



ANNUAL  
**CONFERENCE**  
2021 **RUSSIA**

Chief Editor: Dr Sandis Šrāders

Editor: Dr Viljar Veebel

# Conference Papers



Tartu, Estonia

## The Russia Conference Papers 2021

*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

*In Europe we were Tatars,  
while in Asia we can be Europeans.*  
Fyodor Dostoevsky

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

# THE RUSSIA CONFERENCE PAPERS 2021

Chief Editor, Dr. Sandis ŠRĀDERS,  
Baltic Defence College

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Baltic Defence College



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## Foreword

Brigadier General Ilmar TAMM,  
Commandant of the Baltic Defence College

The security of a state is the key to its wealth, stability, and welfare. As per the words of former Estonian President Lennart Meri during the College's inaugural ceremony on 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1999,

*“Security is precious, and there is never too much of it. Security is an indivisible wealth, and it must be cultivated in the spirit of close regional concord. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have the task to ensure, to the best of their ability, the security of the Baltic region, which is a necessary precondition to stability in Europe.”*

All three Baltic states historical path reverted to freedom and independence just a little more than 30 years ago. With the support of Allies, fostering regional security has been the top priority of the Baltic Defence College for more than 20 years. Our College delivers professional military education to senior staff officers and civil servants. The College's core task is to invest in human capital to ensure peace dividends for future generations and the shared security of the Baltic sea region.

For more than two decades since the inauguration, the civilian and military leadership of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and our partners have continuously recognized the importance and quality of our work. One of the most prominent flagship educational events of the College is our annual Conference on Russia. This international and renowned project commenced in 2014 and has been primarily aimed at our military and civilian students but also the broader community – civilian and military security experts, academics, media, and think tanks, and policy makers. The purpose of our Conferences is to focus on and study Russia, from within and without, especially concerning the Baltic, European, and transatlantic perspectives.

This year, we are proud to release the Conference's papers to unveil how both the international community and Russians see the Russian Federation as apart or a part of the world order. We are questioning if Russia is a tentative partner or a strategic challenge for the West, or is it a historical phenomenon that cannot separate itself from the demons of the past? Moreover, the publication allows us to better understand if and how to

accommodate Russia or just let Russia be Russia. Together with the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Russia 2021, this publication and its authors offer an invaluable contribution to debates on Russia.

*Ilmar Tamm*

Tartu, 04 March 2021.

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## Introduction

Dr. Sandis ŠRĀDERS, Chief Editor and Fellow, Baltic Defence College  
COL (Ret.) Dr Zdzisław ŚLIWA, Dean, Baltic Defence College

The objective of the Baltic Defence College is to foster a forum for debates and knowledge relating to international and regional security perspectives for the Baltic Sea Region. Intrinsicly, this task includes an appraisal of Russian foreign and security policies. As such, these objectives render our college important to the civilian and military leadership of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for one profound reason: the security, economic, and social conditions of the Baltic States cannot be viewed separately from but in a direct correlation with the Russian Federation – one of the biggest and mightiest countries in the world.

For the seventh year in a row, our academic mission, teaching, and research activities have been supported by this annual Conference on Russia. This event discusses Russian foreign, security and military policies relating to the three Baltic States, the Baltic Sea Region, Europe, transatlantic relations, and Eurasia more widely. In relation to Russia's foreign and security ambitions, the focus is on how the West perceives Russia and how Russia is viewing the West.

Our conference and research has summoned the most recognized and learned civilian and military pundits from both Russia and the West. This pool of knowledge allows an enhanced and nuanced understanding of Russia and the way Russia perceives the rest of the world. This conference and our publication *The Russia Conference Papers 2021* brings together experts from both sides of the Atlantic and Russia. Institutionally, this publication bridges the civilian military cooperation between the Baltic Defence College and NATO.

These papers consist of two distinct parts covering a variety of areas. The first part bears the title "From the Heart of Europe." It consists of seven articles. The first paper "The Baltic States at the Berlin Blockade – a West Berlin or an East Germany?" by Sandis ŠRĀDERS and George Spencer TERRY reviews the analogy of the past Berlin crisis and the present conditions around the Baltic States. Although separated by seven decades and with particular security conditions between then and now, there are significant similarities. Transatlantic security depends on the allied solidarity and resolve to stand up for even the smallest members of the collective security

community. Second, “Changing Course – From Ostpolitik to Containment” by Sarah PAGUNG traces the evolution of the German approach toward Russia. Willy Brandt introduced *Ostpolitik*, which focused on engagement with Moscow. This policy aimed at removing all reasons for conflict by giving priority to the cooperation and closer links. Instead, owing to more adverse policies from Russia, Berlin has shifted its course to a policy of containment. Third, the joint paper “Perceptions of Russia in Poland: Reconciling History, Maintaining Dialogue, and Shaping the Future” by Eugeniusz CIEŚLAK and Zdzisław ŚLIWA focuses on the importance of Russia in Poland. This paper uncovers the historical and cultural implications for Polish military, political, and economic arrangements relating to Russia. Fourth, Hans BINNENDIJK offers a logic on NATO in his “NATO Adaptation and Baltic Security.” His arguments dwell on the adaptation of the transatlantic alliance to external security conditions. Even though the Alliance could not engage the Baltic States in collective defence institutionally, the evolution of NATO has been implicitly beneficial for Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the Baltic States should now think about their niche power status in front of the emerging challenges more strategically. Each member of the alliance must contribute to collective security instead of just acting as consumers of the collective efforts. Fifth, crucial developments in the immediate neighbourhood of the Baltic States allow Dovilė JAKNIŪNAITĖ to offer the paper, “The Baltic States, Poland, and the Protests in Belarus: the Case for the Unconditional Love?” She elaborates on the background of current situation in Belarus and the policies and social responses from the Baltic States that have supported the democratic transition over the human rights violations. Finally, an image of the Belarusian case is further developed by Sandis ŠRĀDERS and Shota GVINERIA. Their article “Belarus: Stuck in a Moment with No Escape” outlines the broader growing interest in Belarus by Russia, the hesitant West, and the others. In addition, this paper offers several policy recommendations for the Baltic States, the European Union, and the West.

“From Russia: Mirror Images” is the second part of the Russia Conference Papers 2021. This section consists of eight authored articles. The first paper is “I Looked Back to See If You Looked Back to See If I Was Looking at You: Russian Discourse on Western Critique of Russia’s Actions,” by Dmitry LANKO. He provides a detailed overview of Russian narratives toward the West from the perspective of the leadership and the population. He argues that soft power plays a significant role in how Russians perceive the Western.

This assessment of the public view is furthered by Nikita LOMAGIN in the second paper of the section, “Where People Stand: Public Attitudes in Russia towards the West”. This paper provides a broader assessment of how the Russian population perceives the West, understood by proxy as the United States, the European Union, and NATO. His research compares the results from three public opinion surveys – those from WCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre), the independent Levada Center, and the Pew Research Center. Third, in his paper “Assessing Russian Success and Failure,” Keir GILES provides intriguing arguments on the views of the war in Ukraine, the intervention in Syria, the covert meddling into the United States presidential election, and elimination of opposition at home and abroad among other instances as possible successes (or not) for Russia. Fourth, Viljar VEEBEL delivers an assessment on the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian military industrial complex. In his paper “The Future of the Russia’s Military Industry: ‘Special Deliveries’, Functional Needs, Generous Loan Deals, and ‘Old Love’ from Soviet Times,” he forwards some possibilities for the future of Russia’s modern military. Fifth, in his paper “Russia and Global Order,” Bobo Lo assesses Russia and international liberal order. His arguments outline some of the important areas for the Kremlin in the contemporary international disorder where ambiguities and power vacuums might allow Russia to hide its relative weaknesses in key areas. Sixth, in his paper “Perceptions of Russia’s Pivot to Asia,” Fraser CAMERON describes how Russia’s strategic regional approach is perceived in China and by other regional players. His conclusions allow for the assessment of Moscow’s strategic future in Asia. Seventh, Konstantin VON EGGERT delivers an assessment of the development of Russian ideas in his paper, “How the Empire Struck Back: Russia’s Long Quest for a Post-Soviet Soul”. This paper focuses on the Russian society. He compares the evolution of ideas in Germany and Russia after the Second World War. The Kremlin’s intervention in Georgia and Ukraine serve as indicators of Russia’s hard detour from its history when Russia was considered a great power. Finally yet importantly, Andrew WOOD is offering deep insight into the Russian power structure in his paper “Putin’s Chains.” He looks into the circumstances behind and the continuing processes now of the preservation of power by President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle. WOOD explains not only the present paradigm, delivering a forecast as to what should be expect after 2024 as well. This in-depth reference to the past allows for an understanding of future Russian politics and the role of its national leaders.



I  
**From the Heart of Europe**



# **The Baltic States at the Berlin Blockade – a West Berlin or an East Germany?**

Dr. Sandis ŠRĀDERS  
George Spencer TERRY

## **Abstract**

Civilizational collision between the West and the East is nothing new. During the Cold War, this contest between the liberal democratic West and communist East reached its apex. From one side, the US policy of containing communism worldwide tamed the Soviet power and influence. On the other, this geopolitical rivalry allowed for some states to choose allies and alliance. Nevertheless, these small political entities had to rely on the goodwill of their major power patrons. The Berlin Blockade acted as a crucial test of solidarity for the United States and its European allies. By standing by West Berlin when it was surrounded by intense Soviet pressure, the West proved its commitment to its allies. Multiple decades since, this resolve has expanded the Western alliance as far as the Baltic States, but revisionist challenges have not dissipated in the Kremlin. Considering the above, this paper will investigate similarities and differences between the events surrounding Berlin Blockade and the situation of the Baltic States. In both cases, only solidarity within the Euroatlantic community can ensure prosperity and security of all its allies. This paper will investigate the social attitudes, political choices, and policies that enhanced the solidarity or divisions in Europe, between the Europe's East and West.

Key words: Iron Curtain, containment, solidarity, Ostpolitik, Berlin Wall, Westpolitik

## **Introduction**

After the Second World War, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West deteriorated incrementally until the adversities were soaring rather quickly thereafter. At the United Nations, Winston Churchill's March 1946 "Sinews of Peace" speech heralded the erection of Iron Curtain – the beginning of bipolar confrontation between the communist Soviet Union and the



liberal democratic West.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, based on the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union George F. Kennan's experience and observations until 1949, the long telegram set the stage for the United States' emphasis on containing the Soviet Union.

The containment policy aimed to safeguard Western capitalist or social democracies from communism fed the Kremlin's sense of insecurity. This insecurity resulted in the Soviet hostility toward the Marshall Plan. The possibility of the inclusion of any of Soviet-occupied or subjugated territories resulted in political punishment, the defenestration of the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk from his apartment in 1948 due to his willingness to join the Marshall Plan cooperation.

This Soviet menace fertilized Western commitment to consolidate Western Germany into a single and independent state. The indicators of such policies were the introduction of Deutschmark in West Berlin. Due to perceptions of such actions in the East, the result was the Soviet blockade of all ground transportation to West Berlin, which then lay in East Germany. West Berlin then was positioned as a Western outpost, deep within the communist bloc.

It was a hotbed of intelligence operations by both sides and the best available escape route for East Germans fleeing communism and Soviet control to the West. President Truman was convinced that abandoning Berlin would jeopardize control of all of Western Germany. Moreover, he believed that abandoning even any of the smallest allies would discredit repeated American assurances to its allies in Europe or elsewhere.

This overt confrontation over Berlin lasted until 1961, which marked a transformative period in the dynamics of the Cold War. The results of the Berlin Crisis showed a steel resolve among the United States, the United Kingdom, and France not to abandon their allies around the world, even in the face of naked coercion and overwhelming force. Nonetheless, as the Berlin Wall arose and fenced in half of the city, there remained this outpost of support, a promise of a future beyond Soviet domination.

Since 1961 until the end of 1989, the Berlin Wall stabilized the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. But the promise of the West to Berlin, much like the promises entailed in the Welles Declaration to never accept neither the *de facto* nor *de jure* annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Willbanks, "The Berlin Blockade and Airlift (1948–1949)" in Jan Goldman ed., *An Encyclopedia of Covert Ops, Intelligence Gathering, and Spies*, (The Central Intelligence Agency, 2015), 39–40.

Lithuania to the Soviet Union, always allowed for an opening of prospective transformations in the statuses of these areas, whether that would be in a year, a decade, or in a future still far away.<sup>2</sup>

Two years from the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany would reunite and the Baltic States would have regained their independence. However, do we live in that same world today? Do the Western Allies think that they share the same values and the European and transatlantic resolve as their Central and Eastern European partners and vice versa?

This current piece explores these questions by first providing a vignette of the domestic German case and its evolution since 1989 and then by allegorically contraposing this state of affairs with the wider topography of outlooks and developments in Central and Eastern Europe from 1991 onward, using the Baltic States as representative of wider changes in the region.

### **Left Behind or Left Out?**

In many ways, unified Germany can be pragmatically viewed as the heart of the European project when the Cold War was over. First, it represented the capstone in US objectives to rebuild Europe – whole, free, and Western. Reshaping NATO as an organization from military to more political entity was a pathway that could soften the geopolitical shock in the Soviet Union of Germany's impending unification and entry into NATO.<sup>3</sup>

Second, it was the cornerstone of the European unity as only after the Unification Treaty of August 1990 was the Maastricht Treaty considered a possibility. Shortly before the German unification, major European leaders such as Thatcher and Mitterrand had learned from their counterparts in Kremlin about Soviet fears about a possible German unification or positions on Baltic territorial issues (such as in Lithuania, for example).<sup>4</sup> A hasty consolidation of European or transatlantic geopolitical interests and institutional structures might have averted the Soviet/Russian de-militarization at the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Sumner Welles, "Welles Declaration, Department of State Press Release, 'Statement by the Acting Secretary of State the Honorable Sumner Welles'" (US Department of State, April 23, 1940), History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/144967>.

<sup>3</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed: A German Question* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 217.

<sup>4</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, 277, 557–559.

Third, this period marked a reunited German resolve at whatever the cost – at the expense of Deutschmark, immediate economic gains, or anyone who opposed the project, such as the President of the Bundesbank, Karl Otto Pöhl, who lost his job.<sup>5</sup> The European solidarity and American objectives in Europe depended on German capacity to embrace their unity, European and American institutions.

German adherence to a common European currency and values was even a precondition to advancement towards the treaty.<sup>6</sup> Even now, as a single state, close to a majority of Europeans (48 percent) believe that Germany as a single actor has ‘too much influence when it comes to decision-making in the EU,’ despite 71 percent of Europeans holding a positive view of the country.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, to understand how Europe has evolved as a concept, it is a prerequisite to understand Germany’s own evolution due to the perception of its leading role within it.

A suitable point of departure is to look at the popular attitudes of both West and East Germans since 1990, since popular attitudes form a foundational part of the substratum of the systemic environment in which foreign policy is formed.<sup>8</sup> In 1991, 79 percent of West Germans and 89 percent of East Germans viewed reunification as either ‘very positive’ or ‘somewhat positive.’<sup>9</sup> However, in 2009, West German opinion stayed the same – 77 percent of the population holding ‘very’ to ‘somewhat positive’ views – yet East German outlooks had become increasingly pessimistic, with a drop of 10 percent in support. While in most other contexts an 80 percent positive outlook would be an absolutely victory, this decline in support of predicated a growing social dissensus for the future.

<sup>5</sup> David Marsh, *Germany and Europe: The Crisis of Unity* (A Mandarin Paperback, 1994), 72–73.

<sup>6</sup> Sven Böll et al., “Euro Struggles Can Be Traced to Origins of Common Currency,” *Der Spiegel*, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/euro-struggles-can-be-traced-to-origins-of-common-currency-a-831842.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favorable Toward EU” (Pew Research Center, June 15, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/06/15/favorable-views-of-germany-dont-erase-concerns-about-its-influence-within-eu/>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Clarke, “The Foreign Policy System: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Understanding Foreign Policy: The Foreign Policy Systems Approach*, ed. M. Clarke and B. White, 1989, 27–59; David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> “Two Decades After the Wall’s Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations,” *The Pew Global Attitudes Project* (Pew Research Center, November 2, 2009), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2009/11/02/chapter-5-views-of-german-reunification/>.

As of 2019, this trend has continued in a stark fashion; 47 percent of East Germans are dissatisfied with the current state of German democracy.<sup>10</sup> While some of this unhappiness with the extant situation could be reduced to economic complaints and a lower quality of life, such a cleavage of opinion implies a much deeper disagreement on the general guiding liberal normative values, which can be displayed in the doubled levels of support for the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* in the former East as compared to the West.<sup>11</sup>

From the onset, Germany political reunification was based on the adoption of the West German *Grundgesetz*, which although supposedly provisional, has continued in place as the law for all German federal subjects. In this way, although the reunification of Germany was presented as a natural, historically predetermined, and mutually beneficial occurrence by those actors involved, it nonetheless was a hegemonically West German-led venture. This development meant fidelity to West German decisions that had already been made, including membership in organizations such as NATO and the European Community.

This side-lining of the East to the West, nonetheless in the name of a common ‘German’ project, would act as a correlative factor in the disenchantment that lead to a situation in which “over half of residents in eastern Germany feel like second-class citizens, and that only 38 percent of those surveyed said reunification was a success.”<sup>12</sup> Some academics, such as Dominic Boyer, posit that the related concept of *Ostalgie* – or nostalgia for the East German past – that has arisen in the wake of such dissatisfaction is a specifically East German lens through which to gaze at a markedly greyer future rather than to remember any sort of idealized socialist past.<sup>13</sup> Understood this way, *Ostalgie* and other sorts of political and cultural protests are a way of asserting actorship in a paradigm wherein such actorship

<sup>10</sup> “How the Attitudes of West and East Germans Compare, 30 Years after Fall of Berlin Wall,” Pew Research Center, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/18/how-the-attitudes-of-west-and-east-germans-compare-30-years-after-fall-of-berlin-wall/>.

<sup>11</sup> “East Germany Has Narrowed Economic Gap with West Germany since Fall of Communism, but Still Lags,” Pew Research Center, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/06/east-germany-has-narrowed-economic-gap-with-west-germany-since-fall-of-communism-but-still-lags/>.

<sup>12</sup> Deutsche Welle, “German Unity Day: Reunification Is ‘ongoing Process’ Says Merkel,” DW.COM, October 3, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-unity-day-reunification-is-ongoing-process-says-merkel/a-50687798>.

<sup>13</sup> Dominic Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 361–81.

has been either cast aside or made irrelevant. At least on the executive level, this division is well understood, as ‘internal reunification’ is assumed as an ongoing and markedly current process and not yet a ‘reality.’<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, this ongoing social unification of ideas and German interest has undermining Germany’s stronger commitment to European and transatlantic solidarity like Berlin experienced from 1948 to 1949. The Eastern part of the unified Germany, and the German Länder, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, and Brandenburg were immediately interested in steering Germany toward the East at the onset of the unification.<sup>15</sup> A secure and institutionally reintegrated Central and Eastern Europe was of a profound interest within *Ostpolitik* not only to forge more cooperative relations with the Russia but also to close the so-called grey area or the buffer zone between the unified Germany and reborn Russia from 1991.

## From the Gateway to the West to Outpost in the East

This ongoing progression of German reunification – both external and domestic – finds a wider analogy in Central and Eastern Europe with the expansion of Western institutions past the borders of the Oder and Neisse. Like East Germany, post-Soviet and post-communist Europe enthusiastically oriented toward the West in the 1990s and early 2000s, which would soon welcome them into a ‘united’ political community in the form of the European Union.

However, the idealism behind the so-long-awaited homecoming to a united country or united continent would soon be dashed, as the end of the Cold War did not necessarily mean a world structured by a peaceful, rules-based order that would bring the material and ideational boons that the West had long represented. Russia – although for the 1990s and early 2000s relatively benign in its policy toward Europe – remained a perceived existential threat for many of these member states, and the Western European

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<sup>14</sup> Deutsche Welle, “Angela Merkel Hails Germany’s Progress since Fall of Berlin Wall,” DW.COM, September 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-hails-germanys-progress-since-fall-of-berlin-wall/a-50620492>.

<sup>15</sup> Lothar Gutjahr, *German Foreign and Defense Policy After Unification* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 125, 137.

quality of life would not arrive immediately, and even then, only through the most internationalized urban centres.<sup>16</sup>

For the Baltic States, this new paradigm signalled an inversion from their traditional position within the region, as for their period under the Russian Empire and Soviet occupation, they had been viewed more as Western in comparison to other subjects of the state. With independence regained and the new pivot to Europe and NATO, they now had to operate under the assumption that they would be considered Eastern – even if this would not be a definition that they would ascribe to themselves.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania based their domestic political renovation on an explicit model that would converge upon Western standards, which would guarantee their respective places in both the European project and the transatlantic security order. From the Baltic perspective, the prospect of joining the European Union seen as the democratic precondition for NATO membership.<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, support for NATO remains high in the Baltic States.<sup>18</sup> Thus, parallels of fatigue akin to those of East Germany could not be as easily drawn – but nearly quarter of the population in each of the countries consistently has harboured Eurosceptic views.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, only in Estonia has an overtly Eurosceptic party been elected to a governing position, and even then, this was just in the form of a junior partner of a governing coalition.

However, unlike Poland and Hungary, which for the time being remain in an aggressive posture against the European Union in arenas from migration to various interpretations of social issues, the Baltic States have not as of yet adopted such confrontational policies that explicitly run counter to the normative agenda that emanates from Brussels. Nonetheless, even if their transatlantic security interests remain profound – their rhetoric over future constitutional referenda or possible elections of more Eurosceptic parties

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<sup>16</sup> “Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018 – ESTONIA” (OECD, 2018).; “Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018 – LITHUANIA” (OECD, 2018).; “Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018 – LATVIA” (OECD, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Sandis Šrāders, *Small Baltic States and the Euro-Atlantic Security Community* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Michael E. O’Hanlon and Christopher Skaluba, “A Report from NATO’s Front Lines,” *Brookings* (blog), June 13, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/06/13/a-report-from-natos-front-lines/>.

<sup>19</sup> Aldis Austers et al., *Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Uncovering Issues, People and Stereotypes*, 2017, <http://liia.lv/en/publications/euroscepticism-in-the-baltic-states-uncovering-issues-people-and-stereotypes-639>.

could bring any or all of the Baltic States into a future normative conflict with the European Union.<sup>20</sup>

## A Baltic Westpolitik?

Policy cannot be made based on purely hypothetical imageries of the future, however. Somewhere between stereotypes between the perceived East and the imagined West and rational calculation lies the strategic choice for the Baltic States. At the centre of this calculus, conversely, lies an explicit survival-based discourse, understandably due to historical experiences of the Baltic States with their neighbours and especially considering the aggressive international posture of Russia in the past decade and a half. By continuing the two-way metaphor between the Baltics and Germany further by one more linkage, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would fulfil their strategic goals best if they were to be seen as a West Berlin rather than an East Germany.

As Germany as a concept was necessarily constituted by both West and East Germany, so too is Europe by the members from Maastricht to the members of the enlargements of 2004 and beyond. In addition, like in the case of Germany, this unification or enlargement was based almost entirely on Western normative standards. Those standards – in both Europe and Germany – remain hegemonic today, even if some actors do contend with them or strive to redefine them. It is exactly this point of tension where contemporary issues arise, both in Germany and in Europe. However, that which necessarily keeps Germany together is that which could possibly drive the different ‘Europes’ apart. This is none other than the sacrosanct issue of sovereignty as the immutability of the state and its territory. Understandings of democracy – with the number of definitions matching either number of voters or scholars – might lead to a situation where East and West no longer even categorically matter.

As has become apparent in the past years, definitions of democracy have come into conflict. There are still adherents to liberal democracy.<sup>21</sup> Even if the United States as an actor views its liberal world order as crumbling, the endowments that such world order has delivered to the United States will

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<sup>20</sup> ERR | ERR, “Preparations for Referendum and 2021 Elections Must Begin This Summer,” ERR, June 9, 2020, <https://news.err.ee/1099907/preparations-for-referendum-and-2021-elections-must-begin-this-summer>.

<sup>21</sup> “Liberal Democratic Order Is under Threat – Guy Verhofstadt,” accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2017/02/22/liberal-democratic-order-is-under-threat>.

force the others to compete for the US market and security guarantees.<sup>22</sup> There are those with more illiberal or post-liberal views.<sup>23</sup> Such as Russia or China, some actors willing to overtly (Moscow) or covertly (Beijing) offer an alternative to liberal democracy that leads to a multipolar international system wherein regional powers would offer their own values or rules of the game.<sup>24</sup> This power-based system can abuse all options to divide transatlantic and European partners, by discrediting and weakening democracies to undermine their appeal, co-opting possible defectors, and isolating those who would resist leaving the United States alone either with a diminished or enfeebled coalition.<sup>25</sup> Such retreat of a rules-based order, giving way to the rule of the jungle is the result of the lack of solidarity where major Western partners cannot even agree on a simple binding issue of common cause.<sup>26</sup>

Within a country, such as Germany, this discussion does not threaten the sovereignty of the state as such, and if a consensus is reached, it could in fact strengthen citizen participation and trust toward governmental institutions. In the EU, however, there is no guarantee that a consensus would be reached, and the debate would solely exacerbate already-growing rifts among blocs with similar understandings of norms. In a world where the United States trends toward unilateralism and has even pulled its troops out of allied nations for going against its policy decisions, a weaker EU, that is, a Union in name only, would only aggravate threat anxieties and weaken the security assurances for the Baltic States.<sup>27</sup>

2020 is no analogue to the Berlin Blockade leading to the Berlin Wall in 1961. The enemies are no longer placed as such by any ideology *ipso facto*. Nevertheless, there is still a communist bastion in Beijing that cannot forgive the past communist regime collapse in Moscow and nonetheless sees the

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Beckley, "Rogue Superpower: Why This Could Be an Illiberal American Century," (Foreign Affairs, November/December, 2020), 73–74.

<sup>23</sup> "Viktor Orban: Era of 'liberal Democracy' Is Over," Deutsche Welle, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/viktor-orban-era-of-liberal-democracy-is-over/a-43732540>.

<sup>24</sup> Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry V. Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs* (November 24, 2020, accessed on March 26, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-new-world-order-a-view-from-russia/>).

<sup>25</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, "An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing" (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2020), 151.

<sup>26</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "The Next Liberal Order: The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less" (*Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 2020), 133.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S. to Withdraw about 12,000 Troops from Germany but Nearly Half to Stay in Europe," Reuters, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-germany-military-idUSKCN24U20L>.



United States as a rapidly declining power.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, there is Moscow, which aims at rebuilding the lost soviet or imperial glory at least with the tacit support from China.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, those who seemed to be allies look more and more like strangers within the Western alliance. This uncertainty toward the international liberal order not only grounds academic debates.<sup>30</sup> It guides popular ones as well.<sup>31</sup>

From this paradigm, a strategy based on the construction of a normative consensus with Brussels and wider Europe, on a nonetheless liberal basis, is one of the strongest options for the Baltic States going forward. If the United States no longer can be completely considered a reliable security guarantee, a plurality of the remaining NATO members with the material capacity and will to defend the Baltic States heavily overlaps with Europe. If a situation would arise like during the Berlin blockade – and Russia were to aggressively pressure Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania like the Soviet Union had pressured the West out of West Berlin – the West would first need to view the Baltic States as an inviolable part of their collective self rather than just burdensome institutional partners. This is primarily possible through an active positioning Westward within the Baltic States. Like the solidarity and unification of Germany and Europe and transatlantic alliance, the resolve to uphold common security interests within Europe and with transatlantic partners bolsters the common aim to contain the material and normative challenges emanating from a revisionist Russia and communist China.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Julian Gewirtz, “China Thinks America is Losing” (Foreign Affairs, November/December, 2020), 64.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Dugin, *The Rise of the Fourth Political Theory* (Arkatos Media, 2017), 57–83, 114–146; Sandis Šrāders, *Small Baltic States and the Euro-Atlantic Security Community* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 174.

<sup>30</sup> Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 2 (June 1998): 226–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066198004002004>.

<sup>31</sup> “Age of Uncertainties,” *Berlin Policy Journal - Blog* (blog), January 19, 2017, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/age-of-uncertainties/>.

<sup>32</sup> See Michael Mandelbaum, “The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April, 2019).

# Changing Course – From Ostpolitik to Containment

Sarah PAGUNG

## Abstract

Over the last decade, Germany has slowly adjusted its policy towards Russia in relation to evolving European and Russian realities. This change was driven by the growing alienation of German elites due to the assertive policies of the Kremlin towards the EU, its partners, and Berlin itself. However, Germany still struggles to accept the end of the special German-Russian partnership, especially as the debate on Russia is shaped by domestic factors rather than foreign policy objectives as the discourse around Nord Stream 2 illustrates. In this way, differing attitudes toward Russia mirror domestic conflicts on values, leadership, and identity. Accordingly, German elites and public disagree on how to engage with Russia. This division and the lack of a strategic vision for German foreign policy towards Russia have therefore caused inconsistencies in Germany's approach.

Key words: Russia, German politics, conflict, containment, Ostpolitik

## Introduction

In autumn 2020, Germany once again experienced a heated debate on its Russia policy. In early September, a German Bundeswehr laboratory confirmed that Alexey Navalny had been poisoned by the nerve agent Novichok, making it highly likely that Russian state institutions were involved in an attempt to murder a Russian opposition politician. The debate demonstrated a change of course in German policy towards Russia. Hence, the poisoning should not be understood as a turning point but rather as a visible sign of a slow adjustment – a shift that was caused by Russian actions and by changing perceptions of Russia within the political elite and its top ranks. Despite this change, Germany fails to actively shape its relations with Russia. Instead, its gradual adaption to European, Russian, and global realities make German Russia policy mostly reactive. This is caused by a German debate on Russia that is driven by domestic factors instead of foreign policy strategies. The Navalny case illustrated these conflicting narratives on Russia, both within the German public and among political stakeholders.

## Germany's Misperception of its Russia Policy

For 50 years, Germany's Russia policy has been shaped by the idea of Ostpolitik. Back in the late 1960s, the creation of the policy was aimed at reducing the risk of military escalation in Europe. Its basic assumption was that economic interdependence would aggravate military conflict. Despite opposition from the US, West Germany's policy was accepted due to its deep entrenchment in NATO. Nevertheless, the Ostpolitik soon evolved further and additionally promoted "change through rapprochement." This approach survived the end of the Cold War and stayed the defining principle of Germany's Russia policy. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was developed into a modernization partnership based on the hope, that Russia would become a liberal democracy. Berlin even adhered to this principle in the late 2000s and early 2010s, when growing authoritarianism shaped Russia and its political system. This stubbornness had two specific reasons: First, Germany's Ostpolitik was accompanied by a misperception of its power and scope. Until today, German politicians as well as the German public tend to overestimate the role of this policy approach in ending the Cold War, when in fact political change and the final collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states were caused by domestic reasons, with inefficiency and petrification in nearly every sector of political, social and economic life being the main drivers. The Ostpolitik only played a supporting role. Secondly, the Ostpolitik found strong advocates in German business who sought opportunities in Russia after the collapse of communism. Thus, German Ostpolitik – even though still treated like a political strategy – was more and more driven by economic considerations.

## Germany's Failed Ostpolitik in Ukraine

The continuation of German Ostpolitik in the 21st century ignored that Russia and the wider strategic environment had changed. The military deterrence of 'the West', which time functioned as the backbone of German Ostpolitik for the longest, lost its credibility for several reasons. The United States increasingly focused its attention on the Pacific region, and many NATO members – primarily Germany – neglected military investments. At the same time, former US President Trump openly questioned NATO and its Article 5. Additionally, the Russian elite focused on cementing its grip on power and not on change, let alone democratic development. The re-election

of Vladimir Putin in 2012 illustrated this development and caused a sense of growing alienation in Berlin. However, just like the Georgian-Russian war in 2008, this alienation did not lead to a change in policy. Only after Russia's proxy war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, Germany started to alter its course by leading the European sanctions consensus. German Ostpolitik was slowly supplemented by strategies of containment. In 2016, this "dual approach [of] credible deterrence and defence capability as well as a willingness to engage in dialogue" was even included in German Federal White Paper.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Ukraine crisis proved a key assumption of the Ostpolitik to be wrong, as economic interdependence did not prevent war – but interestingly – it created the conditions for effective sanctions.

## The End of a Special Relationship

The adjustment of Berlin's policy toward Russia was mainly caused by a changing attitude among political leaders concerning Moscow. Chancellor Merkel completely lost trust in President Putin after he lied to her about Russian intervention in Crimea. Even then, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, one of the strongest advocates of the Ostpolitik, was disillusioned and supported sanctions against Russia. Following these events, relations further soured, and this conflict increasingly affected German domestic policies. In 2016, Russian media and politicians spread fake news of a girl allegedly raped by migrants in Berlin, further fuelling an already heated debate on migration in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Still, it took Chancellor Merkel another four years to finally denounce Russian malign activities in Germany openly. In May 2020, she attributed a cyber attack on the German Bundestag in 2015 to the Russian military secret service, GRU.<sup>3</sup> This clearness was mainly caused by another conflict in German-Russian relations that had evolved a year before. In August 2019, a Russia citizen killed the former Chechen commander Zelimkhan Changoshvili in a public park in Berlin. Germany's General Attorney linked the perpetrator to Russian

<sup>1</sup> "The White Paper 2016 on German Security and the Future of the Bundeswehr," *The German Federal Government*, 2016, 66, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/111704/2027268/2016%20White%20Paper.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Rinke and Paul Carrel, "German-Russian ties feel Cold War-style chill over rape case," Reuters, 1 February 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-russia-idUSKCN0VA31O>.

<sup>3</sup> "Angela Merkel droht mit Konsequenzen," ZEIT ONLINE, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-05/hackerangriff-bundestag-2015-russland-angela-merkel>.

security services, making it a case of state terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Berlin reached out to Russian officials for support in their investigations, relying on its close ties to Russia. Nonetheless, Moscow reacted with denial, delaying tactics, and fake news, calling it a “hackneyed story.”<sup>5</sup> This disappointment explains the much harsher reaction of Chancellor Merkel and other officials both in the Navalny case and in the attribution of the hacking attack. Berlin had come to realize that its special relationship with Russia was useless. Therefore, Germany adopted a tougher approach, including the public shaming of Moscow. Berlin was turning the wheel in the direction of containment.

## Germany Lacks a Strategic Vision

As this chain of events shows, change was slow. It was characterized by contradictions along the road. The most striking example is Nord Stream II that was agreed upon just a year after Russia’s proxy war in Ukraine had started. The pipeline project is the result of economic interests, interests of German federal states, and the overall Ostpolitik idea. It illustrates a lack of strategic vision for relations with Russia after Ostpolitik has proven to be outdated. Attempts to frame the pipeline as a way of implementing the so-called Mogherini principle of selective engagement were half-hearted. The massive underestimation of resistance from European partners as well as the United States is one of the gravest foreign policy mistakes of the German government in the last decade. Nonetheless, Nord Stream II illustrates two lessons for Germany’s Russia policy. First, it demonstrated, that the dual approach of rapprochement and selective engagement was failing in reality, despite the hopes that Germany put into it. Possible cases for cooperation were sparse. Germany and the EU on one hand and Russian on the other share interests mostly in areas where both do not have leverage or power like the Iranian nuclear deal. Where both sides possess power and influence, such as the Common Neighbourhood or potentially in conflicts in Syria and Libya, interests do not overlap or are even contradictory. Second, Nord Stream II illustrates the changing reference points in Berlin’s policy towards

<sup>4</sup> “Georgian’s Death in Berlin was Russian-ordered assassination, prosecutor believes,” DW, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/georgians-death-in-berlin-was-a-russian-ordered-assassination-prosecutors-believe/a-53860911>.

<sup>5</sup> Florian Flade and Georg Mascolo, “Verdacht auf Staatsterrorismus,” *Tagesschau*, 24 May 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/tiergartenmmogherord-verdaechtiger-anklage-101.html>.

Russia. While relations with Russia have always been politicized, the context has been changing. In the beginning, interdependence was instrumentalized to achieve peaceful coexistence and subsequently to bring about change in Russia. Now, interdependence is also assessed as a possible risk further fueling the debate on the fate of German Ostpolitik.

## **Russia Presents a Projection Screen for German Domestic Conflicts**

Berlin's adjustment to the reality of relations with the Kremlin is caused by conflicting narratives and a polarized debate on Russia within the country. A poll conducted in 2019 shows that 30% of Germans believe that relations with Russia should be closer, 23% assess relations as just right, 9% think they are too close and as much as 38% do not know or refused to answer.<sup>6</sup> Living or having been born in the former GDR as well as being older increases the likeliness of wanting better relations. The logic behind this answer is similar among varying social groups. Respondents connected opinions on Russia to German domestic policies, making the country a projection area for worries and wishes for Germany itself. Russia or Putin himself are associated with strength and order or traditional values and national pride, things that respondents say are missing in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, latent Anti-American attitudes lead to positive attitudes towards Russia, painting the country as the ideological opposite to the USA – even 30 years after the end of the Cold War. This is also reflected in a 2019 poll; 29% see value in having relations with the US, 25% with Russia and 30% with both.<sup>8</sup> This equidistance to West and East is a continuity in German thinking since the 19th century.

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<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn Sasse, "Russland: Russlandbilder in Ost- und Westdeutschland," ZOIS Report 5/2020, May 2020, 14f, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/zois-report-52020/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Pushter and Christina Huang, "Despite some improvements, Americans and Germans remain far apart in views of bilateral relations," Pew Research Center, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/25/americans-and-germans-remain-far-apart-in-views-of-bilateral-relations-2/>.

## German Parties are Divided over Russia

The fact that Russia serves as a projection of the German domestic political situation is also reflected within the German party system. The parties that demand the closest relations with Russia are to be found on the far right and far left, drawing contradictory narratives from Russia. The left party Die LINKE sees Russia as a bulwark against US imperialism, capitalism, and globalization, even though Russia does not present the antipode to either of these. By contrast, the far right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) admires Russia's and Putin's assertive strongmen-policies defending so-called traditional values, ignoring that Russia as a multi-ethnic state is the antithesis to the party's idea of homogenous ethno pluralism. Both parties want to lift sanctions and build a collective security structure in Europe without the United States while including Russia.<sup>9</sup> Die LINKE even adopts a Russian narrative by stating that NATO and EU expansion caused the ongoing conflict with Russia.<sup>10</sup>

The three governing parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democrats (SPD) have had to manage a delicate balance since 2014. Chancellor Merkel's CDU, a deeply transatlantic party, has been critical towards Russia and its foreign and domestic policies. The party has been the driving force behind the policy adjustment including sanctions and thereby rejecting the idea of Ostpolitik.<sup>11</sup> Still, the CDU defends Nord Stream II, causing an inconsistency in policy towards Russia. Its coalition partner, the SPD, faces even bigger challenges in its Russia policy. The party of Willy Brandt, the founder of the Ostpolitik, has been promoting the idea of Ostpolitik for decades. Today, however, the party is torn between conflicting groups. Mostly, but not only, younger members like Foreign Minister Heiko Maas demand a containment policy towards Russia while there are those who believe in the idea of Ostpolitik like the former prime minister of the federal state Brandenburg Matthias Platzeck and those who have been

<sup>9</sup> "Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum Deutschen Bundestag," AfD, 2017, 19, [https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/06/2017-06-01\\_AfD-Bundestagswahlprogramm\\_Onlinefassung.pdf](https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/06/2017-06-01_AfD-Bundestagswahlprogramm_Onlinefassung.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "Langfassung des Wahlprogramms zur Bundestagswahl 2017," *Die Linke*, 2017, 100, [https://www.die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/wahlen2017/wahlprogramm2017/die\\_linke\\_wahlprogramm\\_2017.pdf](https://www.die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/wahlen2017/wahlprogramm2017/die_linke_wahlprogramm_2017.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Roderich Kiesewetter (2020): A balance of values and interests: Germany, realpolitik, and Russia policy, see: [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_balance\\_of\\_values\\_and\\_interests\\_germany\\_realpolitik\\_and\\_russia/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_balance_of_values_and_interests_germany_realpolitik_and_russia/).

corrupted or co-opted by Russian interests like former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Additionally, regional heads of governments like Manuela Schwesig, prime minister of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the state where Nord Stream 1 and 2 land, support cooperation in order to attract voters and to secure economic benefits. The latter groups have prevented any serious change in policy within the SPD, even though Foreign Minister Maas has promoted a New European Ostpolitik. As a publication of the SPD fraction within the German Bundestag in 2018 shows, the SPD de facto equates security interests and the needs of its European partners and Russia.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, some SPD politicians, such as the head of the SPD fraction in the German Bundestag, Rolf Mützenich, are questioning nuclear sharing with the United States.<sup>13</sup> Both effectively undermine the EU and the NATO. Still, the position of the SPD has changed since 2014 as its support for sanctions illustrates. This change is mainly caused by personal disappointment among senior party officials. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, president and former foreign minister, as well as former Coordinator for relations with Russia, Central Asia, and the Eastern Partnership countries of the German Government Gernot Erler have been strong advocates of the Ostpolitik. Like many others, both were deeply frustrated with their relations with Russian officials following the war in Ukraine. Ultimately, they helped build a sanction consensus within the party.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats (FDP) are also torn apart between classic liberal values in foreign policy and an electorate that emphasizes free trade and conservative values while opposing sanctions. Next to Die LINKE and AfD, the Greens are the only party that have a clear policy strategy towards Russia. The party pursues a foreign policy based on values with a critical attitude towards Russia. Members of the Greens regularly demand additional sanctions and also focus on Russian domestic issues, human rights, and democratization.

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<sup>12</sup> “Dialog – Vertrauen – Sicherheit,” *SPD Fraktion in the German Bundestag*, 2018, 2, <https://www.spdfraktion.de/system/files/documents/positionspapier-spdfraktion-dialog-vertrauen-sicherheit-20181009.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Pia Furhop, Ulrich Kühn, and Oliver Meier, “Creating an Opportunity to Withdraw U.S. Nuclear Weapons from Europe,” 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-10/features/creating-opportunity-withdraw-us-nuclear-weapons-europe>.



## German Business Cautiously Supports Sanctions

The view from German economy also presents a mixed picture. While companies had criticized sanctions in the spring of 2014, many business entities supported sanctions against Russia following the downing of MH17 in July 2014. The German Eastern Business Association, the main lobbying body of German companies for business in Eastern Europe, has upheld its support until today despite warnings of additional economic sanctions. While Joe Kaeser, CEO of SIEMENS, and other leading German business figures met with Putin in 2014 publically, German business officials now keep a public distance from Russian state officials. A similarly mixed picture can be observed among civil society institutions. Many German NGOs and foundations finance or support Russian civil society structures in their fight for democracy or rule of law. Organizations like the Petersburger Dialog or the German Russian Forum want to provide room for exchange between German and Russian civil society. Hence, both structures have been politically commandeered, preventing an open exchange with Russian civil society organizations. Russia pursued its domestic strategy of duplicating functioning civil society institution to deprive them of attention and instrumentalize their proxies – and Berlin did not oppose this.

## Conclusion

The recent events in German-Russian relations have illustrated a policy adjustment that has been evolving since 2012. This change in course is caused not only by Russian actions but by a shift in attitudes among senior political leaders as well. Still, many politicians as well as the German public are divided in regards to the question on how to engage with Russia. This split also reflects other divisions in domestic politics such as ‘traditional values’ or in foreign policy questions like NATO burden sharing. Therefore, Berlin’s Russia policy is not only determined by foreign policy needs but also has become dependent on an increasingly populist debate on domestic issues. This is reflected by strategic inconsistencies within Germany policy toward Russia policy that cause a policy of disorder and irregularity rather than a policy driven by strategic vision. Still, Germany’s Russia policy has evolved from an approach dominated by the paradigm of Ostpolitik to a dual approach of engagement and containment, eventually emphasizing the latter. The upcoming parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2021 will

likely be decisive for the future of Germany's Russia policy. As none of the governing parties wants to continue the present coalition and the Green party is increasingly gaining support among Germans, a new coalition consisting of the CDU/CSU and the Greens becomes probable. This would turn the wheel even more in the direction of containment, as such a coalition would increasingly focus on Russian domestic issues like political repression and be more willing to impose additional sanctions as well as strengthen transatlantic defence cooperation.

# Perceptions of Russia in Poland: Reconciling History, Maintaining Dialogue, and Shaping the Future

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## Abstract

The long shadow of the past complicates current Polish-Russian relations. Despite a genuine interest from Warsaw and Moscow to rebuild mutual relations based on cooperation, this renewed relationship cannot immediately discount painful historical memories in the popular conscience. The longer such dissensus drags on into the future, it becomes more difficult to find a common language for cooperation. Moreover, any past common understanding from Warsaw Pact cooperation based on the knowledge of Russian language is fading. Conversely, the Russian people and the Russian state are not viewed as a unitary actor in Poland, instead seen as a dyad between society and government. As such, the Polish elites and wider population perceive the possibilities of cooperation with Russia differently. Nevertheless, there is a strong reciprocity between the popular thought and the policies of the Polish elites. This paper will explain the important aspects of history in Poland, elite and popular attitudes toward dialogue, and prospects for reconciliation in order to shape future relations between Poland and Russia.

Key words: Poland, Russia, historical memory, cultural politics, dialogue

## Introduction

Polish-Russian relations have traditionally been perceived as difficult. Due to shared geopolitical and historical conditions, it has been difficult to overcome Polish-Russian hostility, which has resulted in problems in achieving mutual understanding and reconciliation. Prejudices and stereotypes rooted in history and cultural conditions have put a visible mark on the perception of Russia and Russians inside Poland as well as Poland and Poles inside

Russia.<sup>1</sup> Compounded with the past, these present political and economic disputes have rendered any hopes for quick improvements in bilateral relations between Poland and Russia difficult. However, there is a noticeable potential for improving the situation in the long term. This improvement may be the result of cultural similarities, social interactions and shared economic interests.

To address these instances, the current chapter outlines a brief overview of the historical and cultural determinants of Polish-Russian relations. Against this historical background and these cultural perceptions, transformations in the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of the Polish political elite towards Russia will be analysed. In turn, these ideas affect immediate military, political, and economic policy approaches. This thinking and implementation of Polish foreign policy eventually is reflected within Polish society, which is the subject of the second part of this paper. Resulting from these elite political perceptions, these past and present ideas in turn shape public opinion. In the end, the public perception of Russia affects any future policy prospects. The final part of this paper focuses this discussion on the possible ways to improve Polish-Russian relations.

The chapter discusses the perception of Russia and Russians by the Polish political elite and the public opinion after 1989 when Poland regained its state sovereignty. Due to the limited volume of the chapter, the authors focused on the analysis and assessment of key historical and cultural factors as well as current events that shaped the perception of Russia and Russians by the Polish political elite and society. The scope of the work will be limited to the views, assessments, and beliefs formulated by the Polish political elite, scientists and specialists, and society more broadly.

## Historical and Cultural Factors

Poland and Russia have been neighbours for more than a thousand years. However, the most important historical determinants of relationship between Poland and Russia took place in the 16th and 17th centuries. At that time, both countries competed for primacy in the Eastern and Central European space and Poland almost mortally lost in this competition.

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<sup>1</sup> *Czynnik historyczny w stosunkach Polski z Rosją: wymiar społeczny i kulturalno-naukowy*, (Warsaw: Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Międzynarodowych, 2017): 2–3, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://ptsm.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/czynnik-historyczny-w-stosunkach-polski-z-rosja-wymiar-spoleczny-i-kulturalno-naukowy.-raport.pdf>

Further historical events related to the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795 and to the fact that a large part of ethnic Poles remained under the territory of the Russian partition until 1918 increased the problems leading to mutual hostility. The compulsory Russification of Polish lands and the violent suppression of subsequent national uprisings have become a permanent part of the historical consciousness of Poles. The aggression of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic from 1919–1920 and the participation of the Soviet Union in the occupation Poland in September 1939 strengthened this perception of Polish political elite and society that Russia is intrinsically hostile to the nation<sup>2</sup>. Mass repressions and deportations of Poles deep into the Soviet Union during the Second World War and the mass execution of Polish officers in the Katyń forest provided further evidence of the inhumane methods of the Soviet Empire.

After World War II, many people in Polish society had been displaced from their homes in the pre-war Polish eastern borderlands and suffered personal harm from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union actions during the final period of World War II and immediately after its end contributed to the negative perception of the Soviet Union in Poland. Many Poles blame the Soviet Union for the lack of assistance to the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, repressions against Polish independence underground movement, and violence against the Polish civilian population in the areas that became part of Poland after World War II. The imposition of a communist regime on Polish society and the consequent domination of the Soviet Union over formally independent Poland exposed Poles to the consequences of the lack of full political and economic sovereignty. The dependence of the Polish ruling elite on the Soviet Union and its interference in Poland's internal affairs did not contribute to the development of friendly relations between both societies.

This sequence of events in the common history of Poland and Russia highlights many negative experiences and phenomena that make building mutual trust and achieving reconciliation beyond historical divisions a challenge. Understanding the differing interpretations of these is essential for conceptualizing the impact of these historical factors on the perception of Russia in Poland. This applies primarily to the official historiographies of both Russia and Poland. Poles are concerned with the Russian interpretations of history that deny responsibility for any aggression against Poland

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<sup>2</sup> Józef Tymanowski, "Stosunki polsko-rosyjskie i perspektywy ich zmiany," *Studia Wschodnioeuropejskie*, No 11 (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, May 2020): 5.

in 1939, avoid the issue of responsibility for harm inflicted on Poles by the Soviet Union, or glorify the role of Stalin in creating the Yalta order. This negative perception of Russian historical policy finds fertile ground in Poland, especially in comparison with Polish-German historical dialogue and reconciliation based on the acceptance of historical facts and taking responsibility for them.

The historical connotations of the negative perception of Russia in Poland are also the result of the instrumental use of history in current politics by both sides. Polish Professor of international relations Ryszard Zięba argues that the Polish perception of Russia is particularly sensitive to symbolic issues and their excessive interpretations. Polish politicians, especially those of the right-wing, operationalize tragic episodes and historical processes to place Russia under the pillory of international opinion. Zięba observes that the period between 2005 and 2007 and since autumn 2015 has been a time when the ruling elites in Poland found it convenient to scare their society with Russia to facilitate the conduct of authoritarian and populist internal politics.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural factors influence Polish-Russian relations as much as historical factors. To be fully understood, mutual prejudices between Poles and Russians need to be understood through a reference to a different “cultural programming” in both nations. In 1916, Nikolai Berdyaev wrote, “The quarrel between Russians and Poles cannot be explained only by external forces of history and purely political reasons (...). It is primarily a feud between two Slavic souls, linguistically and anthropologically related, and at the same time so different, almost contradictory, incompatible, and unable to communicate.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the Polish Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz wrote, “Poles and Russians do not like each other, or, more precisely, do not have any unfavourable feelings towards each other, ranging from contempt to hatred, which does not exclude a vague mutual attraction, but always marked by distrust.” Different sources and traditions of political cultures in both countries and societies also influence the perception of Russia in Poland. Polish political culture, based on the noble liberties of the *Rzeczpospolita*, is alien to the monopolisation of power. Poles do not understand the Russians’

<sup>3</sup> Ryszard Zięba, “Główne problemy w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich / Main Problems in Polish-Russian Relations”, *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* nr 3 (t. 54) 2018, 15–18

<sup>4</sup> Olga Nadskakula, “W matni uprzedzeń i stereotypów”. *Znak*. Kwiecień 2007, <https://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/6232007/olga-nadskakulaw-matni-uprzedzen-i-stereotypow/>

deference towards authorities, their orientation towards collectivism, and their acceptance of autocracy.<sup>5</sup>

Among the cultural factors influencing the perception of Russia in Poland, one can mention the Polish concept of Prometheanism that was expressed in the missionary nature of eastern Polish policy. The Polish political elite has held a historical conviction that Poland should and has the right, as the largest state in Central and Eastern Europe, to engage in shaping the political scene in the post-Soviet areas by promoting democratic standards and Western models of political culture there. The idea of helping countries in the post-Soviet area to develop and reinforce their political ties and economic integration with the West is visible in Poland's foreign policy since 1989. Such an approach is inherently set on a collision course with Russia's desire to maintain its security zone within the post-Soviet space.

For many years, developments in national culture have contributed to mutual understanding in relations between Poland and Russia.<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, both national cultures have inspired each other and influenced their mutual development. It was evident in the nineteenth century, when the majority of Poland was a part of the Russian Empire, but also in the second half of the twentieth century when Polish culture acted as an intermediary between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. This influence is evident among the older and better-educated part of Polish society, who are familiar with Russian literature, theatre, cinematography, classical music, and ballet. Poles are also aware of the similar fate of both societies and the efforts for human rights and democracy undertaken in both countries during the communist period. As professor de Lazari observed, Poles could love Russians if they had only their culture. However, Russians also have a state that is possessive and expansive, which has been historically prone to turn into an empire with autocratic rulers. Furthermore, this is what Poles fear and cannot accept.<sup>7</sup>

The declining knowledge of the Russian language in Polish society has a negative impact on the understanding of Russia in Poland. Until 1989, teaching the Russian language in Poland was obligatory and ideologically

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Miron Lakomy, "Główne problemy w stosunkach polsko – rosyjskich na początku XXI wieku," in *Stosunki Polski z sąsiadami w pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku*, ed. Mieczysław Stolarczyk, (Katowice: Silesia University Publishing, 2011): 69.

<sup>7</sup> Romuald Karyś, "Między nami, Słowianami". *Sprawy Nauki*. 09-11-2006, <http://www.sprawynauki.edu.pl/archiwum/dzialy-wyd-papierowe/16-politologia/73-58>

motivated. Nevertheless, during that period, many Poles learnt not only the Russian language but also Russian culture as well. Although the older generation of Poles is able to communicate in Russian at a basic level, 51 percent of the society no longer knows this language, as the international language of the young generation speaks English. Therefore, fewer and fewer Poles can immerse into Russian culture or follow political, economic and social events in Russia using Russian-language sources. This will most likely limit future close contact between societies and understanding of the “Russian soul” by young generations of Poles.

### Polish Political Elite Perceptions of Russia

The political elite perceives Russia through the prism of disputes over the history of mutual relations, different concepts of European security, and Polish concerns about energy security.<sup>8</sup> Demands that Russia acknowledges its role in Poland’s tragic history was a constant element of the Polish-Russian dialogue and polemics of the political elites. In the nineties of the last century, a differentiation in the approach of the Polish political elite to Russia was noticeable. Right-wing circles have tried to eliminate the ideological factor from relations with Russia and pursue a dual-track policy with a focus on economic relations.

At the same time, the Polish government opposed Russia’s attempts to maintain its sphere of influence in Central Europe. As personalities matter in politics, there were also regular tensions between the President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, and the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin. The assumption of the presidency by the left-wing post-communist Aleksander Kwasniewski led to a sanitation of bilateral relations in the second half of the nineties to some extent. At that time, the easing of the position of the Russian side was also noticeable. Between 2001 and 2005, two successive centre-left governments in Poland led by Leszek Miller and then Marek Belka tried to implement pragmatic cooperation with Russia. Such cooperation was criticized by the opposition Law and Justice and the Civic Platform parties, as well as by the anti-Russian Polish media.

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<sup>8</sup> Political elite is understood as a group of people high in a hierarchy of political life in Poland, including top governmental officials both active and retired, and leaders of major political parties. Mariusz Janicki, “Kto w Polsce należy do elity”, *Polityka*, 4 lipca 2017, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1710972,1,kto-w-polsce-nalez-y-do-elity.read>



The rule of the conservative-nationalist Law and Justice party between the autumn of 2005 and 2007 was a period of sharp polemics and declarations of a tough policy towards Russia. In 2007, the Polish government postulated the will to continue dialogue on historical matters, conditioning it by a need to change “the awareness of the Russian political elite.” The government also declared that it would oppose “unjustified attempts to discriminate against Poland” by Russia.

A temporary softening of the polemics over the common history took place in 2007–2010 during the mandate of Civic Platform. Since 2009, the Polish Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church have joined in building dialogue and reconciliation between Poles and Russians. When the Law and Justice Party’s government came to power in 2015, its policy toward Russia became passive, isolationist, and compounded with aggressive anti-Russian rhetoric aimed at attracting right-wing voters and internal political market. After 2015, relations with Russia supported short-term goals in domestic politics, in terms of public relations rather than real politics. According to Professor Zięba, the historical policy imposed by the government after 2015 strengthened Poland’s inclination toward an instrumental use of history for current politics, which only served to achieve the goals of one political option.

The events at hand have reinforced the pre-existing historical and cultural fixations held by Polish political elites throughout the period after 1989. The most notable events were Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, the presidential plane crash in Smolensk in 2010, and Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The use of military power by Russia in the post-Soviet area has traditionally sparked a harsh response from Polish political elites. In 2008, right-wing President Lech Kaczyński condemned the Russian aggression against Georgia in a harsh way. Kaczyński warned against further aggressive steps by Russia towards its neighbours, saying “Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic states, and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland.”<sup>9</sup>

However, there was no unity inside the Polish government about the condemnation of Russia. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was more reluctant in voicing criticism against Russia and declared that Poland would remain

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<sup>9</sup> “Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine appeal to Russia over Georgia,” *The Baltic Times*, August 8, 2008, accessed November 2, 2020, [https://www.baltictimes.com/poland\\_lithuania\\_latvia\\_ukraine\\_appeal\\_to\\_russia\\_over\\_georgia/](https://www.baltictimes.com/poland_lithuania_latvia_ukraine_appeal_to_russia_over_georgia/).

in the mainstream of European activities in connection with the Russian-Georgian conflict. With anti-Russian rhetoric developing in Poland, there were numerous occasions to expose this mutual lack of trust. Press allegations about a simulated nuclear attack on Poland by the Russian armed forces during the *Zapad* 2009 military exercises reasoned well with anti-Russian sentiments. Further information on the Russian plans to deploy Iskander missile systems in the Kaliningrad region also disappointed the Polish political elite.

After 2010, bilateral relations became a hostage of the Smolensk air crash and the issue of recovering the wreckage of the presidential plane. Although the 2010 Smolensk air crash could have acted as a chance for Polish-Russian reconciliation, politicians from the then opposition Law and Justice Party used it quickly to accuse Russia and the Polish government of a conspiratorial attack on the Polish delegation. The Russophobic campaign launched by Law and Justice in 2010 ruled out any possibility of Polish-Russian dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Politicians from Law and Justice accused the Polish government of failing to recognize the threats to independence posed by Russia, accusing it of betraying national interests and serving the country. These conspiracy theories served the purposes of purely internal political struggle but nonetheless damaged Polish-Russian relations beyond repair. With a harsh response from Russian authorities, a spiral of mutual accusations accelerated, ruling out any chance of dialogue. After the Smolensk air crash, right-wing politicians used attitude to Russia as a litmus test in internal political debate in Poland. Those more moderate and open to possible dialogue were labelled as traitors.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine from 2013 on became a trigger for anti-Russian sentiments in Poland.<sup>11</sup> The speed of this aggression and Russia's lack of respect for international law deeply shook the Polish political elites. In 2014, Russia was included as a threat in the strategy of Poland's national security for the first time after 1989. Russia's strong political, military, and economic pressure in the post-Soviet area was described as the reason for the persistence of instability in this region. Nevertheless, the 2014 strategy emphasized the importance of Russia's relations with the West as an

<sup>10</sup> Monika Sus, "Poland: Leading Critic or Marginalised Hawk?" in *EU Member States and Russia. National and European Debates in an Evolving International Environment*, ed. Marco Siddi (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Report No 53/2018): 82.

<sup>11</sup> Katarzyna Pełczyńska - Nałęcz, "How Far do the Borders of the West Extend? Russian/Polish Strategic Conflicts in the Period 1990–2010," (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2010): 21–23.

important factor that affects the security of Poland, the region, and Europe. At the same time, the value of the Euroatlantic solidarity was reemphasized and the United States' military power started to be sought as a bulwark against any future aggression by Russia.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has shaped the perception of Russia as an existential threat ever since. The "Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland" of 2017 listed the aggressive policies of the Russian Federation as a direct threat to the security of Poland and the other countries of NATO's Eastern Flank.<sup>12</sup> It warned of Russian way to pursue its political goals, the situation in neighbouring countries, of undermining their territorial integrity, and of hybrid activities. The expansion of the military potential of the Russian armed forces in the Western Military District and the aggressive scenarios of the Russian military exercises after 2014, which envisaged the use of nuclear weapons against Poland, was estimated in Poland as a confirmation threat assessment of the Russian Federation.

The recent National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland reinforced the political elite's preoccupation with Russian aggression.<sup>13</sup> The strategy placed the neo-imperial policy of the Russian Federation, along with its willingness to use military force, as the most serious threat to Poland's security. The Polish political elite sees the threat from the Russian Federation through the prism of its offensive military potential and activities below the threshold of a hybrid war. The perception of the actions of the Russian Federation as a real military threat to Poland's security contributed to the consensus of the Polish political elite on the need to strengthen Poland's defence potential in the national dimension, within NATO and in bilateral cooperation with the United States.

Poland is organizing territorial defence troops and acquiring anti-access aerial denial operational capabilities to increase the possibilities of independent defence with these facts in mind. At the same time, it is involved in shaping the adaptation of the North Atlantic Alliance and activities aimed at strengthening the security of NATO's Eastern Flank. At the same time, the Polish political elite considers the presence of the US military in Poland and in the Central and Eastern Europe as a safeguard against Russian aggression.

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<sup>12</sup> Poland's Ministry of National Defence, *The Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland*, (Warsaw: Ministry of Defence, 2017): 8, 21–24.

<sup>13</sup> President of Poland, *The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*, (Warsaw: The President of Poland, 2020): 6.

## Polish public opinion about Russia and Russians

Public opinion polls on Russia and Russians are part of regularly held polls on the issues of international relations, Poland's neighbours, and current political events. Polls directly concerning Polish-Russian relations and Poles' assessments of Russia and Russians have been conducted in Poland for the governmental Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, which was established in 2012. The issue of the perception of Russia and Russians also appears in surveys conducted by other social research centres commissioned by the media, such as television, Internet portals, and the press.

The Centre has published three reports on public opinion under the title "Poland-Russia. Social Diagnosis" in the years 2012, 2014, and 2020. Those reports included the results of research on the opinions of Poles about Russia and Russians as well as about Polish-Russian relations. The vast majority of Poles assess Russia's attitude towards Poland as definitely or somewhat unfriendly (80 percent in 2012, 82 percent in 2014 and 79 percent in 2020)<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, in 2020, 64 percent of Poles believed that Russian attitudes towards Poland and Poles were friendly, after a drop in such ratings in 2014 to 46 percent. Such a differentiation of the state and nation's attitude towards Poland and Poles is observed only concerning Russia and Russians. Although Poles see Russians as the most distant to them in terms of culture and customs from among the seven neighbouring nations, spontaneous associations with the word Russian are generally positive or neutral. Positive associations focus on Russian Slavic identity, hospitality, and other similarities and cultural closeness. The first negative association is Russian alcohol abuse, followed immediately by political threads linking the "poor" Russian nation in opposition to the "bad" government. In 2020, 74 percent of respondents perceived Russia as an authoritarian country and only 11 percent as a democratic one while 45 percent of respondents considered it an unfriendly country compared to 20 percent as a friendly one.<sup>15</sup>

Public opinion polls in Poland show a very critical assessment of Russian authorities and policies. Around 60 percent of respondents in 2020 were critical of President Putin's activities. The term Russian foreign policy

<sup>14</sup> *Polska-Rosja diagnoza społeczna 2020*, (Warsaw: Polish – Russian Centre for Dialogue and Understanding, 2020): 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 12, 16.

evoked negative associations with imperialism, expansion, and aggression by most respondents. Most respondents of the 2020 surveys associated Russian foreign policy with propaganda, lies, and manipulation by the state's authorities. Few respondents held a positive or neutral opinion about Russian foreign policy, based on efforts and care of the Russian authorities to promote interests of their own country.

The 2020 research confirmed the inconsistencies observed in 2012 between the will and actions of the Russian authorities and the will of "ordinary Russians." Most of the respondents to the research conducted for the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding in 2020 (76 percent) believed that ordinary Russians did not influence the Kremlin's operation, and therefore cannot be blamed for the government's foreign policy. Nevertheless, 39 percent of respondents felt that the majority of ordinary Russians who support it are also to blame for Russia's aggressive foreign policy.

Public opinion in Poland is critical of individual political events related to Russia's foreign policy. Most Poles consider Russia a threat to national security. In the Centre's 2020 research, the sense of threat from Russia was the highest in the group of respondents aged 55–64 (69 percent of respondents), which is explained by the experience and individual historical memory of this generation of Poles. The respondents aged 18–24 were the smallest group of people who were afraid of being threatened by Russia (35 percent of respondents).<sup>16</sup>

The Centre's research on the use of cultural and social cooperation as a platform for Polish-Russian understanding looks promising. As many as 85 percent of Poles surveyed believed that such cooperation was beneficial for explaining to Russians their arguments and getting to know the neighbour's perspective, as well as mitigating conflicts. Only 33 percent of respondents believed that such cooperation is possible without restrictions while 52 percent of respondents indicated the need for a limited degree of cooperation as they feared that Russian authorities might use it to spread manipulation or disinformation. Only 9 percent of respondents rejected any cultural and social cooperation, believing that the best way to ensure Poland's security is to minimise any contacts with Russia.

The results of public opinion polls for the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding on information warfare and historical propaganda carried out in April 2020 also provide good insights into Polish public

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 24.

opinion about Russia.<sup>17</sup> 74 percent of respondents considered historical issues as the main reasons for the disagreements between nations. 30 percent of respondents considered current matters relating to economic matters to be the cause of disputes, and 26 percent of respondents pointed to current political matters. Among the political issues, 44 percent of respondents viewed Smolensk air crash as the most predominant political issue while only 8 percent pointed to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and 7 percent to the war in Donbas, the dispute over Crimea, foreign policy issues, and Katyń massacre.

Polish public opinion is critical of Russian historical revisionism. Poles spontaneously indicate Russian motives as a desire to create a negative image of Poland and improve their image (14 percent of respondents), as well as to falsify history (11 percent of respondents) and to provoke tensions and conflicts between nations (10 percent of respondents). Poles react emotionally to Russian propaganda activities, which both manipulate and deny historical facts. Such actions inspire the outrage of 42 percent, irritation of 35 percent, and the embarrassment of 20 percent of respondents. According to 43 percent of respondents, the most desirable course of action to respond to Russian information warfare and historical propaganda is by presenting the Polish point of view and by protesting and publicising the Kremlin's manipulation on the international arena. Poles consider it desirable to coordinate such actions with other countries that fell victim to Soviet totalitarianism.

When assessing the perception of Russia by Polish society, one must notice the positive influence of Russia's and Russians reactions or behaviours that are considered by Poles to be morally right and fair. The Public Opinion Research Centre polls conducted in March and May 2010 examined the opinions of Poles about the crime in Katyń and its importance for Polish-Russian relations. Poles perceived the initial actions and gestures of the Russian Federation authorities after the presidential plane crash near Smolensk as honest and reconciling<sup>18</sup>. Poles saw this as an opportunity for improvement in mutual relations, the possibility of explaining the Katyń massacre and closing the inflammatory chapter in history.

<sup>17</sup> *Wojna informacyjna i propaganda historyczna*, (Warsaw: Polish – Russian Centre for Dialogue and Understanding, April 2020): 9, 11, 14–15, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Public Opinion Research Centre, "Opinia publiczna o zbrodni katyńskiej i jej znaczeniu dla stosunków polsko-rosyjskich, BS/67/2010", accessed 3 November 2020. [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K\\_067\\_10.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K_067_10.PDF)

## Perspectives

The assessment of Polish-Russian relations as being in the worst state since the end of World War II presented by the ambassador of the Russian Federation to Poland in February 2020, although exaggerated, points to the problem of a serious deterioration of the situation in recent years. While the ruling circles blame this state of affairs exclusively on the Russian side and do not show any will to engage in dialogue with Russia, the Polish political elite perceives this problem in a more nuanced way.

In November 2016, Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, former Polish ambassador to the Russian Federation, pointed to the need to demythologise relations between Poland and Russia. She criticised simplified black-and-white perceptions of relations with the Russian authorities by the government circles, which resulted in an almost complete blockade of developing these relations. She called for a deliberate and balanced approach to recreating communication channels at the ministerial level, officials, opinion leaders, society and cultural environments. She also warned against spectacular quarrels with Russia and pointed to the potential danger of Russia using bilateral relations to weaken the European Union.

Later, in 2018, Pełczyńska-Nałęcz critically assessed the Polish government's approach towards Russia, calling it radicalism without a policy. The ambassador criticised the political elite and experts for their habitual way of thinking about bilateral relations and blaming Russia for the situation. She noticed "such superiority, and at the same time, defensive perception of reality is very comfortable for the elites. This is because it frees you from the need to ask questions about the effectiveness of the actions taken, and thus to accept helplessness, ineptitude, and irresponsibility in relations with Moscow."<sup>19</sup> According to the ambassador "Russophobe Poland in conflict with Berlin, Paris, Brussels, and Ukraine is completely satisfying for Moscow."<sup>20</sup>

Cooperation with Russia does not have to be equated with a cynically pragmatic cooperation with Putin, Pełczyńska-Nałęcz observes. Poles should look at the size and geographic proximity of the Russian market, which may be a source of beneficial cooperation. At the same time, she emphasises the need counter Russian interference in Poland's internal affairs seriously. In

<sup>19</sup> Pełczyńska – Nałęcz Katarzyna, *Polska wobec Rosji. Radykalizm bez polityki*, (Warsaw: Fundacja Batorego, 2010): 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

particular, Poland should counteract information aggression, protecting electoral processes and building credibility in international cooperation in the process.

According to the ambassador, Poland should start to treat its biggest neighbour and primary opponent seriously. A real policy is needed that would protect the interests of Poland and would act as an adequate answer to the threats in line with the strategies of the European Union and NATO towards Russia. As Pełczyńska-Nałęcz concludes, "Our hostility harms Russia very little; on the contrary, it is often convenient in its present form. Moscow does not need a pro-Russian turn of Warsaw at all. Poland, with hostile slogans on its lips, fulfils almost all the wishes of the Kremlin."<sup>21</sup>

The Conference of Polish Ambassadors has recognised the need for changing Poland's approach to Russia. In September 2019, they published a report on Poland's Eastern policy. The ambassadors criticised the anti-Russian rhetoric of the authorities and opposition groups, which did not translate into real political and economic activities. The current policy towards Russia is perceived as "dreamed up by Kremlin strategists," and the harsh rhetoric of a significant part of the Polish political elite becomes a justification for real retaliation from Russia.

Russia can build an image of Poland as a genetically Russophobe country in the international arena, and the lack of real contacts between societies effectively protects Russia from being infected with freedom and democratic ideas flowing from Poland. The ambassadors argued, "Polish-Russian relations do not exist, and the tools for rebuilding them have been largely damaged, destroyed or taken over by other political players. What is more, it was possible to build an atmosphere in Poland in which dialogue with Russia will be complicated."<sup>22</sup> They recommended a clear message from the Polish government that the policy disputes are aimed at the Russian government and not at Russian society.

Former Polish ambassadors advocated a rebuilding of contacts with the Russian elites of the older generation and dialogue with the rulers, the moderate opposition intelligentsia, and the young generation of Russian elites in addition to an intensification of relations with the Russian democratic

<sup>21</sup> Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, "Stosunki Polska-Rosja: obalamy 7 mitów," *Polityka*, November 1, 2016, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1681052,1,stosunki-polska-rosja-obalamy-7-mitow.read>.

<sup>22</sup> Marek Jerzy Nowakowski, Jacek Kluczkowski, Bogumił Luft, Agnieszka Madziak-Miszewska. *Polityka Wschodnia Polski. Raport*, (Warszawa: Konferencja Ambasadorów RP, 2019): 8.



emigration in Europe. They called for the creation of a long-term program of contacts with the younger generation of Russians to build trust and support mutual cultural exchange.

Numerous Polish scientists and specialists dealing with Polish-Russian relations voice their concerns about the status quo and call for a change in the attitude toward Russia. In his book "Poland's Sickness – Russia," published in 2016, the Polish philosopher and historian of ideas, Bronisław Łagowski argues for accounting for realities in relations with Russia and not relying on myths about Russia and its importance in contemporary Europe. He warns against Russophobia, which he sees as an irrational prejudice, full of fear and blind hostility, which makes it difficult to adapt politics to changing external and internal conditions.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Łagowski accepts an anti-Russian policy, which should include an element of rational calculation, correct or incorrect, depending on the intellectual calculations of the rulers.

In the 2019 monograph "On Russia differently," recognised Polish historian of ideas and philosopher Andrzej Walicki argues that Poland's relations with Russia can be good. In his opinion, this is possible due to the lack of border disputes, problems with national minorities, and favourable conditions for the development of beneficial economic and even political cooperation. Walicki notes, however, that for this to happen, Poles should stop seeing Russia as an unchanging historical enemy and themselves as defenders of Europe against this Russian threat. He encourages the possibility of treating Russia as a reserve power of Europe and Poland's role in the process of building relations between the European Union and Russia.<sup>24</sup> Although it is difficult to imagine this in the present situation, it is difficult to deny the rationality of such a view in the long-term.

In regards to the future of Polish-Russian relations, it is good to recall the views of the late Professor Michał Dobroczyński. He argued that there exists a genuine desire in the younger generations in both countries to engage in various kinds of constructive contacts with as many representatives as possible. This development would be of fundamental importance for the future of Polish-Russian relations. Although it will be a long process, it will allow for a broad understanding and deepening of rapprochement between the two nations. Professor Tymanowski observed in 2020 that the process of

<sup>23</sup> Bronisław Łagowski, *Polska chora na Rosję*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Fundacja Oratio Recta, 2016), 75.

<sup>24</sup> Andrzej Walicki, "O Rosji inaczej", (Warszawa: Fundacja Oratio Recta, 2019): 109.

reconciliation in Polish-Russian relations requires systematic dialogue, which should reduce the distances between both groups, create friendly attitudes, set directions for the future, and agree on principles. Tymanowski hopes that “sooner or later (it would be better, of course, sooner), a dialogue will take place, which is in the interest of both countries. Because both Russia and Poland want to have stable and predictable neighbours at their borders.”<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The perception of Russia and Russians in Poland relies on deeply historical and cultural preconceptions, reinforced by current political, military, economic and social events. The historical policy of both countries, used instrumentally in current politics, has a serious impact on mutual relations. Polish political elites and society are critical of Russian historical revisionism. Poles are concerned about the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation towards its neighbours, especially the threats or use of military force. Currently, the political elite considers Russia the most serious threat to Poland’s security, and this perception shapes national strategies and actions taken in the sphere of security and defence as well as public opinion in Poland. In recent years, limiting contacts and freezing relations have become a substitute for a rational policy towards the Russian Federation. Public opinion shares most of the elite fears and assessments in relation to the authorities and the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

However, Poles see Russia as a country and Russians as a people in separate ways. The criticism toward Russian authorities’ actions does not translate into hostility towards Russian society. Poles do not blame “ordinary” Russians for the aggressive policy of their government. They understand the “Russian soul,” value Russian hospitality, and appreciate other similarities and cultural closeness. A noticeable part of the Polish political elite see the need to move away from irrational hostility and frozen relations with Russia. Postulates of realistic, rational calculations in mutual relations are voiced more and more frequently in the public debate. Former diplomats advocate dialogue with the Russian elites, actions within the framework of public diplomacy, and continuation of economic contacts. Therefore, a more balanced and nuanced policy toward Russia may be of pragmatic benefit not only to Poland, but also to entire Central and Eastern European region.

<sup>25</sup> Józef Tymanowski, “Stosunki polsko-rosyjskie i perspektywy ich zmiany,” 23.

However; the lack of contacts with Russian society in recent years and Poland's integration with the West will reduce the interest of the younger generations of Poles in Russia. Such a state of affairs is unlikely to improve the perception of Russia and Russians in Poland in the short term. Nevertheless, the majority of Poles are aware of the cultural and economic potential for the development of cooperation, dialogue, and reconciliation between societies and states. Despite the poor status of relations now, there is a conviction among the Polish political elite and Polish society that there is both the need and the opportunity of improving Polish-Russian relations in the future.

# NATO Adaptation and Baltic Security

Dr. Hans BINNENDIJK

## Abstract

This article explores the emergence of transatlantic security cooperation from a historical perspective. Even though it was not possible to address the Baltic security challenges during the Cold War due to the Soviet occupation and presence of the Warsaw Pact, adjustments to the transatlantic structures have always delivered their necessary future benefits. This article explores the four stages of NATO transformation by explaining how the alliance has adapted to emerging and already existing security challenges. Since the 2004 enlargement, the Baltic States now can actively contribute to addressing the emerging geopolitical and technological challenges all allies face to remain the “strategic anchor in uncertain times.” In conclusion of the article, the author provides seven recommendations for enhancements, cooperation, and adaptation to new tasks for NATO.

Key words: Adaptation, cohesion, dual track, Russia, emerging challenges

As NATO nears its 72nd anniversary, it remains history’s most successful alliance because it has consistently adapted to the changing security environment. In general, those historical adaptations have benefited the security of the Baltic States. NATO is now in the midst of another adaptation. Several steps have already been taken since 2014 to strengthen NATO’s military capabilities, and the recent NATO Reflection Group’s report offers several important recommendations for strengthening NATO’s political cohesion.

The new Biden Administration will seek to reassure its transatlantic allies that the United States remains a strong ally that is willing to lead. These positive trends will come together during the coming year in the form of a renewed NATO strategic concept. If carried out properly, this process can make NATO more coherent politically, more capable militarily, more resilient as a society, more comprehensive in scope, more global politically, and more equitable in sharing the burden. An adapted NATO should provide even greater security for the Baltic States.

## Four Phases of the NATO Alliance

To understand NATO's future, one must first understand NATO's past. One can think of the Alliance as having transitioned through four different phases in the past seven decades, each of which took place in a different international system. Each of those international systems presented different challenges, threats, and opportunities. The Alliance used varying strategic concepts to adjust both militarily and politically so that it could remain relevant to the changing strategic environment. NATO summits generally served as pivot points for the adaptation process.

*The first phase of NATO, call it NATO 1.0, was the Cold War (1949 to 1989).* NATO during its early years had to adjust to several events such as German membership and the Suez Crisis. The 1956 "Three Wise Men" report suggested ways to strengthen Alliance political consultation and to extend that consultation into non-military fields. But major military and political adjustments during this phase came in 1967 with the Harmel Report. The United States under the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations sought to shift NATO's nuclear strategy from massive retaliation to the more credible flexible response.

Some in Europe interpreted that as a willingness to fighting nuclear war on their soil. In 1966, France withdrew from NATO's military command structure. The Harmel Report struck a balance by connecting deterrence and defence with detente and arms control. That balance was tested a decade later by the Soviet deployment of SS-20s, and the test was met in December 1979 with the NATO dual track decision: to deploy INF range missiles in Europe while negotiating for their subsequent removal. Despite large protests in Europe,<sup>1</sup> cruise and Pershing missiles were deployed, resulting in the 1987 INF treaty and global removal of an entire class of delivery systems. That led to greater Western detente with the Soviet Union. This combination, alongside a collapsing Soviet economy, both forced and enabled Gorbachev to proceed with his reforms. The Baltic States were safer and about to get their freedom.

*NATO 2.0 spanned the decade from 1989 to 2001, sometimes called the post-Cold War period.* This was the unipolar moment in which democracy seemed destined to prevail across the globe. Some asked if NATO was still needed. NATO summits in London and Rome answered "yes" and began to

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<sup>1</sup> Two reports to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: *NATO Today: The Alliance in Evolution*, April 1982; *Post-Deployment Nuclear Arms Control in Europe*, February 1984.

transform the alliance with a renewed focus on Central and Eastern Europe. Two issues of adaptation dominated this period, both in this geographical area. One was primarily political, the other military.

First, political discussions on the prospect of NATO enlargement began as early as 1991.<sup>2</sup> Objections were raised by those who feared that this move would alienate Russia, and it took most of the decade – until the 1999 Washington summit – to welcome Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in the first stage of enlargement. To deal with Russia, the Alliance had created the NATO-Russia Council at the Paris summit in 1997.

Second, NATO's delayed reaction in dealing militarily with the breakup of Yugoslavia caused Senator Richard Lugar to tell NATO that it would have to operate out of area or go out of business. By the end of the decade, NATO had fought two wars in the Balkans and deployed stabilization operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. A Baltic Battalion was created that participated in Balkan peacekeeping operations. Baltic State security was again better off as a result since peace had been enforced by NATO, the Baltic States demonstrated their ability to be a producer of security, and the door had been opened to further enlargement.

*NATO 3.0 (2001 to 2014) began on September 11, 2001 when the twin towers and the Pentagon were attacked.* The Global War on Terror was the dominant theme of this international system. NATO began to speak in terms of “360 degrees” of defence effort. Again, the adaptation had political and military elements. NATO for the first time declared that the common defence clause (Article 5) had been triggered. NATO allies volunteered to support US efforts to drive Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan. They are still deployed there. But George W. Bush's unwise decision to invade Iraq caused deep transatlantic divisions. This focus on the Middle East distracted NATO efforts to strengthen deterrence in Europe.

Militarily, America had transformed the way the US fights using precise battlefield intelligence, stealth aircraft, rapid command and control, and precision strike. Early European participation in Afghanistan highlighted the fact that European militaries had not transformed in a similar way and were thus unable to fight alongside the United States. The focus turned to transforming European militaries. The 2002 Prague summit both spurred military transformation with the creation of the NATO Response

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<sup>2</sup> “NATO Can't Be Vague About Commitment to Eastern Europe,” *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, 8 November 1991.

Force<sup>3</sup> and invited seven additional countries to join the alliance, including the three Baltic States. Those nations formally joined NATO at the 2004 Istanbul summit. During this period, NATO militaries concentrated on counter-insurgency operations and civil-military cooperation (called the comprehensive approach)<sup>4</sup> rather than preparing to deter high intensity conflict with a peer adversary. The 2006 Riga summit continued the military transformation and political enlargement process. The latter hit a speed bump when membership for Ukraine and Georgia was discussed at the 2008 Bucharest summit.

Politically, the 2010 Lisbon summit featured a new strategic concept based on the recommendations made by a Group of Experts headed by Madeleine Albright.<sup>5</sup> That concept predated the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine, but it did anticipate a more complex strategic environment. The 2010 strategic concept defined three core tasks for the alliance: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. Those tasks expanded NATO's traditional concentration on collective defence and provided adequate flexibility for NATO to operate in that more complex environment.

*NATO 4.0, the current phase of the Alliance, began as Russian President Vladimir Putin took more assertive military action against Georgia and Ukraine* in part in response to the Bucharest summit. The precise start of this phase might be dated to the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The 2014 Wales summit again pivoted the alliance in a new direction. Politically, it clarified NATO's views on Russia's aggressive policies and set in motion a series of subsequent military steps designed to enhance NATO's deterrent posture, with a focus on the Baltic States.<sup>6</sup>

That new deterrent posture took shape over the next five years and was based on modest forward deployed forces, a robust civil-military total defence, and the ability to forward deploy reserve forces rapidly. NATO forward deployed a battle group into each of the three Baltic States and Poland, created a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, upgraded the NATO

<sup>3</sup> "A European Spearhead Force Would Bridge the Gap," *IHT*, 16 February 2002.

<sup>4</sup> "From Comprehensive Approach to Comprehensive Capability," *NATO Review Online*, 18 April 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement*, Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 17 May 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "Deterring Putin's Russia", in *Transatlantic Relations in a Changing European Security Environment*, edited by Robert Kupiecki and Andrew Michta, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2015, 21–29.

Response Force, created a new set of mobility commands, and agreed to robust Readiness<sup>7</sup> and Mobility Initiatives. The United States further funded a European Deterrence Initiative and forward deployed rotational brigade combat teams into Poland. But as military adaptation succeeded, NATO's political fabric was badly frayed by President Trump's erratic and undiplomatic policies toward his transatlantic partners.

## NATO Adaptation and the New Strategic Concept

The November 2020 NATO Reflection Group report calls the alliance a "strategic anchor in uncertain times" and includes 14 main findings. The focus is on strengthening the damaged political side of the Alliance. Some of the more prominent findings are:<sup>8</sup>

- First, maintaining political cohesion and unity must be an unambiguous priority for all Allies.
- Second, NATO should continue the dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue with Russia while revitalizing its nuclear-sharing arrangements.
- Third, NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China.
- Fourth, terrorism poses one of the immediate, asymmetric threats to Allied nations and citizens.
- Fifth, climate change will continue to shape NATO's security environment.
- Sixth, NATO should better utilizing its relationship with the EU and other partners.
- Seventh, NATO must be diligent in ensuring that it remains capable of reaching and implementing decisions in a timely fashion.

In order to deal with these and other findings, the Alliance will need to use the renewed strategic concept to be more effective in several areas<sup>9</sup> that will have positive consequences for Baltic security. As in the past, this will again require both political and military adaptation. To meet these challenges, the Alliance needs to:

(a) *Be more coherent politically.* Deep divides have emerged among

<sup>7</sup> "NATO Must Adopt Readiness Initiative to Deter Russia," *Atlantic Council*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," *NATO Secretary General*, 25 November 2020, 12–15.

<sup>9</sup> "Four factors to consider in keeping NATO relevant," *Defense News*, November 24, 2020.



NATO members during the past decade. Transatlantic confidence was shaken by the Trump Administration.<sup>10</sup> Perspectives on the Russian threat differ markedly in the East and South of Europe. China is seen as a partner by some and an adversary by others. Terrorism has hit some countries much harder than others. Several NATO nations have become more autocratic and less free. Economic differences in Europe divide the North and South. Brexit has weakened the EU. This has created a lack of political cohesion that was the focus of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's Reflection Group initiative. A new American President will help regain some of this cohesion but the varying fissures run deep. The place to start in the new Strategic Concept will be to articulate a common statement of Alliance values, a common threat assessment, and a code of conduct focusing on democratic principles.

(b) *Be more effective at conventional deterrence.* The steps taken during the past five years to assure the security of the Baltic States have been positive. Russia would be taking a massive security risk should it decide to pursue any kind of military adventure in Eastern Europe. But NATO Readiness and Mobility Initiatives are key to sustaining conventional deterrence and budgets supporting them may suffer as post-COVID defence resources are reduced. Those two initiatives need to be given high priority. In addition, United States force posture is also key to deterring Russia. The US now periodically rotates a brigade through the Baltic States, but a more persistent presence there would be much more effective. A US brigade is now deployed on a full time heel-to-toe rotational basis in Poland.<sup>11</sup> The same should be done for the Baltic States with deployments spread among the three countries.

(c) *Be more precise at nuclear deterrence.* The demise of the INF treaty has created a potential imbalance in non-nuclear deployments that could tempt Moscow to engage in riskier behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Russia is now in a position to deploy intermediate range missiles targeted at Europe while European Allies are unlikely to agree to any additional ground based nuclear missiles on the continent. Worse, Russia has articulated a nuclear doctrine that amounts to first use, while NATO has no public nuclear use doctrine at all. Unlike the 1980s, new US ground-based nuclear deployments are not

<sup>10</sup> "The folly of a NATO troop withdrawal decision," Defense News, June 9, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," *Atlantic Council Task Force Report*, 13 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Trump's decision to end nuclear treaty will strengthen Putin," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 October 2018.

necessary, but NATO does need to strengthen its nuclear posture. The dual capable aircraft owned by various European nations need to remain modern and NATO needs to design a nuclear doctrine which will clarify for Moscow that any first use of a nuclear weapon against NATO will result in a symmetrical response.<sup>13</sup>

(d) *Be a more resilient society in fighting hybrid war.* Russia engages in ongoing hybrid war against much of NATO. It seeks divisions in societies and then uses social media and other techniques to amplify those schisms. The Baltic States and NATO units deployed there are often targeted. NATO and the Baltic States have taken several steps to counter Moscow's efforts at malign influence and coercion. These include total defence concepts, a heightened sense of the need for reliance, NATO Centres of Excellence in each Baltic State that focus on elements of hybrid war, and NATO counter-hybrid assistance teams. NATO might next consider ways to deter these ongoing hybrid attacks by making clear to Moscow that NATO will retaliate if they continue.

(e) *Be more comprehensive in scope.* To remain relevant to all generations in the transatlantic space, NATO will need to broaden its scope to include issues like managing pandemics, global warming, and uncontrolled immigration. NATO has already played a visible role in the COVID crisis but needs to think forward to see how its' technical, organizational, and logistic skills can help alleviate future pandemics. Similarly, NATO navies have played key roles in dealing with cross-Mediterranean immigration, but as this crisis will likely continue, NATO's "rules of engagement" for handling refugees will need to be refined. Global warming too may have a profound impact on broader security interests if ice melts impact crowded coastlines. NATO should develop contingency plans defining its role in each of these three areas.

(f) *Be more global in outlook.*<sup>14</sup> NATO has already begun to consider its global role. It is increasingly hard to distinguish global issues from issues that have a direct impact on European security. For example, NATO has noted that China is "coming to Europe." China is challenging NATO interests and values in many areas, including abuse of human rights, challenges to democratic governance, ownership of critical infrastructure, control of technology and technology standards, predatory economic practices, use of

<sup>13</sup> "Decisive Response: A New Nuclear Strategy for NATO," *Survival*, Volume 61, Number 5, October-November 2019, 113–128.

<sup>14</sup> "NATO needs a new core task," *Defense News*, 22 July 2020.

coercive diplomacy, defence cooperation with Russia, and use of the global commons. Europe has this past year awoken to the realities of a Chinese challenge. A new and more cooperative transatlantic approach to China is likely to be developed by the Biden administration. While Chinese challenges extend well beyond NATO's remit, NATO will nonetheless need to define the critical role it can play in meeting these global challenges. In doing so, NATO will need to reach out much more effectively to Asian partners.<sup>15</sup>

(g) *Be more assured in decision making.* NATO's lack of cohesion, discussed above, has given rise to the concern that in time of crisis, NATO might be deadlocked and unable to act in a concerted fashion. Consensus decision making is hard wired into the alliance and probably cannot be changed for most issues. But single country vetoes have frustrated NATO policies. If such a political deadlock occurred in time of military crisis, such as an attack on the Baltic States, then a coalition of willing partners would probably respond quickly under Article 5 while NATO decides what to do. But the response would not benefit from all of NATO's assets. So, the United States has sought to build in time limits for decisions that would escalate them to the ministerial level quickly. This process might be assisted with the latest on line meeting technology.<sup>16</sup> Some combination of constraints on single country vetoes and time limits on decisions in crisis would strengthen the Alliance.

(h) *Be more equitable in sharing the burden.* Burden sharing has been a perennial issue in the Alliance.<sup>17</sup> The 2 percent of GDP defence spending goal was agreed to by all during the Obama Administration. Progress has been made toward that goal, though not enough. Now, a new reality needs to be considered by the Alliance. As China's military power grows to rival that of the United States in Asia, NATO must contend with the fact that a major power conflict in Asia involving the United States would have a profound impact on Europe, much more than is generally perceived. US troops would be shifted to the Asian theatre, making Europe much more vulnerable to Russian aggression. In addition, a US war with China would inevitably draw European nations into the conflict economically and politically, if not militarily. So, Europe has a greater than ever interest in being able to defend itself should there be less than expected American support. It needs to plan for that eventuality.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "Capitalizing on transatlantic concerns about China," *Atlantic Council*, 24 August 2020.

<sup>16</sup> "NATO should always work from home," *Defense One*, 10 April 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "What NATO's burden-sharing history teaches us," *Defense News*, 9 July 2018.

<sup>18</sup> "NATO needs a European level of ambition," *Defense News*, 7 December 2018.

(i) *Be more creative in using the NATO-Russia Council.* During the past half-decade, “business as usual” with Russia has broken down. Each month seems to bring another Russian action that makes any degree of cooperation more difficult. The latest have been the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and massive Russian cyber-attacks on various US government and business computer systems. Another “reset” by the Biden Administration is unlikely unless Russia changes its practices. Any yet there remain areas of potential cooperation in the security field where common interests exist. They would include some arms control measures, agreement on rules of the road for military exercises, and incident management procedures. The NATO-Russia Council might be used to explore more effective ways to manage military incidents and avoid unwanted escalation with Russia.

## Conclusion

The Baltic States have a high stake in the success of NATO’s adaptation process. Adaptation has served them well historically during four phases of the Alliance’s history. Current adaptation must be comprehensive because the global strategic environment is increasingly complex and dangerous. But history also indicates that the Alliance is up to the task. New leadership in the United States will bring positive change. Europe too will need to share a more co-equal burden in all elements of the Alliance. This new burden-sharing requirement should include enhancing Europe’s traditional military capabilities, but it should also extend to the new tasks of countering hybrid or grey area attacks. The Baltic States are well situated to contribute significantly to this latter mission.

# **The Baltic States, Poland, and the Protests in Belarus: the Case for the Unconditional Love?**

Dr. Dovilė JAKNIŪNAITĖ

## **Abstract**

The dubious August 2020 election results in Belarus have caused international condemnation and domestic unrest in Minsk. The anti-Lukashenko protests in the capital of Belarus were met with militarized repression, incarceration of the opposition leaders, and exile for opposition leaders such as Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya. In this shifting paradigm, the Baltic States and Poland have played a crucial role. First, they have reinforced the democratic opposition by hosting and accepting them in their countries in order to alleviate the humanitarian impact of the government suppression of protests. Second, the Baltic States and Poland have assisted by leading debates about the necessary steps to stop violence and promote democratic transition in the neighbouring Belarus. This paper explains the reasons for the Baltic States and Poland to support the democratic transition in Belarus by leading debates on sanctions and policies in Europe and the region, concluding that this advocacy has been critical for the opposition, prefiguring any concrete policy from the EU.

Key words: Belarus, anti-government protests, Lukashenko, Tsihanouskaya, democratic transition

## **Introduction**

The scale and the duration of the Belarusian anti-government that began on 10 August after dubious election results surprised many observers – and likely most Belarusian people themselves. In this unexpected situation, what was not surprising was the quick support and admiration that protesters received from the three Baltic States and Poland, both from their populations at large and at the official level. For years, they had declared the democratization process in Eastern neighbourhood of the EU as a foreign policy priority, and they had stayed consistent despite making some

concessions towards Belarusian regime from time to time over the years. This process involved activities such as engaging with the Belarusian authorities, suspending sanctions despite information about human rights violations and suppression of the political opposition, or believing Lukashenko's criticism towards Russia.

Support of these protests was the continuation of long-term rhetorical backing for the democratic opposition in Belarus. However, such rhetoric has become problematic by gradually gaining inertia through the ritualistic expression of criticism against the Belarusian authorities on various human rights violations towards its political opponents. It seemed that that the presidential elections in the summer of 2020 would result in a predictable outcome, Lukashenko's victory, which again would be followed by criticism from outside observers and Western governments.

However, the unexpected happened. By allowing Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya to run in the presidential elections, Alexander Lukashenko unwillingly allowed part of Belarusian society to see an alternative view of the future. Then, many vote-counting irregularities were revealed, and this gave the people a reason to go to the streets. Moreover, by authorising the usage of force against his citizens, Belarus authorities provided for those protests to persist. All of this allowed the countries in Belarus neighbourhood – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – to reaffirm their interest in the country and sparked hopes about the regime change in Belarus.

Even though at the beginning of 2021 the protests have waned, political instability is still lasting. It is already feasible to reflect upon and review the efforts and justifications by these four countries – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – in supporting the 2020 Belarusian protest movement. First, I will review the reactions and support Belarus received from these states, and then, I examine the reasons and rationale for such policies, concluding with discussion on major findings and the remaining policy challenges and perspectives for Belarus.

## **Support for the Democratic Protests in Belarus**

Almost immediately after the first protests on the duplicity of the official election results, all four states expressed their shared concerns over the transparency of the August elections and condemned violence against peaceful protesters. For example, on 13 August, the prime ministers of

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania made a joint statement calling Belarus to conduct new, “free and fair” elections in front of international observers, which would be more transparent. The statement also urged the EU to consider sanctions on those responsible for the violence and rigging of the elections.<sup>1</sup> Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki expressed adamant support and called for the EU to take further action by hosting a special Belarus summit, although without ever clarifying its potential content.<sup>2</sup> The leaders of these countries continued to use a similar lexicon of support and criticism for the Belarusian authorities many times in a variety of formats in the subsequent months.

In their backing of a coordinated EU sanction policy, these states also stayed consistent in their demands, and the Baltic States were quick to adopt their own policy in the form of independent sanctions regime. They demonstrated impatience with the EU’s indecisively slow approach to respond to the gruesome events in Minsk. On 31 August, they imposed travel bans on Lukashenko and 29 other regime officials who are suspected to have contributed to the dubious election results and to the orchestration of violence against protesters.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of Lukashenko was symbolic, as other EU states were particularly reluctant even to consider sanctions against him personally. Poland said it considered unilateral sanctions, but in the end, it waited for formulation of a common EU stance.

A variety of other symbolic support activities were organised as well. One of the prominent early events was organised on 23 August in Lithuania called the Freedom Way. On that day, a human chain stretching more than 30 kilometres from the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, to the border with Belarus was formed.<sup>4</sup> The chosen date was not accidental; on 23 August 1989, two million people in the three Baltic States formed the Baltic Way to peacefully protest the communist rule that had lasted since the signing of

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<sup>1</sup> RFE/RL, ‘Baltic States Urge New Election In Belarus, Call For EU Sanctions’, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 15 August 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/baltic-states-urge-new-election-in-belarus-call-for-eu-sanctions/30785103.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Plucinska and Kacper Pempel, ‘Poland Offers New Support for Belarus Civil Society, Media’, Reuters, 14 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-poland-idUSKCN25A0X3>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrius Sytas, ‘Baltic States Impose Sanctions on Lukashenko and Other Belarus Officials’, Reuters, 31 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-sanctions-idUSKBN25R0Z7>.

<sup>4</sup> RFE/RL, ‘Lithuanians Form “Freedom Way” Human Chain In Solidarity With Belarus Opposition’, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 23 August 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/30798715.html>.

the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This event affirmed the symbolic connection between the past fight for the independence in the Baltic States then and the present struggle of the Belarus people. Various rallies of support were organized in Latvia and Estonia as well.

A series of public events entitled “Solidarity with Belarus” were organised by the Polish government as well. One landmark event was a huge concert in the national football stadium.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the year, the annual Freedom Prize by the Parliament of Lithuania was dedicated to Belarusian opposition. Overall, it is possible to firmly state that the majority of the population agreed with their government’s decision to stand on the side of the protesters. In general, public support in all four countries relied often on the historical analogy between their struggles and projected their understanding about the importance of freedom.

Lithuania and Poland also became host countries for many Belarusians who had left their home country. Among them were prominent opposition and business figures. In Vilnius, Lithuania hosts the Belarusian opposition leader and the presidential candidate Tsihanouskaya, who was forced to flee Belarus alongside her team. Veronika Tsepkalova, another opposition figure, found her new home in Poland, with several others as well. Polish government also provided a villa in one of the districts of Warsaw for the use of the Belarusian opposition.<sup>6</sup> With more than 1.5 million subscribers as of end of 2020, one of the most popular information sources in early months of the protest, the *Nexta Live Telegram* channel, has been broadcasting from Warsaw. The location in Warsaw was coincidental, without any official Polish assistance; nevertheless, it also has contributed to the growing idea of full Polish support (and another reason for Lukashenko to believe in an external conspiracy against him).

The support that the Baltic States and Poland have provided was not only symbolic. The countries initiated the variety of projects to assist the people who suffered violence and were willing or forced to leave Belarus. Polish hospitals began to treat Belarusian activists who have been injured or tortured by the authorities in Minsk. In addition, to alleviate restrictions on movement, these countries loosened their visa requirements and fast-tracked immigration procedures. They also promised tax breaks for

<sup>5</sup> Christian Davies, ‘Poland Takes a Back-Seat Role in Belarus Standoff’, *Financial Times*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/e851f4b2-819a-46ca-a443-e5078dbb66c0>.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Easton, ‘Belarus Protests: Why Poland Is Backing the Opposition’, *BBC News*, 9 September 2020, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54090389>.



companies that moved from Belarus to the Baltic States or Poland. Poland ensured a 24-hour hotline and Polish language classes for children. Poland also provided funding for the start-ups.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it promised to allocate around 50 million zloty (11 million euros) as a part of the new support programme for repressed academics in Belarus.<sup>8</sup> In August, Latvia allocated €150,000 EUR for legal and medical counselling and other practical assistance to detained protesters who suffered from the physical abuse. Lithuania launched a web page for IT specialists seeking employment, and is helping Belarusian companies to open bank accounts, obtain visas, and find office space. Belarusian IT sector seemed especially desirable, as in 2019, it accounted for 5 percent of the Belarus exports. The neighbouring countries (including Ukraine) saw the opportunity to recruit talent, and, one can say, to exploit the unfortunate Belarusian situation for their own advantage. For example, as of October, Latvia said that 12 Belarus companies had decided to move there, but Lithuania's investment agency informed it has been harboured over 85 companies.<sup>9</sup>

These activities did not go unnoticed in Minsk. Lukashenko accused Poland and Lithuania (and Ukraine, and the Czech Republic) of meddling in Belarus's domestic affairs, organising protests, and wanting to overthrow his government.<sup>10</sup> He threatened Lithuania with sanctions but did not make good on his promise. Nevertheless, Belarus demanded the reduction of diplomatic staff residing in Belarus from Lithuania and Poland and characterized the Lithuanian and Polish diplomatic activities as "unambiguously destructive." Moreover, he recalled its own ambassadors from Riga, Vilnius, and Warsaw.<sup>11</sup>

Reacting to this pressure, Lithuania and Poland also recalled their ambassadors from Belarus. A couple of days later, Estonia, Latvia and several other countries followed the same path in solidarity. Finally, at the end

<sup>7</sup> Andrius Sytas, Ilya Zhegulev, and Margaryta Chornokondratenko, 'With Warm Words and Fast Visas, Neighbours Woo IT Workers Fleeing Belarus', Reuters, 1 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/belarus-election-tech-idUSKBN26M5FJ>.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters Staff, 'Poland Says It Will Support Belarus Civil Society, Media', Reuters, 14 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/belarus-election-poland-society-idUSW8N2CW01L>.

<sup>9</sup> Sytas, Zhegulev, and Chornokondratenko, 'With Warm Words and Fast Visas, Neighbours Woo IT Workers Fleeing Belarus'.

<sup>10</sup> Tut.by, 'Лукашенко рассказал, что у Беларуси «хотят отсечь Гродненскую область»', TUT.BY, 21 August 2020, <https://news.tut.by/economics/697579.html>.

<sup>11</sup> TASS, 'Belarusian Foreign Ministry Says Lithuania, Poland Have Reduce Diplomatic Staff in Minsk', TASS, 3 October 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1208203>.

of December 2020, Belarus closed all of its state borders for its citizens except the one that it shares with Russia citing the COVID-19 pandemic. In any case, most of the measures taken by the Belarusian authorities demonstrated a show of strength and to find an external scapegoat for unrest at home. These measures also have displayed the possibility of a complete break of all diplomatic and political relations with Belarus and the Baltic States and Poland.

### **Reasons for Supporting Protests and Backing the Opposition**

There is a variety of explanations for the approach that the three Baltic States and Poland have taken towards the post-election events in Belarus. One of the most obvious answers regarding the huge interest into the processes in Belarus – all countries other than Estonia share a border with Belarus, and Estonia is still in proximity and holds a similar foreign policy towards the region as Lithuania and Latvia do. Another general explanation, at least for Poland and Lithuania, is historical. Their territories once belonged to the same state – either Grand Duchy of Lithuania, or later Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Therefore, there are several historical events and figures that are shared among Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Poles. For some in each country, this historical context creates some sense of togetherness and a justification for helping their historic relatives. Crucial in this paradigm is that Lithuania and its policies act as an essential ligature that ties Estonia and Latvia to Poland in a common approach toward Belarus.

However, these ideas and broader historical analogies provide only general, abstract reasons for this attention but do not necessarily explain the political choices and actions made by the Baltic States and Poland. One major reason can be used when explaining this common position – Russia and its role in Belarus. Many studies have been written about Belarus's multifaceted dependence on Russia.<sup>12</sup> It includes the existence of Union State of Russia and Belarus with the constant possibility of deeper integration and less sovereignty for Belarus, and energy and economic dependence as a political advantage over Minsk – with political and even military-security repercussions if Belarus were to diverge from its planned course.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Anaïs Marin, 'Under Pressure: Can Belarus Resist Russian Coercion?', Brief (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 7 July 2020), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/under-pressure-can-belarus-resist-russian-coercion>.

Keeping in mind the constant fear and mistrust of Russia by the Baltic States and Poland, the hypothetical situation of Belarus just another Russian Oblast' does not provide any sense of security in the Baltic Sea Region.<sup>13</sup> During his long political presidential career, Lukashenko has made a variety of intelligent moves in trying to balance Russia's influence, sometimes distancing more from Russia and coming closer to the EU, hinting at a more a pro-European orientation (and implicitly, a more democratic and anti-Russian). These hopes, as it transpired later, were false. Moreover, the events of August 2020 and the following months demonstrated that the only constant ally that Lukashenko's regime can rely on is Russia. Therefore, for the Baltic States and Poland, this geopolitical fact is a sufficient reason to justify their opposition to Lukashenko in his quest to stay in power.

Despite these commonalities – proximity, history, and the fear of geopolitically revisionist Russia – there has been some differences among the four states on how they have approached Belarus. Besides, these four states have not always implemented idealistic, value-based foreign policies toward the current Belarusian regime. Therefore, it is useful to quickly review and compare the Belarus policies of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in order to better acknowledge their differences, current position, and outcomes.

Latvia has economic initiatives to cooperate with Belarus, as it has well developed port infrastructure and is closest and cheapest pathway to the international trade (together with Lithuania<sup>14</sup>). Over the years, the Belarusian authorities have been trying to play a strategic game by creating competition between Lithuania and Latvia over transit, especially after its relations with Lithuania became strained over the newly built Astravets nuclear power plant near Lithuania's border.

For example, Belarusian products currently account for around 30 percent of the cargo transit through Latvia.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Lithuania, Latvia has not focused much on the issues that Belarus authorities would consider sensitive (as the Lithuanians did with Astravets nuclear power plant or openly hosting opposition groups in their country), taking a more pragmatic

<sup>13</sup> For the review of the Baltic States relations to Russia in early 2000s, see Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration* (Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Lithuania is even easier to cooperate with if one seeks to diversify the economic activities as it has less Russian business interests to deal with in its transport and transit sector.

<sup>15</sup> Dzianis Melyantsov, 'Belarus's Relations With the Baltic States: Strategic Economic Links and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Calculations' (Jamestown Foundation, 29 May 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-relations-with-the-baltic-states-strategic-economic-links-and-pragmatic-foreign-policy-calculations/>.

stance. Therefore, Latvia was much eager supporter of EU-Belarus rapprochement. There were even plans at the beginning of 2020 regarding Lukashenko's visit to Riga.<sup>16</sup> Despite this pragmatic strategy, Latvia never doubted the EU strategy towards Belarus and has always emphasised human rights violations and lack of democracy within Belarus.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, despite clear economic interests, Latvia did not have difficulty formulating its political position after the protests in Belarus, joining Lithuania and Poland in the common approach.

Estonia is the only country in this overview that does not border Belarus. Being farther to the north, it serves more as an entrance to Northern European market that is of lesser interest to Belarus.<sup>18</sup> Because of these factors, Belarus has not been a foreign policy priority in Tallinn as compared to the other neighbouring countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Nevertheless, Estonia's case is somewhat similar to that of Latvia. Support for the democratic Belarus opposition and criticism of various violations of law and human rights have always been on its agenda. Therefore, for Tallinn, it was easy to follow the same path with the others as it had even less economic costs to keep in mind.

Poland has stood by Lithuania as the main supporter of the democratic Belarus cause, but during the last five years, it has been taking a more pragmatic approach in economic cooperation with Belarus (similar to Latvia). At the end of 2016, Polish Senate Marshal Stanislaw Karchevsky visited Belarus and met with Lukashenko and other high level officials, signalling some renewal of political contacts that have been absent since the 2011 EU sanctions (after another contested election).

This renewed dialogue was connected with economic interests and partly with changed Belarusian rhetoric after the events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, making the assumption that more a sovereign Belarus can counterbalance Russian ambitions for larger military presence near Polish borders.<sup>19</sup> According to some Polish experts, these moves might have been influenced by certain reservations by some Belarus opposition figures towards Poland. Therefore, it allowed Lithuania to lead the regional

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<sup>16</sup> Melyantsou.

<sup>17</sup> Kamil Klysiński, 'No Other Choice but Co-Operation. The Background of Lithuania's and Latvia's Relations with Belarus', OSW Commentary (Centre for Eastern Studies, 7 January 2013), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-01-07/no-other-choice-co-operation-background-lithuanias-and-latvias>.

<sup>18</sup> Melyantsou, 'Belarus's Relations With the Baltic States'.

<sup>19</sup> Davies, 'Poland Takes a Back-Seat Role in Belarus Standoff'.

effort with Belarus.<sup>20</sup> However, as mentioned in the beginning of the article, Poland did not hesitate to vocally express its backing for the Belarusian opposition, mobilizing international support.

Nevertheless, Lithuania has been the most vocal public supporter of Belarus protesters. It was of Lukashenko's primary critic, pushing the EU to adopt sanctions as soon as possible, even against the initial search for a consensus policy and a slow EU approach. All of the EU countries in the Belarusian neighbourhood have declared their hopes for more democratic Belarus at least for the last decade. However, looking back at the last couple of decades, one can see that Lithuania's foreign policy towards Belarus has also been ambiguous. Lithuania has also implemented the double-track policy towards Belarus.<sup>21</sup>

The political relations between two states have been cold since the 2010 election – it demonstrated that efforts to engage with Belarus blatantly failed. Criticism towards Lukashenko was frequent and harsh, and many opposition activists easily found their new homes and offices in Vilnius. However, under these politically almost non-existent relations, intensive and fruitful economic cooperation had been developing. It was popular to emphasise that Lithuania's border with Belarus is its longest state border, thus, economic cooperation is inevitable and logical. Lithuanian businesses invested in Belarus, the Lithuanian transport sector profited from the transit from Belarus, and economic and cultural tourism from Belarus contributed to the Lithuanian economy. As a result, Lithuanian foreign policy oscillated between these two opposing poles. At one end of this continuum were ideas about the democratization of Belarus, using economic isolation and EU Eastern Partnership as tools for such a goal. At the opposing end was a non-interference, commercial pragmatism, and acceptance of Belarusian dependence on Russia.<sup>22</sup>

There were several reasons for such fluctuation between idealistic and pragmatic Belarus policy, apart from clear economic calculations and pressure and impact of business interest groups. These reasons explain the policy ambiguity by Latvia and Poland as well. First, there is the clever manoeuvring by Lukashenko who exploited the hopes of the EU and the

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<sup>20</sup> Easton, 'Belarus Protests'.

<sup>21</sup> Klysiński, 'No Other Choice but Co-Operation. The Background of Lithuania's and Latvia's Relations with Belarus'.

<sup>22</sup> Tomas Janeliūnas, 'Lietuva ir Baltarusija: pusiausvyros paieškos', in *Ambicingas dešimtmetis: Lietuvos užsienio politika 2004–2014*, ed. Dovilė Jakniūnaitė (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2015), 174.

other Western countries by promising reforms and distance from Russia. These signals misled policymakers and societies into thinking that Belarus can change peacefully from the top-down and did not allow a closure of cooperation and communication. Second, it was believed that the Belarusian authorities are rational actors despite their domestic policies and, when a problem arises, it would be solved if the communication channels were left open at some level. Third, gradual disappointment in the chances and possibilities of Belarusian opposition to topple Lukashenko regime contributed to this. The Belarusian authorities have closed all domestic channels of influence for political opposition, making it impotent and inefficient, and besides, internal quarrels and competition among the opposition weakened them as well. Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland took the pragmatic “wait and see” position toward Belarus expecting either forceful changes from Russia or public grass-roots protests and civil society activity.

During the last year or two, these reasons have provided less and less of a justification. First, Lukashenko lost all the credibility that he ever had, and even though during his last presidential campaign he tried to distance from Russia, few, at least in the EU countries, believed him. There is little possibility for any new reset of EU-Belarus relations. Pressure from Russia against Belarus has also increased, leaving less space for manoeuvring between the West and Russia.<sup>23</sup> Second, the rationality of Belarus government also appeared to be unwarranted as an argument. After a long planning process, Belarus began to build a nuclear power plant in Astravets in 2012, which is just several kilometres from the Lithuanian border and 45 kilometres from Vilnius. Lithuania considers this power plant to be challenge to its security. There have been several serious incidents already during the construction phase.<sup>24</sup> These incidents and Vilnius policies have not prevented the construction. The only option now remains to boycott electricity imports, and Latvia has also promised to ban electricity imports from Belarus.<sup>25</sup> The idea of rational discussion with Belarus proved to be unsubstantiated.

<sup>23</sup> Artyom Shraibman, ‘Embattled Lukashenko Loses Friends in East and West’, Carnegie Moscow Center (blog), accessed 11 January 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82245>.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, ‘Fundamental Problems of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant under Construction in Belarus | News’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 29 March 2018, <https://www.urm.lt/default/en/news/fundamental-problems-of-the-astravets-nuclear-power-plant-under-construction-in-belarus->.

<sup>25</sup> Andrius Sytas, ‘Lithuania Stops Baltics Power Trade with Belarus, Russia over Nuclear Plant’, Reuters, 3 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/litgrid-belarus-idUSKBN27J2CA>.

Finally, the unexpected happened in August 2020, and a substantial part of Belarusian society decided to show its discontent after the unfair elections by participating in mass demonstrations. This was unexpected turn of events that few had foreseen, though some had been long hoping for. Yet, this possibility has always existed, and the protests did not need any special interpretation – they were anti-government, demanding democratic elections – therefore, it was what that Belarus's European neighbours had wanted to see. There were new people, new forms of mobilization and communication, and new faces of opposition, and thus old discontent could be forgotten and new hopes could be raised.

### **What is Next?**

Unequivocally supporting the opposition protests in Belarus, the Baltic States and Poland have put all their foreign policy efforts into one basket, having clearly committed themselves to waiting for regime change in Belarus. Of course, the question is how long should such policies last. The biggest questions are about the future of the political processes in Belarus. What will 2021 bring? How or whether political stabilisation would take place? Would Lukashenko prevail? If not, what kind of a political regime would emerge? Would Belarus experience stronger ties with Russia or would Belarus inch closer to democratic standards? Now, there are still many unknowns.

The Baltic States and Poland have stayed the most vocal supporters of the still ongoing Belarusian democratic protest movement, championing continued pressure on Lukashenko by the EU. In the context of uncertainty in Belarus, there is nonetheless some certainty that the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish positions towards Belarus remains and should remain the same. There is little doubt that this on-going support would continue, even if a pessimistic scenario about Lukashenko staying in power would be realised. Even if Lukashenko promises some democratic reforms – the mistrust is reciprocal and hardly recoverable. There is also a huge probability that none of these four would return to their sometimes more, sometimes less pragmatic policy positions towards Belarus in the economic and commercial policies – many rhetorical moves of criticism have been levied and many promises have been made to Belarusian people and its activists in exile.

After its usual coordination, deliberation, and certain trade-offs, the EU managed to formulate a supportive and strict policy and adopt a mostly symbolic schedule of three rounds of sanctions, although there is a constant risk that some other internal or external more urgent events will shift focus. Therefore, the largest external threat is waning attention toward the situation Belarus, which could be caused by diminishing interest in waiting for regime change from more powerful international actors. Then, the alertness and will of the most ardent supporters of Belarus in the EU would become of the utmost importance. What remains to be seen is if they themselves would not be overtaken by more urgent and demanding concerns.



# Belarus: Stuck in a Moment with No Escape

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## Abstract

Belarusian President and strongman Alexander Lukashenko has long balanced the domestic and foreign and security policies of Belarus to maintain the benefits from its strategic partnership with Russia and a pragmatic cooperation with the West. However, the troubled presidential elections of August 2020 resulted in an eruption public resentment and protests against the government. These events disturbed the domestic political stability and balance – the only ostensible benefit of Lukashenko's regime until this contested election. Now, Lukashenko has been widely condemned due to his response to the protests, and it is too late for the West to establish an actionable and substantial policy towards Belarus. Nevertheless, some states can implement or offer a policy for Europe and the West vis-à-vis the relations Belarus still has with Russia. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyse what are the key components of Kremlin's actual strategy and what are the Western interests regarding Belarus. Most importantly, the paper will consider what the three Baltic States as close neighbours of Belarus could do to facilitate the emergence of a coherent and unified strategy towards Belarus.

Key words: Belarus, Russia, United States, European Union, policy recommendations

## Introduction

Relative silence had rung out from Belarus for protracted periods. Despite his soft authoritarianism, Alexander Lukashenko's social contract with the Belarussian people had been functioning until the 2020 presidential election. Before these elections, even if many in Belarus did not approve Lukashenko's policies, the majority still covertly agreed to give away fundamental democratic freedoms in return for continued stability and jobs. Popular opinion had passively approved close contacts with Russia, but society was not actively engaged in autocratic policy designs or implementation.

A few positive steps were evident in Belarus. First, informal reports from Belarusian *siloviki* claim success in fighting against crime, having imprisoned more than 41,000 criminals over the last two decades – mostly for tax evasion. Officially, incumbent Sergei Roumas reported the elimination of corruption in the areas of health and regional reform. Second, in stark contrast with the past traditions of inefficient state ownership, private business now provides for more than a half of Belarus gross domestic product (60 percent) – a striking shift away from the socialist economic traditions. Substantial political support had been invested in small and medium enterprises in concert with a simultaneous reform of the public sector. Third, attempts to diversify sources of energy resulted in the construction of the Ostrovets Nuclear Power Plant. Built by Russia's *Rosatom*, the plant hardly helped in reducing fossil energy dependence on Russia. It also did not diversify from reliance of Russian technology, but Belarus could not afford the first offers to build such plant from Japan or France. As a result, the government enjoyed both public trust and that of Lukashenko.

Nevertheless, authorities, academia, and society openly were invested in some kind of a social contract. The fragile stability and incremental improvement had their limits, which arose during the 2020 presidential elections, growing even starker in its aftermath. There are a few specific reasons why Belarusian society decided to terminate its social contract with Lukashenko. In this context, many commentators wrongly compare protests against massive election fraud and ruthless oppression against demonstrators to the 'colour revolutions'.

The leaders of the demonstrations have repeatedly stated that – in contrast to the Colour Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine – the demonstrations do not demand any geopolitical shift or influence over the foreign policy choices of the government.<sup>1</sup> The elimination of political opposition raised doubts – as Lukashenko is the only feasible candidate received majority support – but the over-falsification of election results created substantial discontent in Belarus. In addition to this, the appalling handling of the COVID-19 challenges also contributed to this growing wave of popular resentment. Finally, the combination of negligence, injustice, and ruthlessness by the authorities brought the public in Belarus on streets to protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya, "I repeated many times: our revolution is not about geopolitics, this is not a decision between East and West, it is not pro-European or pro-Russian. It is pro-Belarusian," *Twitter*, 28 November 2020, <https://twitter.com/WarsawForum/status/1329082650418507783/photo/1>.

The 2020 presidential elections clearly demonstrated that Lukashenko's management regime must change and is not indispensable to the populace at large.

On the foreign relations front, decades of balancing between the West and Russia further rattled Lukashenko's domestic political stability and influence. Fighting against crime, the modernization of economy, and diversification of energy sources were the lodestars of the EU's Eastern partnership initiative, which Belarus had passively pursued without pressure from Brussels.<sup>2</sup> Before the election, there was even some hope in Brussels for a slowly, but incrementally improving record on human rights. There is no ideology behind Lukashenko authoritarian regime and therefore it was not perceived as a security threat in any of the Belarus's western neighbours. On the top of the absence of closer and deeper cooperation especially in the realms of security and economic, the greatest challenge in this regard is Lukashenko's growing dependence on Russia, which is a tool for Moscow to further tighten its grip over Belarus.

Through irresponsible and reckless behaviour, Russia has consistently increased its influence in its self-declared 'sphere of exclusive influence and interests,' stretching across the former subjugated Soviet territories. Following longstanding occupation of Moldovan, Georgian, and Ukrainian regions, Russia now enjoys military presence in five (out of the six) Eastern Partnership countries after stationing the so-called peacekeeping forces in Nagorno Karabakh earlier this year.

Russia's poorly tamed assertiveness to broaden its geopolitical foothold in Eastern Europe has become a rather antagonistic trend in a long-term perspective for the security, economic, or social interests of the Baltic States, NATO more broadly, and the EU. China – among other major powers – is no longer feigning to bide time for its moment but instead can offset Russia's influence through direct financial-economic assistance to Minsk. In response, only now has the United States started to be more visible with the nomination of an Ambassador to Belarus and State Secretary's Pompeo visit in 2020. During this visit, as it was reported, the United States and Belarus aimed to strengthening cooperation, including in the field of energy cooperation, which is one of the most profound advantages that Russia has over Belarus. On the European side, an exception to such circumscribed

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on Eastern Partnership initiative please see "Eastern Partnership," EEAS, 19 October 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en).

cooperation was the involvement of British troops in training of the Belarussian armed forces.<sup>3</sup>

Politics after the presidential election in Belarus suggests that elevated interest towards Belarus by both the West and Russia may indicate some geopolitical shifts. This paper will analyse the trajectory of those possible shifts and answer some outstanding questions such as: What is Russia trying to achieve in Belarus? What policy can and should the Euro-Atlantic community plan and implement? The aim of the article is not to describe domestic political dynamics of Belarus but rather to focus on what neighbours such as the Baltic states could do to improve conditions with and in Belarus.

### **Business as Usual: Russia Acts, the West Reacts**

The results of the 2020 elections presented possibilities to push Russia's own interests in Belarus forward. It is important to note that one of the key objectives for Kremlin was and still is to extend its influence in Belarus either through weakening Lukashenko's position or through replacing him with leader more loyal to Moscow. Therefore, the Kremlin's reaction and engagement in the aftermath of the elections was based on the understanding that Lukashenko, punished and isolated by the West, is either forced out from the power or compelled to fully comply with Russia's command at the expense of Belarus's sovereignty and national interests.

One of the most important geopolitical conditions around Belarus is the perceived friendship and strategic partnership with Russia. However, Lukashenko has long been a headache for Moscow. On the top of personal animosity between the two authoritarian leaders – Putin and Lukashenko – Minsk's tough negotiation tactics have prevented the Kremlin from achieving its three major strategic objectives with Belarus. First, Lukashenko has hampered the possibility of fully implementing the 1999 Union Treaty Agreement with Russia, which would further merge Belarus into Russia even more. Second, rights for increased military presence and open military bases in Belarus for the Russian forces have not been granted as of yet. Third, Belarus has not recognized the statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – but most importantly Crimea – that would uphold the legitimacy of Moscow's geopolitical ambitions in the former Soviet territories.

<sup>3</sup> See "Belarusian, British military to share experience of tactical, engineering training," *BELTA*, 24 March 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarusian-british-military-to-share-experience-of-tactical-engineering-training-128775-2020/>.

If in the first post-Cold War moments Belarus emphasized the importance for the United States to avoid overstepping Cold War geopolitical borders by aligning with Russia instead of going West (like the Baltic States), then situation today is dramatically different.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of 1990s because of the geographic and historical proximity as well as economic and security dependence, a separate or neutral alliance with Russia was seen possible and necessary in Minsk. Conversely, the Baltic States chose NATO and closer cooperation with the United States and EU integration to avoid dependence on Russia and possible challenges to their sovereignty. The Baltic States turned out to have made the correct decision. Russia is inching closer to the Baltic States, the EU, and NATO. The most recent actions in this way were in Georgia in 2008 (against NATO enlargement) and in Ukraine in 2014 (against EU integration). Belarus is a rare exception as it is the only country in the whole of the EU Eastern Partnership region that does not have a conflict or breakaway region within its territory. Such a situation makes it easier to justify Lukashenko's domestic and foreign policies.

In Minsk, as in Tallinn, Riga, or Vilnius, there has been and even now is a growing concern with the Kremlin's activities. Even though as a Union State Agreement signatory Belarus legally gains territories lost by Ukraine to Russia, Lukashenko early and from the outset opposed and called the annexation of Crimea illegal – a bad precedent per his own words.<sup>5</sup> While Lukashenko condemned annexation right away, it took the EU over a year of conflict, as it could not identify the Russian troops in Ukraine,<sup>6</sup> and Brussels was much better equipped with substantial tools to tame Kremlin's aggression early on.

Furthermore, Minsk has been hesitant to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as so-called independent states. On the contrary, Lukashenko has asked Putin to rethink relations with neighbours, noting, “Belarusians and Russians live in their own countries,” hinting that shared borders should be respected.<sup>7</sup> The concern for Lukashenko might be that the Union

<sup>4</sup> Anatol Maisenia, “A View from Belarus,” ed. Jeffrey Simon, *NATO Enlargement: Opinion and Options* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1995), 155–165.

<sup>5</sup> See RFE-RL 23.03.2014 report “Belarusian President Says Crimean Annexation ‘Bad Precedent’”, accessed on 11.03.2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-crimea-precedent/25306914.html>

<sup>6</sup> Keir Giles, *Russia's “New” Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power* (Chatham House: March 2016), 31.

<sup>7</sup> See “Lukashenko: Russia needs time to re-think relations with neighbors,” *Gomel Region News Portal, Oktiabrskiy Regional Executive Committee*, 21 October 2010, <http://www.oktiabrskiy.gomel-region.by/special/en/republic-en/view/lukashenko-russia-needs-time-to-re-think-relations-with-neighbors-8045/>, accessed 23 March 2020.

Agreement is not an endpoint as it is seen by Minsk, but rather halfway to annexation as seen in Kremlin in order to completely quash the sovereignty of Belarus. The Belarusian leader has reported that the Russian strongman – Vladimir Putin – has been pushing for a complete merger with Russia. To be more particular, the Russian leadership has hinted “at the incorporation of Belarus in return for unified energy prices.” The Kremlin’s policies have strong grounds in the past.

Strategic partnerships between Belarus and Russia were forged in 1999 at the behest of Lukashenko. Such agreements were naturally justified on geographic location, close historic and cultural links between both countries and peoples, and economic ties and cooperation between Belarusian and Russian businesses.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, Lukashenko has been convinced that neither Russians nor Belarusians would ever want to merge Belarus and Russia into one state.<sup>9</sup> Of course, transit and gas agreements as a model for economic integration and an eternal source for income raise questions about alternatives for Belarus. The only feasible option otherwise is to construct ties with the West.

Despite its geopolitical situation having unfolded on the borders of the West, consisting of the United States-led NATO and the EU, this community has been rather hesitant to craft any substantial and consistent position toward Belarus for years, notwithstanding the aftermath of the 2020 election. Before the 2020 election riots, there was a demand from the Belarusian public for more cooperation with the West. However, during and after the August 2020 unrest, Western institutions failed to elaborate a consistent strategy or even a common vision towards Belarus.

In response to disproportionate violence deployed by Belarussian authorities against peaceful protesters in August 2020 – causing deaths, injuries, and incarcerations – it took days for the EU to even forge an initial reaction. Only five days after the announcement of the election results and constant protesting was the EU able to muster a response of a video conference of the foreign ministers agreeing on the need to sanction those responsible for violence and violation of the rule of law. The EU shortly thereafter decided not to recognize the election results and therefore sided with the fleeing Belarusian opposition leaders, abandoning democratic protesters in Belarus. Furthermore, a couple of dozen of persons and companies have

<sup>8</sup> See “Russia and Union State,” Belarussian Diplomatic Service, 11 March 2020, <http://mfa.gov.by/en/courtiers/russia/>.

<sup>9</sup> See “The Kremlin is pushing Belarus to merge with Russia: Lukashenko,” *EURACTIV.com with AFP*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/the-kremlin-is-pushing-belarus-to-merge-with-russia-lukashenko/>, accessed 11 March 2020.

been sanctioned. Moreover, the EU has agreed on the economic cooperation with Belarus when it becomes a democracy – the European Council also encouraged the European Commission to prepare a plan of economic support for a democratic Belarus.<sup>10</sup> In the case that Belarussian authorities indeed decide to rapidly democratize, there might be a hope for an economic assistance plan to Belarus from the EU.

From the outset, the West has demanded the same from Belarus as it did from the every partner or aspirant nation, including the Baltics. First, democratize – whatever the cost. Then, as democracy, you can receive access to the EU market and probably US security guarantees. Only such an adjustment to EU wishes would allow for the development of relations with the EU, even with the possibility of allowing financial support. Consequently, EU's closer engagement with Belarus is inherently linked with the regime change and Lukashenko's legitimization in Brussels seems no longer an option.

Nevertheless, not all states hold the same security interests as the Baltic States – being ready to give all to escape Russian domination. Minor and less related to substantial cooperation, dialogue with Belarus has been limited to technical talks on specific issues, such as support to civil society and victims of repression and a visa facilitation agreement from July 2020.<sup>11</sup> Hypothetically speaking, the alternative to this policy could be to first engage with Minsk on the basis of conditionality and then to await the results. However, at this point when the EU does not recognize the legitimacy of Lukashenko's regime, it is even more difficult to define what would it mean to engage with Minsk and who would be the right counterpart for Brussels.

Briefly, a common EU foreign policy toward Belarus can be described as fractured and divided amongst EU member states. Some member states and their leaders are even seen as supportive of Russia's interests as they perceive Belarus as a part of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence or simply want to please Russia in return for various cooperation initiatives. Prime Minister Orbán's choice for EU enlargement and relations, Mr. Olivér Várhelyi, called for lifting all sanctions on Russia.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See "EU relations with Belarus" and "Sanctions following the August 2020 presidential elections," *European Council*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/#>, accessed on 5 January 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Lili Bayer, "Hungary's 'incredibly rude' Commission pick" *Politico*, 3 October 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-orban-european-commission-oliver-varhelyi-criticism-management-style-verbal-abuse/>, accessed on 5 January 2021.

Orban also supported one of the most Russia-friendly voices in the EU, Cyprus, in blocking sanctions on Minsk over election fraud and human rights abuses.<sup>13</sup> As part of an anti-Western agenda, Hungary also called on the EU to push for the European army as an important part of EU's strategic autonomy from the United States. In this light, several EU member states individually have condemned the activities of Belarus and sanctioned few officials as symbolic penalty for the regime activities after the August 2020 election.

Relations with the United States have been uneasy and similarly limited. After recognizing the independence, the United States appointed the first Ambassador to Minsk in 1992, but in 2008, the Belarusian Government unilaterally forced the US Embassy to withdraw its Ambassador and reduce its staff from 35 to five diplomats (to agree on the normalization of relations only in 2019). Besides the recent high-level visit by Secretary of State Pompeo, there have been only members of the Bush administration in Minsk during March 2001.<sup>14</sup> US foreign policy toward Belarus has been limited to expanding democratic rights and fundamental freedoms and promoting a market economy by strengthening the private sector and stimulating entrepreneurship.<sup>15</sup>

In stark contrast, the real power Moscow wields over Minsk stems from economic cooperation. Conversely for the Kremlin, the successful re-incorporation of Belarus as the geopolitical goal is profoundly tied to Putin's domestic political interests.<sup>16</sup> Moscow's policies toward Minsk can affect the political stability around Kremlin and the central regions of the Russian Federation. If Belarus steps closer to the Euro-Atlantic structures,

<sup>13</sup> See Gabriela Baczyńska and John Chalmers, "Hungary's Orban says EU should reverse Russia sanctions, not push Cyprus on Belarus" *Reuters*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-russia-belarus-idUSKCN26G2IU>, accessed on 5 January 2021; Eli Moskowitz, "Cyprus Blocks Sanctions Against Belarus as Some Question its Motives" *OCCRP*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/13163-cyprus-blocks-sanctions-against-belarus-but-some-question-its-motives>, accessed on 5 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See "U.S.-Belarus Relations," *U.S. Embassy in Belarus*, <https://by.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/us-country-relations/>, accessed on 5 January 2021.

<sup>15</sup> See "U.S. Relations with Belarus," *State Department*, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-belarus/>, accessed on 5 January 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Iulia Sluckaja, "Kremlin's Belarussian Strategy: Destabilization, Regime Change, Incorporation? (Белорусская стратегия Кремля: дестабилизация, смена режима, инкорпорация?)" *Наше Мнение*, 14 February 2020, <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7044.html?fbclid=IwAR1TYuwvMIItJQfzC8cuwuIFSZINPqznQFlvvQApnKHoTzctX4CEpIvVmyE>, accessed on 11 March 2020.



conditions for Putin's political survival would be rather dim. On the other hand, Moscow learned an important lesson through losing popular support in Ukraine and Georgia due to its aggressive policies. By invading and occupying parts of both countries, Russia has irreversibly pushed the Ukrainian and Georgian peoples, once friendly to Russia, towards the West. It is clear for Russia that it cannot afford to use the same coercive tools with Belarus – the last remnants of Moscow's geopolitical ambition of a pan-Slavic union.

## The Way Forward

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that Russia is the only power with not only a very clear, coherent, and proactive policy towards its neighbourhood but also with a strategy how to enhance its influence from the Baltic to Black Sea regions.<sup>17</sup> It is also obvious that Western policies and strategies in Eastern frontline are indistinct, divisive, and ill equipped to deter Russia's growing aggression in its neighbourhood.

The on-going situation in Belarus is an unfortunate demonstration of this pattern. The Baltic States have long been squeezed between internal divisions during the EU and NATO discussions on the possible approaches to the Eastern front. At this point, there is little the neighbouring states can do bilaterally to change the domestic political situation in Belarus, especially after the 2020 election. However, perhaps, now is the right moment for the three Baltic States to propose and lead a coherent Western policy towards Belarus.

The first step for the Baltic States would be to engage multilateral structures while keeping their eyes open (Belarus is a member of Moscow's led CSTO and it depends on Kremlin's subsidies that restrain Minsk's foreign and security policy decisions). Nevertheless, the large Euro-Atlantic community has been wrong on two accounts. Engagement with Russia by the West was based on a delusional prediction – that Russia would be a democracy one day. Respect afforded for this regional power and efforts to avoid its alienation and engagement in security cooperation have brought the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia to a dead end. Neither the US-Reset, (false) STARTs, nor special relations with leaders in Europe have delivered any results. The Russian regime continues to export instability and neo-imperial

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<sup>17</sup> Shota Gvineria, "The New Iron Curtain," CEPA, August 26 2019, <https://cepa.org/the-new-iron-curtain/>.

ambitions in the near abroad and beyond. An active phase of similar revisionist strategies is unfolding in Belarus at this point.

Second is that the basis for a new Eastern policy of the West should be shared security, economic, and social interests – especially regards to the nearest neighbourhood country of Belarus. If before the August 2020 election, the Baltic States and Poland could have pragmatically remedied the democratic deficits in Belarus through the economic cooperation, then the deterioration of these relations for the West and for the neighbourhood has made any positive political outcomes even less likely. The United States lacks any institutional advantage to cope with the challenges in Belarus against Moscow's foothold in Minsk. Moreover, the EU lacks the internal unity and resolve to construct a rational and lasting schedule of either long- or short-term policies.

The Baltic States share significant interests with Belarus. As members of NATO and the EU, the Baltic States could propose a platform of security consultations with Minsk, however, with the full participation of Belarus's democratic civil society. First, this would be done to ensure confidence and trust building between Belarus and parts of the West. Second, it would be undertaken to expand cooperation where possible or necessary. Such policies would be desirable to ensure better conditions for democratic transition in Belarus in a long-term. Since the UK military has been on the ground in Belarus for military exercises, such a policy would not be a step too far for Tallinn, Riga, or Vilnius especially in the framework of broader partnerships with allies.

Third, cooperation between the Baltic States and Belarus is not limited only to security and geo-economic areas. Closer diplomatic ties and cultural initiatives (such as sports and educational exchanges for youth as well as environmental cooperation) are all important. Now during this period of instability, the Baltic States could propose a more constructive, more guided, and more comprehensive offer to Minsk, again with the condition of the full participation of the representatives of the civil society. Such an approach would on one hand support and strengthen democratic civil society and would force dialogue between the regime and the people on the other.

The hardest step would be to overcome obstacles for the Baltic cooperation within already-existing multilateral structures. Here, the objective is to resolve the divergence between Lithuanian and Polish interests. Rooted in historical ambitions and bifurcating further due to contemporary conditions, both countries approach Belarus differently on a bilateral basis. With

patience (if possible), the Baltic States and Poland should outline a common approach toward Belarus in order to eventually propose it as an EU-wide policy. This approach would advocate for incremental cooperation improvements that would be reciprocally echoed in Brussels, Belarus, and the Baltic region. The pre-2020 election stability inside Belarus is much cherished. Thus, emphasis should be placed on the absence of instant and dramatic demands. Lukashenko is still forced to perform a neat balancing act between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia. The coming or present leadership in Belarus and their partners would benefit from positive, non-confrontational agenda with both Kremlin and Brussels.

The fourth task is to decrease energy dependence on Russia as the main source of vulnerability for Belarus. The question here is if the Baltic States could open their energy markets in order to buy surplus energy from Belarus. It is difficult to provide an answer, but there are the few reasons why this might not be possible. For example, Lithuania is the most adamant opponent of opening the EU energy market to Belarusian electricity for environmental (security) concerns. Nonetheless, there could be at least two critical counterarguments to such an approach.

Rosatom has already built one nuclear power plant in Finland and the second is under construction, and Hungary is following the Helsinki's model. Thus, Rosatom technology in principle is legitimized for use on the EU energy market. We must ask why the same source-technology electricity should be banned from Belarus. Second, the Ignalina nuclear power plant was built as near to Latvia's border as the Ostrovets plant is to Lithuania's border. If compliance with the European Atomic Energy Community standards were assured for Ostrovets, there would be no difference between two projects when it comes to the geographic proximity to foreign borders, either Ostrovets to Lithuania or Ignalina to Latvia.

Moreover, former experts from the Ignalina plant could become employees at Ostrovets to ensure high standards. A benefit from such improved cooperation could be translated into increased transits from Belarus to Lithuanian and from Lithuania to Belarus. Furthermore, the Ostrovets plant would bring the competition into the Nord Pool electricity stock exchange so as to compete with nuclear energy suppliers, such as Finland, in the common Baltic-Nordic energy market. Such steps suggest not only the direct and broader economic benefits but also closer cooperation with Belarus in general.

In order to decrease Belarus' dependence on Russia's oil, the Baltic ports, including the restoration of Polotsk 1 pipeline from Ventspils in Latvia (approximately 500km) to Belarus and the construction of Polotsk 2 from Mazeikiai in Lithuania to Belarus (approximately 450km), could ensure two-way transit. The obstacle for such cooperation is the Russian ownership of transit routes in Latvia and – to more limited extent – in Lithuania. Minsk's calls in Latvia met deaf ears due to Russia's substantial control over transportation assets in Latvia. LatRosTrans is controlled by Russia, as the company is owned by the Russian Transneft and the Dutch-Swiss Vitol. Vitol most likely will not be willing to spoil relations with one of the largest net exporter of oil over Baltic-Belarus cooperation.

Conversely, Lithuania is free from such restraints to transit and is already experiencing profound volumes of transit business with Belarus, notwithstanding harsh opposition against the Ostrovets project. To decrease Belarus's energy dependency on gas and oil, especially LNG, terminals in Lithuania and ports in the Baltic States could become an economic benefit for all. Then, future investments in the infrastructure must be considered. The United States' Three Seas Initiative and energy exports to Belarus could fit well in these new infrastructural projects. This would be done not only with economic gains in mind but also to enhance cooperation around the Baltic Sea Region.

The fifth task is to find the right position in major power battles over Belarus. China has chosen Belarus as one of its key outposts for trade and investment in the Baltic region; it sees Belarus as a hub for trade with the West and a window to the Europe. This influence is underwritten by investments and loans that are pushing Minsk closer to the EU. On the other hand, with the Three Seas Initiative, the United States is becoming a bolder player in the region in relations to security, investments in infrastructure, and the economy. On the top of this, there is a challenge to consider – a warning from the most informed pundits about the coming economic downturn of Russia.<sup>18</sup> As a result, early cooperation with Belarus could pre-empt some of the most adverse consequences for security first and for economy fallouts, regional stability, and social welfare second. The Russian economy is in an appalling state. With oil prices falling, the Kremlin faces severe economic constraints – dangerous for all its neighbours.

The sixth is the exchange of information. There is more that we can do to promote business opportunities and social contacts between the Baltic

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<sup>18</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Global Futures: December, 2016), 56–76.

States and Belarus. To offset this lack of awareness and information, civil society should organize exchanges of journalists to and from Belarus. As a result, this would give all necessary information for small and medium enterprises to launch new and extend existing cooperation. Furthermore, it would intensify cooperation and personal contacts such as the exchange programs for students, regional cooperation platforms like start-ups communities, enhanced contacts between local municipalities, and an overall surge of social contacts. Such trends would create better understanding and trust, new incentives, and eventually jobs.

The Baltic States are small enough to be non-provocative. They know enough to share their expertise with the others to the West. For the most part, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius understand each other well, as they too were incorporated in the Soviet Union – the entity that Moscow wants to restore in all but name. A robust Baltic-Belarusian cooperation could be one of the most challenging impediments of Kremlin's plans.

II  
**From Russia: Mirror Images**



# **“I Looked Back to See If You Looked Back to See If I Was Looking at You”: Russian Discourse on Western Critique of Russia’s Actions**

Dr. Dmitry LANKO

## **Abstract**

Most Russians are interested in finding out how their country’s particular actions are perceived in the West. To satisfy this interest, the website Inosmi.Ru was established almost twenty years ago, and since then, this website has selected, translated, and published foreign – mostly Western – media reports on Russia. This paper analyses the publications on the website, including translated articles and editorial comments, with the aim of understanding Russian discourse on the Western critique of Russia’s actions. The paper applies the theoretical lens of Orientalism as an analytical tool as an important characteristic of the Russian discourse on Western critique of Russia’s actions; in this paradigm, it is the assumption that the West treats any Russia’s action with an attitude of hubristic superiority. In conclusion, this paper illustrates the two major strategies that Russian agents apply in order to cope with this assumed Western conceit: mimicry and self-Orientalisation.

Key words: Russia, Orientalism, perception, discourse, West

## **Putin: I Watch Western Media, but I do not Believe It**

The song “I looked back,” a line from which provided the first half of the title of this paper, appeared on the B-side of the single “Master Jack” by the South African rock ensemble *Four Jacks and a Jill* released in 1967. In 1996, Russian pop singer Maksim Leonidov released his probably most popular song of his entire career, *Devochka-videnye* (Phantasm Girl), the refrain of which repeated those same words. The words “I looked back to see if you looked back to see if I was looking at you” perfectly convey the impression that Russia’s reaction to Western reaction to its actions creates. When Western reactions to Russia’s actions are positive, Russian discourse appreciates it. In most cases, however, it is negative. In such cases, different



Russian agents apply different strategies of coping with Western critiques, from admitting its correctness to devaluing it or hyperbolizing it. Below, the following work will demonstrate that what makes all those interlocutors similar is that all of them would rather hear Western criticism than not get any Western reaction to Russian actions at all.

Western academia opened the debate on Russian disinformation campaigns in Western media, including social media, after the announcement of the results of the 2016 United States presidential election, in which Russia allegedly interfered. There were few publications earlier than 2016 on the matter of Russian disinformation campaigns in countries neighbouring Russia. For example, Ciziunas names propaganda and disinformation campaigns among the tools that Russia applies with the aim to influence domestic politics in the Baltic States; other tools being diplomatic pressure, military threats and peacekeeping deployments, economic leverage and energy controls, exploiting ethnic and social discontent, discrediting governments through political influence, and penetrating intelligence services.<sup>1</sup> Although several influential US Democrats, including former President Jimmy Carter,<sup>2</sup> have declared that Russian interference played the decisive role in determining the outcomes of 2016 presidential elections, Western academia failed to reach consensus on the impact that Russian interference actually had on the election results.

The role that any (dis)information campaigns, including a foreign one, had on the outcomes of particular elections is difficult to measure, if not impossible. It is possible, however, to measure the influence of such campaigns on public and elite perceptions of particular events. In Germany, for example, “Russian disinformation exploiting historical memory, discontent with policies, and skepticism towards the U.S.” has not produced approval of Putin’s Russia and its actions, both domestic and international, but it has resulted in ‘understanding’ of it.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars agree that despite some of the information perceived to be part of Russian disinformation campaigns in Western media, including social media, is either false or true but misleading,

<sup>1</sup> Pranas Ciziunas, “Russia and the Baltic States: Is Russian Imperialism Dead?,” *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 3 (2008): 287–307.

<sup>2</sup> John Wagner, “Jimmy Carter Says Trump Wouldn’t Be President without Help from Russia,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/jimmy-carter-says-trump-wouldnt-be-president-without-help-from-russia/2019/06/28/deef1ef0-99b6-11e9-8d0a-5edd7e2025b1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/jimmy-carter-says-trump-wouldnt-be-president-without-help-from-russia/2019/06/28/deef1ef0-99b6-11e9-8d0a-5edd7e2025b1_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Steve Wood, “Understanding’ for Russia in Germany: International Triangle Meets Domestic Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* forthcoming (2020).

most of it is nonetheless true. Richey explains the potency of Russian disinformation campaigns not with its establishing “falsehoods as true,” but with its ability to pollute “political discourse such that news information consumers are led to doubt the very concepts of truth and objective political facts.”<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, it was in 2016 that the Oxford Dictionary named post-truth as its Word of the Year.

While being the alleged source of multiple disinformation campaigns that influenced international politics in the latter half of 2010s, Russia simultaneously suffered being the target of multiple disinformation campaigns allegedly orchestrated from other countries. The alleged potency of Russian disinformation campaigns itself became a propaganda tool targeting Russia. In particular, Carden named the publications in Western media accusing Russian government of hacking the US Democratic National Committee, of orchestrating the Brexit, and of tacitly supporting Trump as “evidence-free.”<sup>5</sup> A reaction to these and other accusations of Russia in the country itself was the growing concern among the elite and the public in Russia of what they believed to be Western disinformation campaigns against Russia. Debates on disinformation campaigns, propaganda and information warfare gained prevalence not only in the West, but also in Russia as well.<sup>6</sup> Russian debate on Western anti-Russian propaganda started at least a decade earlier than similar Western debate on Russian anti-Western propaganda began in the West.

The war in Chechnya became the first subject that Putin's administration declared a propaganda tool of Western anti-Russian media campaign. Despite in the early years of the 21st century, Russia was an ally in the United States-led global war on terror; Western media in those years criticized what the administration called a “counter-terrorist operation” in Chechnya. According to the administration, part of the information on which the critique was founded was false. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself expressed his “concern... for coverage of the events that take

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<sup>4</sup> Mason Richey, “Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation,” *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 101–13.

<sup>5</sup> James Carden, “The Media's Incessant Barrage of Evidence-Free Accusations against Russia,” *The Nation*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-medias-incessant-barrage-of-evidence-free-accusations-against-russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Baumann, “Propaganda Fights' and 'Disinformation Campaigns': The Discourse on Information Warfare in Russia-West Relations,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 288–307.

place [in Chechnya] to be objective.”<sup>7</sup> Foreign media coverage of Russian-Georgian War of 2008 became another occasion for Putin to start casting doubt on the objectivity of Western media. In particular, in his interview to the CNN, Putin criticized an interview with an American of South Ossetian origin aired by CNN’s rival broadcaster Fox News. “Is that an honest and objective way to give information? Is that the way to inform the people of your own country?” Putin asked, referring to the Fox interview. “No, he answered to self that is disinformation.”<sup>8</sup>

Russian authorities actively criticized the way in which Western media covered Russia’s conflict with Ukraine. Even before the beginning of the violent phase of the conflict, Putin criticized the way in which Western media covered the Russian-Ukrainian so-called gas wars during the latter half of 2000s. During his news conference specially organized for foreign reporters on the occasion of termination of supplies of natural gas from Russia to Ukraine in January 2009, Putin claimed that he “watch[ed] both Western European and North American media,” and that he could not “see objective assessment of the events.”<sup>9</sup> Recently, Putin criticized Western media coverage of the Russian role in the civil war in Libya, which has been going on since Gaddafi was removed from power in 2011. Some Western media reported that Russia supported the Libyan National Army and that Russian mercenaries fought on its side. When a journalist from Turkey asked Putin if such reports were true, Putin responded, “Do you believe what is written in the Western media? Read what they write about Turkey, and you will change your mind.”<sup>10</sup>

The above-quoted statement by Putin concerning Western media coverage of the 2009 Russian-Ukrainian conflict over natural gas supplies is indicative of the internal controversy that is characteristic of a vast part of Russian elite. They, like Putin, watch Western media. Inversely, they do not believe what they see. This paper seeks to understand this controversy by applying the concept of Orientalism, which has been developed in the literature on the relations between the West and the non-West since Said

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Putin, Interview with German television channels ARD and ZDF, May 5, 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22948>.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin, Transcript: CNN interview with Vladimir Putin, August 29, 2008, <https://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Putin, Zapadnye SMI ne dayut ob’ektivnoy otsenki gazovogo konflikta [Western media do not provide with objective assessment of the gas conflict; – in Russian], January 8, 2009, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2177190>.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin’s Annual News Conference,” *Kremlin.Ru*, December 19, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62366>.

introduced the term in late 1970s.<sup>11</sup> The paper will discuss the ambiguity of the Russian self-perception between the East and the West, between that of the Orientalist and the Oriental. The paper analyses the abstracts that Russian online media Inosmi.Ru, which specializes in re-publishing translated articles concerning Russia from foreign media, attaches to texts of translated articles that cover Russian foreign policy action. It will demonstrate that the ambiguity mentioned above forces vast part of Russian elite to look for Western assessment of Russia while simultaneously being prepared to find that it is grounded in stereotypes.

### **Russian Orientalism and Self-Orientalism: We, the people of Mordor**

The double-headed eagle on the Russian coat of arms is intended to symbolize the position of the country between the West and East. With that, Russian discourse on neighbouring countries is ambiguous. This Russian discourse includes elements that can be qualified as Orientalist in Said's terms. Scholarly studies of the peoples of the Orient as well as artistic presentations of Russians meeting those people have contributed to the formation of the Russian discourse on the Orient. Evidence of the continuity of the Oriental Studies from the Russian Empire, to the Soviet Union, and to the Russian Federation can be found in Kemper and Conermann's edited volume.<sup>12</sup> Russian literature from Lermontov<sup>13</sup> until present provides multiple examples of tales about Russians meeting people of the Orient told solely from the Russian perspective. Jersild concludes that the Orientalist discourse, which at the dawn of the 20th century justified Western imperialism as a "white man's burden" in the West itself,<sup>14</sup> was simultaneously characteristic to the elite of the Russian Empire, though Schimmelpenninck van der Oye rejects this conclusion.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Kemper and Stephen Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Scotto, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov's 'Bela,'" *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 107, no. 2 (1992): 246–60.

<sup>14</sup> Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

Conversely, the assumption that Western discourse on Russia can be qualified as Orientalist is also an element of the Russian discourse. Many Western scholars also note an Orientalist Western discourse on Russia. When Russia is considered a part of Europe, thanks to its geography, it is considered a part of Eastern Europe. In this case, Western discourse on Russia bears similar characteristics with Western discourse on Eastern Europe in general, the characteristics that Larry Wolff<sup>16</sup> identified as being essentially Orientalist. When, however, Russia is considered a place outside of Europe, there is no major change in this presentation. Brown found characteristic elements of Orientalism in Western discourse on Russia, namely “exaggeration of difference, assumption of Western superiority, and resort to clichéd analytical models.”<sup>17</sup> In turn, an element of Russian discourse on the West is the assumption that representatives of the West in general and Western media in particular intentionally seek only for such information from and about Russia, which affirms the difference, superiority, and the clichés.

Khudoley and Lanko<sup>18</sup> discuss the influence of the ambiguity of Russian discourse that justifies condescending approaches to people of the Orient living in Russia and abroad while simultaneously failing to justify a similar condescension of some people of the West to Russia itself on Russian foreign policy. They discuss Ramzan Kadyrov of Chechnya as an oriental Russian leader influencing the country’s foreign policymaking despite the fact that they, too, fail to answer Varisco’s question “at what point does European-looking Russia fade into the Eastern steppe.”<sup>19</sup> Russian poet Alexander Pushkin delimited the border between the European and the Oriental parts of Russia in the most radical way by declaring the Russian government to be “the only European” aspect of Russia in a letter to his former schoolmate Pyotr Chaadayev. The latter was a prominent thinker participating in Russia’s most important philosophical debate that of the Westerners vs. Slavophiles, with which Hahn associates the emergence of Orientalist elements in Russian discourse.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> James D.J. Brown, “A Stereotype, Wrapped in a Cliché, inside a Caricature: Russian Foreign Policy and Orientalism,” *Politics* 30, no. 3 (October 2010): 149–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2010.01378.x>.

<sup>18</sup> Konstantin K. Khudoley and Dmitry A. Lanko, “Russia’s Turn to the East: A Postcolonial Perspective,” *Stosunki Miedzynarodowe – International Relations* 54, no. 2 (2018): 31–50.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid (Publications on the Near East)* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Gordon H. Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 232.

Morozov approaches Russia as a “subaltern empire” where the government is the “only European” that never listens to its own people thus justifying the qualification of the people as a “subaltern,” a term applied by postcolonial scholars to identify the people (most often of the Orient) excluded from the hierarchies of power in (most often Western) empires.<sup>21</sup> Many people in Russia perceive their government as a part of the West, which never listens to them; thus, they perceive critical reviews of Russia's actions in Western media as deceitful as rave reviews of those same actions in Russian pro-government media. Koplataдзе perceives such an approach as an attempt to exonerate Russian people, if not the Russian state, of the wrongdoings of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet Union, and of the recent wrongdoings of the Russian Federation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, unconscious recourse to practices described by postcolonial scholars, such as mimicry and self-orientalism, has found a place among defensive strategies adopted by many Russians facing the necessity to cope with Western critique of the actions of Russian government.

Exaggeration of the difference between the West and the rest helps justifying Western superiority in Western discourse on the rest. For representatives of the rest, it becomes a source of insecurity, material losses, and psychological discomfort. Facing these challenges, representatives of the rest adopt either of the two strategies. Sometimes they attempt to bridge the difference by means of adopting Western practices, from clothing to political institutions. However, adoption of Western practices by a group rarely results in elimination of the elements of Western discourse on that group, which in turn justify claims of Western superiority. Bhabha noted that Western Orientalist discourse justifies treatment of such attempts as mimicry; participants of the Western Orientalist discourse thus approach the attempts of non-Western groups to adopt Western practices as resulting in practices, which are “like Western, but not quite.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, some other non-Western groups adopt the opposite to mimic the strategy of self-Orientalism, the term first introduced by Iwabuchi.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Vyatcheslav Morozov, *Russian Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Tamar Koplataдзе, “Theorizing Russian Postcolonial Studies,” *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 4 (2019): 469–89.

<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 122.

<sup>24</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, “Complicit Exotism: Japan and Its Other,” *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (1994): 49–82.

Self-Orientalism is the strategy of exaggerating the differences between non-Western group and the West. Self-Orientalism is widely spread in tourist industry outside of the West;<sup>25</sup> rendering it profitable, workers of the tourist industry wear traditional clothes when dealing with Western tourists seeking ‘indigenous’ experiences, though they change for jeans after hours. Self-Orientalism does not aim for greater profit only but also for security and psychological comfort. It is search for psychological comfort that pushes some Russians to adopt self-Orientalizing practices in response to Western critique of Russia. An example of such practices is the Russian-language Twitter account under the name of “The Voice of the Mordor,”<sup>26</sup> which presents negative reports on Russian actions in Western media as dictated by the desire of the Western media to present contemporary Russia as a kind of Mordor, the fictional evil kingdom from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* in a sarcastic manner. The current article will demonstrate that Russian online media Inosmi.Ru also adopts self-Orientalizing practices when commenting on the texts of translated articles covering Russian foreign policy action from Western media that it publishes.

### Inosmi.Ru: A Russian Soft Power Tool

Many Russians treat the West and Europe as a point of reference. For some, the West and Europe are positive examples. Despite some authors having claimed that Russia as a whole “has moved from the role of the recipient of the EU’s normative power to the demands to be accepted as an agent of normative power,”<sup>27</sup> the words “like in Europe” have positive connotation for many Russians. Many others, however, “following early Slavophiles and also Dostoyevsky, argue[d] that the Russians [were] morally superior to people of the West, because they [had] grown spiritually as they [had] been faced with hardships, such as communism, which [had] not been present in the

<sup>25</sup> Grace C. Yan and Carla A. Santos, “China, Forever’. Tourism Discourse and Self-Orientalism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 2 (2009): 295–315; Lei Wei, Junxi Qian, and Jiuxia Sun, “Self-Orientalism, Joke-Work, and Host-Tourist Relations,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 68, no. 1 (2019): 89–99.

<sup>26</sup> @spacelordrock, “Golos Mordora,” 2014, <https://twitter.com/spacelordrock>.

<sup>27</sup> Elena B. Pavlova and Tatiana A. Romanova, “Normative Power: Some Theory Aspects and Contemporary Practice of Russia and the EU,” *Polis (Russian Federation)* 1 (2017): 162–76.

West.”<sup>28</sup> They believe that the West and Europe, which had made significant achievements in terms of political, social, and economic development in the past, are degrading today. In their view, this degradation is a result of refocusing of attention from the interests of individuals, attention to which made Europe exemplary in the past, to the interests of groups, specifically those of minority groups.

Representatives of these two groups of Russians have polar opinions in most cases, but what makes them similar is their thirst for opinions on Russia's actions published in European and Western media. Representatives of the former group look for those opinions as for something that reaffirms their own beliefs about what is good and what is bad in contemporary Russia. Representatives of the latter groups look for those opinions for a different reason; the phrase attributed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, whose popularity has recently significantly risen in Russia, and who allegedly said, “If our enemies scold us, then we are doing everything right,” helps understanding that reason. At the same time, representatives of both groups demand those opinions. To satisfy that demand, Russian journalist Yaroslav Ognev in 2001 launched the website Inosmi.Ru, “inosmi” being Russian abbreviation meaning foreign mass media. Initially, the website enjoyed support of the Effective Policy Foundation, a non-profit founded and headed by Russian journalist and former Soviet dissident Gleb Pavlovsky, but in 2002, it came to belong to the VGTRK, a state-owned Russian broadcasting company.<sup>29</sup>

In 2004, VGTRK gave the website over to RIA Novosti, the state-owned Russian news agency. In 2013, Russia adopted its new Foreign Policy Concept,<sup>30</sup> which became the first Russian Foreign Policy Concept (previous versions of the documents were adopted in 1993, 2000 and 2008 respectively) that mentions soft power. In line with the desire to make soft power a tool of growing Russian ambitions on the international arena, Russia started heavily investing in state-owned broadcasting companies targeting foreign audiences. RIA Novosti was transformed into the state-owned media

<sup>28</sup> Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation*, vol. 9 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 180.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Skudin, “InoSmi Otdali v RIA ‘Novosti’ [RIA Novosti Aquired InoSmi],” *Webplaneta*, February 24, 2004, [http://www.webplanet.ru/news/internet/2004/2/24/inosmi\\_inovesti.html](http://www.webplanet.ru/news/internet/2004/2/24/inosmi_inovesti.html).

<sup>30</sup> “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 18, 2013), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186).



holding Rossiya Segodnya, which currently owns such Russian media as RT and Sputnik. Inosmi.Ru also became a part of the holding despite the fact that over half of its audience comes from Russia as of October 2020.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the official declaration of the website as a tool of Russian soft power attracted attention of Western scholars to it. Multiple studies made use of the website's selection of articles originally published in foreign media to be translated into Russian and posted on the website in order to understand Russian soft power strategy.

For example, Spiessens and van Poucke found that “through selective appropriation, shifts in translations and visual strategies,” the website “produces a discourse that is more in line with the Kremlin's official viewpoints than the original data set.”<sup>32</sup> In a separate article, however, van Poucke discusses the particular strategies that translators working for the website adopt in order to make “the Western discourse on Russian subjects more visible to the reader, especially in these cases where the source text contains metaphors that suggest a critical interpretation of the Russian state, society or the leaders of the country.”<sup>33</sup> In turn, Spiessens found that the website “re-interprets Western reports on the Crimean crisis by triggering ‘deep memory’ of the Great Patriotic War,” the term that Russians use to identify the part of WWII in 1941–1945 when the Soviet Union was at war with Nazi Germany.<sup>34</sup> After the financial crisis of 2008, which heavily hurt the Russian media market, multiple changes took place in its leadership and structure even before the website was officially declared a Russian soft power tool.

In 2009, Yaroslav Ognev stepped down as the editor-in-chief of the website, and Marina Pustilnik, who had previously headed the user support group of the Russian branch of LiveJournal, became the editor-in-chief.<sup>35</sup> In 2012, Alexey Kovalev came to replace Pustilnik as editor-in-chief of

<sup>31</sup> “Alexa, An Amazon.Com Company,” *Inosmi.Ru: Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic*, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/inosmi.ru>.

<sup>32</sup> Anneleen Spiessens and Piet van Poucke, “Translating News Discourse on the Crimean Crisis: Patterns of Reframing on the Russian Website InoSMI,” *Translator* 22, no. 3 (2016): 319–39.

<sup>33</sup> Piet van Poucke, “Foreignization in News Translation: Metaphors in Russian Translation on the News Translation Website InoSMI,” *Meta* 61, no. 2 (2016): 346–68.

<sup>34</sup> Anneleen Spiessens and Piet van Poucke, “Deep Memory during the Crimean Crisis: References to the Great Patriotic War in Russian News Translations,” *Target* 31, no. 3 (2019): 398–419.

<sup>35</sup> “Glavnym Redaktorom Sayta Inosmi.Ru Naznachena Marina Pustilnik [Marina Pustilnik Appointed Editor-in-Chief of the Inosmi.Ru Website; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, March 9, 2009, <https://inosmi.ru/online/20090311/247854.html>.

the website,<sup>36</sup> though he kept a vast share of her legacy in place. Among Pustilnik's initiatives, the most important was a reform of the website's forum, where visitors of the website had the opportunity to discuss posted translations of articles originally published in foreign media. Initially, she planned to switch from the forum mode to comments under each article, but the plan faced mass online protests from frequent visitors of the website. As a result, the forum remained in place, though its interface changed significantly, and the possibility to make comments under each article appeared in addition to the forum but not as a replacement of the forum. Multiple studies aiming to understand Russian public opinion on others and of Russian discourse on them have made use of those comments since then.

An example is the study by Radina, to whom the comments are evidence of digital political mobilization of the commenters.<sup>37</sup> Another example is the study by Gazda, who "examined the expressions of intolerance toward the opinions of others and linguistic aggression on the part of the Russian-speaking commenters toward the authors of critical Czech journalism as natural and instinctive dismissive reactions to "different" or hostile language and cultural and ideological expressions."<sup>38</sup> Studies that made use of the comments posted by visitors of the website have played an important role in understanding of Russian public opinion in the 2010s. This paper, however, aims at understanding elite opinions; thus, it will not make use of visitors' comments posted on the website, but of editors' notes to each article. The paper will make use of the 153 editor's comments to translations of the articles mentioning NATO and NATO member states posted on the website in 2019 and in January through October 2020. Results of qualitative content analysis of those editorial notes do not represent the entire plurality of Russian elite opinions, but they contribute to understanding of the Russian discourse on the West and Europe.

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<sup>36</sup> "InoSMI Nashel Novogo Glavreda v Londone [Inosmi.Ru Found Its New Editor-in-Chief in London; - in Russian]," *Lenta.Ru*, February 9, 2012, <https://lenta.ru/news/2012/02/09/inosmi/>.

<sup>37</sup> Nadezhda K. Radina, "Digital Political Mobilization of Online Commenters on Publications about Politics and International Relations," *Polis (Russian Federation)* 2 (2018): 115–29.

<sup>38</sup> Jiri Gazda, "Online Comments as a Tool of Inter-Cultural (Russian-Czech) 'Anti-Dialogue,'" *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics* 12, no. 1 (2018): 100–120.

## Editors of Inosmi.Ru: If You Cannot Devalue Western Critique, Hyperbolize It

The results of content analysis of the articles mentioning NATO translated from foreign media and posted on the website Inosmi.Ru and of the editorial notes that precede each article demonstrates that the website published articles that can be classified as pro-Russian, neutral, and anti-Russian. To increase the number of pro-Russian articles, editors of the website post and translate articles from non-Western and non-European media. On multiple occasions, the website posted translated articles originally published by Akharin Khabar<sup>39</sup> and from Ifeng.Com,<sup>40</sup> media from Iran and China respectively, of which is neither Western nor European. On other occasions, the website posts translated articles from the website of the Stratejik Düşünce Estitüsü, the Institute of Strategic Thinking, a think tank from Turkey,<sup>41</sup> whose geographic location vis-à-vis regions of the world is a subject of discussion in the Russian discourse on the country. There are perceptions of Turkey as located between East and West, like Russia itself, as a part of the Middle East, as a part of Europe but not of the West, as a part of the West but not of Europe, and as a part of both the West and Europe.

On some occasions, however, the website posts translated pro-Russian or neutral articles originally published in mass media from NATO member states and not only from Turkey. On those occasions, the editors of the website attach neutral notes to the translated articles, which summarize their contents or simply repeat part of their introductory or concluding parts without evaluating the quality of analysis presented in them. For example, to the report originally published in French *Le Figaro* on Russian military exercises “Centre-2019,” which took place in September 2019, editors of the website attached the following note: “‘Pathfinder-85 to the group commanders, you can start moving. Kavkaz-16, you first’. Such commands endlessly sound from a loudspeaker in the command centre on the banks of the Tom’

<sup>39</sup> “Akharin Khabar: Rossiyskie Razrabotki Neytralizuyut Ugrozy NATO [Akharin Khabar: Russian Developments Neutralize NATO Threats; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, December 9, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/military/20191209/246393382.html>.

<sup>40</sup> “Feniks: Rossiya Gotova Otvetit’ Na Razmeshchenie Voysk NATO Vblizi Svoikh Granits [Phoenix: Russia Is Ready to Respond to the Deployment of NATO Troops Near Its Borders; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, October 23, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20191023/246080887.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “SDE: Po-Zivantiyski Khitrye SShA Nachali Igru a Gruzii [Byzantine Cunning USA Started the Game in Georgia; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, July 31, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20190731/245551711.html>.

A dozen heavy T-72V3 tanks lined up on the bank pull away towards the river that represents the Russian border. This is how the correspondent of the French newspaper begins his report.”<sup>42</sup> The article is considered positive, because it underlines Russian strength and Russian openness: Russia allowed French journalists to observe military exercises.

At the same time, translated articles posted on the website that approach Russian actions negatively outnumbers pro-Russian and neutral articles. In such cases, editorial notes to the translated articles attempt to devalue the critique presented either in them or, to the contrary, to hyperbolize that critique. Multiple tactics help those editorial notes to devalue Western critique of Russia's actions presented in the translated articles. An editorial note can point at the fact that the translated article it is presenting reports only part of the truth, while silencing other relevant information. For example, when commenting on the British Telegraph's report on Russian military exercises held in times when NATO had to cancel the Defender-2020 exercises due to COVID-19, editors of the website wrote, “Russia flexes its muscles near NATO borders – it conducted exercises with the participation of 82,000 troops, the newspaper frightens the public. But he is silent that these exercises to localize emergency situations associated with the threat of viral infections were held at seven training grounds in the Western and Central Military Districts – far from the borders” [with any NATO member country].<sup>43</sup>

An editorial note can simply claim that the translated article it presents does not provide enough evidence to support the author's claim. For example, when commenting on a CNN report that a Russian fighter jet violated the airspace of one of NATO's member countries when intercepting a US bomber, editors of the website wrote, “The US military continues to panic over allegedly unsafe interceptions by Russian fighters. Another reason for the accusations was an incident during which, according to the NATO Air Force, a Russian Su-27 violated Danish airspace. Evidence, as usual, is not presented.”<sup>44</sup> An editorial note can claim that the translated article that is

<sup>42</sup> “Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Na Sibirskikh Ucheniyakh Rossiyskoy Armii [Le Figaro (France): At the Siberian Exercises of the Russian Army; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 24, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20190924/245877334.html>.

<sup>43</sup> “The Telegraph (Velikobritaniya): NATO Preduprezhdaet Rossiyu, Chto Koronavirus Ee Ne Slomil [NATO Warns Russia That COVID-19 Has Not Broken It; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, April 2, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200402/247186363.html>.

<sup>44</sup> “CNN (SShA): Rossiyskiy Samolet Narushil Vozdushnoe Prostranstvo NATO Pri Popytke Perekhvata Amerikanskogo Bombardirovshchika B-52 [CNN (USA): Russian Aircraft Violated NATO Airspace While Attempting to Intercept American B-52 Bomber; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 2, 2019.

presented repeats the argument that Western journalists have used multiple times in the past thus devaluing the content of the articles by means that there is nothing new in it. For example, when commenting on the report on NATO Exercise Eager Leopard that took place in Lithuania in September 2020 originally published in *Le Figaro*, editors of the website wrote, “The Baltic States once again see Russia as a threat, and they turned to NATO for help. Stating this, the correspondent of the French newspaper does not bother to comprehend the real state of affairs and, as a result, does not notice how contradictory the evidence of this ‘threat’ is.”<sup>45</sup>

Sometimes, editors of the *Inosmi.Ru* target the authors of the translated articles or the newsmakers whose opinions the article presents. Sometimes they point at the fact that the author of the translated article has already published several articles that were critical of particular Russian actions but did not present sufficient evidence to support the critique in order to devalue the article in question. For example, when commenting on the article by Jouko Juonala, originally published in the Finnish *Ilta-Sanomat*, editors of *Inosmi.Ru* wrote the following: “If Finland becomes the target of an attack, it will not automatically receive military aid from the West, according to a Finnish journalist known for his ‘objective’ attitude towards Russia. It is from Russia that the attack is supposed to be, and the only insurance can, of course, be Finland’s entry into NATO.”<sup>46</sup> In general, editors of *Inosmi.Ru* often claim that particular opinions critical of certain Russian actions or even of authors of media reports, in which those opinions were presented, are subjective.

Finally, an editorial note can claim that the author of the article presents certain opinions, but readers of the media in which the article was originally published do not agree with those opinions. In such a case, the website publishes not only the article itself, but also some of the comments posted on the website of the media, where the original article was published. For example, when commenting on the interview of former Polish army officer Roman Polko, originally published in the Polish media ‘*Do Rzeczy*’, editors

<sup>45</sup> “*Le Figaro* (Frantsiya): Pribaltika – Soldaty NATO Na Pervoy Linii Oborony Ot Rossiyskoy Ugrozy [Le Figaro (France): The Baltic States – NATO Soldiers on First Line of Defense against Russian Threat; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 30, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200930/248220688.html>.

<sup>46</sup> “*Ilta-Sanomat* (Finlyandiya): Poluchit Li Finlyandiya Pomoshch v Sluchae Napadeniya Rossii? [Ilta-Sanomat (Finland): Will Finland Get Support in Case of Russian Attack? – In Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, February 27, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200227/246938714.html>.

of the website wrote, "General Roman Polko, in an interview with a popular weekly, praises the US decision to place the command of the US 5th Army Corps in Poznan. He says that even Finland can now sleep peacefully – aggressive Russia will be wary of attacking it. The readers are not enthusiastic, as they have different opinions."<sup>47</sup> Editors of Inosmi.Ru often stress their comments, preceding translated interviews posted on the website of military officers or NATO civilian officials, and thus the opinions presented in those interviews are biased thanks to their official status.

The use of the term "aggressive Russia" in the above-quoted editorial note allows a placing of it into a separate category of editorial notes – those that hyperbolize Western critique of Russian actions. Such editorial notes aim to convince the readers that such emotionally charged assessments of the Russian actions, which in practice can only rarely be found in Western media when it comments very exceptional Russian actions, are commonly in use in the West when discussing Russia. By doing so, those editors want to convince their readers that a narrative similar to the equation of Russia to Mordor is dominant in Western media discourse while not in public opinion in Western countries where many people allegedly view Russia positively. They want to convince the readers that certain interest groups in the West, for example, have created the narrative such as those discussed in Tsygankov's book, which has been translated into Russian.<sup>48</sup> They want to convince the readers that most reports published in Western media of any Russian action are influenced by that narrative, and due to that, Western media perceives all Russian actions negatively regardless of intentions and outcomes of those actions.

Following the title of Tsygankov's book, the editors of Inosmi.Ru often use the word "Russophobic" when commenting on critical opinions expressed in translated articles that the website posts. For example, when commenting on the report on Russian military exercises that took place in Northern Caucasus in September 2020 originally published by Le Figaro, the editors of the website wrote, "The exercises of the Russian army look like a show of strength in the face of NATO."<sup>49</sup> How else? We defend our borders

<sup>47</sup> "Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Bolshie Rossiyskie Ucheniya Na Kavkaze [Le Figaro (France): Large Russian Exercises in the Caucasus; – in Russian]" *Inosmi.Ru*, September 28, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200928/248203783.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, *Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> "Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Bolshie Rossiyskie Ucheniya Na Kavkaze [Le Figaro (France): Large Russian Exercises in the Caucasus; – in Russian]"

and security, which was appreciated by the military inspectors of Germany, Denmark, France, and Romania. But the main thing for the author is to convey to the readers a Russophobic attitude.” The editors of the website attribute the authors, whose translated articles the website posts, a usage of emotionally charged terms such as the Kremlin’s “occupation” of Europe<sup>50</sup> in an attempt 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.

## Conclusions

Russian perceptions of Western critique of its actions, including foreign policy actions, is ambivalent. Many Russians use the West and Europe as a reference group, they look for Western assessments of Russian actions, and when they cannot find such assessments easily, they start to demand it. The website Inosmi.Ru, which provided with empirical evidence proving grounds for the conclusions of this paper, was founded exactly in order to satisfy that demand. On other hand, many Russians, who read Western assessments of Russian actions, approach such assessments sceptically. Though Russian discourse contains elements that help justify arrogance toward peoples and countries of Asia and Africa, which can be qualified as Orientalist, the discourse contains elements that allow for an ignorance of Western critique by means of perceiving it as based on arrogance towards peoples and countries of non-West, which is allegedly a characteristic of Westerns elites.

That arrogance, many Russians believe, makes representatives of Western elites ground their assessments of Russia’s actions, as well as of actions of other non-Western countries, on stereotypes rather than facts. This is clearly seen in the website Inosmi.Ru, which belongs to the state-owned Russian media holding Rossiya Segodnya that also owns such Russian mass media as the RT and the Sputnik. Unlike RT and Sputnik, which are mostly targeted on foreign audiences, over half of readers of Inosmi.Ru come from Russia, though slightly under half of other readers are Russophobic residents of foreign countries. The website publishes many translated articles originally published in Western media that contain critical assessments of Russia’s

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<sup>50</sup> “National Review (SShA): Vladimir Putin Beret Evropu v Kol'tso [National Review (USA): Vladimir Putin Surrounds Europe; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, March 20, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200320/247090687.html>.

actions. However, each translated article is preceded with an editorial note advising readers about alleged shortcomings of particular translated articles; this paper benefited from the results of qualitative content analysis of those editorial notes. In particular, it found that sometimes those editorial notes attempt to devalue the critique contained in the translated articles, but sometimes, to the contrary, they attempt to hyperbolize the critique.

The hyperbolization of critical assessments of particular actions can be regarded as another tactic aimed at devaluing them, similar to a deconstruction of such arguments behind such assessments or to attacking those expressing them. On other hand, exercises in this hyperbolization, many of which can be found among the editorial notes presenting translated articles posted at Inosmi.Ru, demonstrate that many Russians refer to self-Orientalism as a strategy to cope with Western critique of their country. While some Russians tend to downplay the differences between their country and the West, arguing that most of Russia's actions are not fundamentally different from Western similar actions, other Russians tend to exaggerate these differences. That inversion contributes to formation of the narrative in Russian discourse on the West that contains elements helpful in justifying its arrogance toward the West. That arrogance rests on the assumption of Russian superiority, which was forged in the fire of the hardships that Russians have suffered throughout their history, from which the assumed tendency, popular among Western elite is to perceive Russia as a kind of Mordor plays an important role.



# Where People Stand: Public Attitudes in Russia towards the West

Professor Nikita LOMAGIN

## Abstract

This paper aims to analyse public attitudes in Russia towards the United States, European Union, and NATO in the period following Russia's incorporation of Crimea, the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and the following war of sanctions. Polls show serious shifts in Russian popular attitudes since 2014. The country was able to withstand different external shocks, including the sanction regime. Mass surveys also show that the Russian people have acquired a sense of self-confidence due to the perceived growth of the military might of the state. Those two factors might serve as a new foundation for potential rapprochement with the West. Moreover, COVID-19 and other unifying threats have also contributed to these changes in public attitudes. Russian leaders (and official mass media) have also called for cooperation with the West in fighting these common problems. Thus, mass surveys indicate that the siege mentality in the minds of the people has begun to fade, and more and more Russians tire of this confrontation. As per NATO, the Alliance's unpopularity is largely determined by the unpopularity of its strongest member state – the United States.

Key words: Russian popular opinion, WCIOM, Levada-Center, the Pew Research Center, the West, United States

## Introduction

As already observed, “Understanding Russian public opinion is not simply a matter of popularity; it is a matter of global security.” While scholars of international relations continue to debate the causal connection between public opinion and foreign policy, the intensification of anti-Western rhetoric that has emerged in Russian public discourse since 2014 holds important and troubling implications for the future of international relations in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bret Shafer, “Ally or Adversary? Public Opinion of NATO in Post-Soviet Russia,” *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*, 2016, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/student-paper/ally-or-adversary-public-opinion-nato-post-soviet-russia>.

One dimension of NATO's so-called 'dual-track approach' to Russia today is dialogue in order to meet a number of common problems and threats such as terrorism, arms control, non-proliferation, pandemics, and climate change.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, cooperation with Russia is essential if the United States and the EU are to mitigate those threats and achieve stability and security in Europe and the Middle East. In sum, both global and regional stability heavily depends on relations between Russia and the West. In the past, US inability to successfully address Russian concerns has inflamed Russian phobias over NATO, which is viewed in Moscow as one of Washington's key foreign policy tools. In the case of Ukraine, the West's overtures to the opposition in Kiev in 2014 directly or indirectly contributed to the crises over Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

This paper aims to analyse public attitudes in Russia towards the United States, European Union, and NATO in the period following Russia's incorporation of Crimea, military conflict in the Eastern Ukraine, and the following war of sanctions. The sources for this paper come from a combination of three types of surveys conducted by the official Russian agency WCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre), an independent agency Levada-Center registered in Russia as a foreign agent, and the Pew Research Center. These three polls perfectly complement each other. The Pew provides two vital pieces of data. The first one covers the issue of Russia's perception about its global status since 2014, and the second one focuses on Russians' take on NATO. Polls by WCIOM and Levada-Center do not duplicate each other but rather shed the light on the same issues at different periods.

## 'Hot Potatoes' in Relations between Russia and the West

About ten years ago, one British diplomat came to conclusion that there are several fundamental reasons of mistrust between Russia and the EU/the West. First, the legacy of the past colours the relationship. Second, we are paying a price for disappointed expectations on both sides – expectations that arose through naivety, ignorance, and a lack of understanding, which Alexander Solzhenitsyn once called "the clash of illusory hopes against reality." Third, there are genuine and substantive differences of interest and policy between

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<sup>2</sup> "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," *NATO*, 25 November 2020, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014.

Russia and EU (NATO enlargement, energy security, ex-Soviet space, etc.). Fourth, the conflict of values is an obstacle to partnership. Fifth, differences have been played up for reasons of domestic politics and this happens on both sides. All of these aforementioned challenges originate in elite perceptions and mainstream mass media coverage from both sides.

It is safe to say that fundamentally not too much has changed for better over the last several years. In fact, wars over history have only been enhanced. They were triggered by two anniversaries – the 80th anniversary of the beginning of WWII and the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII. Other attempts by Warsaw and some other states to initiate a blame game against the Soviet Union, to revise the results of the Second World War, and attempts to remove monuments to liberator soldiers have been met with a strong response from the Kremlin.

In so doing, President Putin published an article in the *National Interest* about “the real lessons” of the 75th Anniversary of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> In late November 2020, the Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu referred to WW2 in response to his German counterpart Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer’s remarks that “it was necessary to talk with Russia from a position of strength.” Shoigu advised Kramp-Karrenbauer to turn to her grandfather, “Who will tell you what it is like to talk to Russia from a position of strength... It will take [Germany] a hundred years or even longer to pray for sins that your ancestors have committed,” Shoigu said.<sup>5</sup>

The hopes in the West that Russians would easily reject great power status have also failed. Quite contrary, according to a Pew Research Center survey of 2018, people in Russia stand out for being much more likely to say their country is playing a bigger role in world affairs than are people in other countries. For example, 72 percent of Russians said their country is playing a more important role in the world today than it did a decade ago. This compares with a median of 42 percent across the 25 other countries surveyed.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II.” *National Interest*, 18 June 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

<sup>5</sup> “Shoigu reacted to the “attacks of a primary school student”,” *Tekdeeps*, 29 November 29 2020, <https://tekdeeps.com/shoigu-reacted-to-the-attacks-of-a-primary-school-student/>

<sup>6</sup> A variety of factors may be behind how people feel about their own country’s rising or falling importance on the global stage. Those who are more optimistic about their national economy think their country’s role in the world is growing. See Laura Silver, “Russians, Indians, Germans especially likely to say their countries are more globally important,” *Pew Research Center*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/12/russians-indians-germans-especially-likely-to-say-their-countries-are-more-globally-important/>.

As far as Western sanctions are concerned, the vast majority of Russians (87 percent) believe that they did not create significant problems for them and their families. This was the highest indicator since the spring of 2014 when first sanctions were introduced, according to Levada Center. The minimal share of those who did not face with problems because of sanctions was registered in January 2015 (57 percent).<sup>7</sup>

It might indicate that Russians will hardly agree with the role of ‘norm-taker’ in their relations with the West be it military and non-military security, or energy, or developments in the common neighbourhood.

As far as values are concerned, going beyond lessons of history, President Putin referred to patriotism and collectivism of the Soviet people as one of the decisive factors in their fight against the Nazis in his article in the *National Interest*.<sup>8</sup>

In another speech on countering the Coronavirus, he spoke of those who were against restrictions and believed that the main thing is to save the economy. Putin compared such thoughts with the idea of natural selection. He turned to literary examples and recalled the story of Jack London’s ‘Law of Life’ – where the tribe abandoned their old who had become a burden. Children left their parents to the mercy of wild animals, leaving them to die.

“And the old father, left alone by the fire, believed and hoped to the end that his sons would return after him. Can you imagine for a moment what you can do with our parents, with our grandparents, as in this story? I will never believe in it, this is not our genetic code,” Putin concluded.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on the Russian ‘genetic code’ referred not only to the local COVID-19 deniers but also to those in Russia who view the West as a role model. During the first half of 2020, Russian official mass media has covered in detail the ‘every nation for itself’ policy in combating the pandemic in Europe in the place of a well-expected solidarity within the EU and the West in general.

<sup>7</sup> “Bolshinstvo rossiyan ne chuvstvuet problem ot zapadnyh sanktsij” *Levada Center*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/03/17/bolshinstvo-rossiyan-ne-chuvstvuet-problem-ot-zapadnyh-sanktsij/>.

<sup>8</sup> According to mass surveys, today Russians view patriotism threefold. First, patriotism is primarily related to love for homeland; 85 percent of Russians consider the opposite thing as unpatriotic. Second, over the past two years, the share of those who link connections with other countries to the lack of patriotism has increased. Third, 23 percent of Russians consider it unpatriotic to express an opinion that runs counter the official stance. See “Russians Explained What They Mean By Patriotism,” *VCIOM*, 20 February 2020, <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1749>.

<sup>9</sup> “Совещание с руководителями субъектов Федерации по вопросам противодействия распространению коронавирусной инфекции,” *President of Russia*, 28 April 2020, <https://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63288>.

It was supposed to demonstrate the impotence of the EU, United States, and NATO to meet this new challenge when the Western states and institutions were put under stress. Moreover, the media's focus on individualism and the lack of decent social protection for old and poor has aimed at showing the West's hypocrisy about human rights and equal opportunities in getting minimal medical services. Alas, Russia and the bulk of Western countries see each other through the prism of the 'Significant Other,' i.e., the actor against whom they build their own identity.

### **The United States as the 'Significant Other'**

There is a powerful point in the literature on contemporary Russia-US relations that from the second US war against Iraq onward, the United States has become the 'Significant Other' for the Russian elite. Moreover, Russia's reaction overall to US foreign policy reflects growing concerns about Washington's unilateralism and a lack of respect to international law that fuelled feelings of insecurity. Putin's 2007 speech in Munich mirrored the whole spectrum of the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with the United States. The global economic crises that originated in Wall Street have undermined yet another significant pillar of the US popularity across the world, including in Russia. In the eyes of many Russians, the United States ceased to be immune to tectonic economic shocks. Moreover, it was the main cause of them.

The 'limited partnership' under the Obama administration has produced some tangible results, but it did not change significantly attitudes towards Washington either in the Kremlin or among ordinary people.<sup>10</sup> The Snowden case and the crises of Syria practically ruined the atmosphere of 'reset.' Emerging competition over Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014 was just the last increase in growing discontent between the two sides.

The contemporary Russian foreign policy concept reads, "The attempts made by Western powers to maintain their positions in the world, including by imposing their point of view on global processes and conducting a

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<sup>10</sup> US forces and supplies could pass through Russian airspace on their way to Afghanistan; US President Barack Obama announced that the United States was dropping the Bush Administration's plan to build a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe; the United States and Russia agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenals. In addition, Russia finally joined the WTO. Later, in 2015, the Iranian nuclear deal was made when the crises over Ukraine overshadowed Russia's relations with the West.

policy to contain alternative centres of power, leads to a greater instability in international relations and growing turbulence on the global and regional levels. The struggle for dominance in shaping the key principles of the future international system has become a key trend at the current stage of international development.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, although there are some experts who believe that 2014 was the turning point in US-Russia relations, Russians stopped loving the United States long before crises over Ukraine. In fact, there were several occasions in late 1990s and early 2000s when US popularity in Russia has been as low as in 2014 when Washington imposed sanctions on Moscow.

Changes in US popularity in Russia have been registered since late 1980s when the United States became the focal point of many sociological surveys in Russia. According to the Levada Center, until the financial crisis of 1998, the number of Russians who viewed the United States positively was in the range of 75 percent (in the early 1990s) and 67 percent (December of 1998). A twofold decline of positive attitudes towards the United States took place after NATO’s bombings of Yugoslavia in March-June 1999 (33 percent).

The rise of sympathies for the United States occurred after the terrorist attacks in September 2001 (70 percent). The Iraq War (2003) resulted in decline of popularity of the United States in Russia with only 27 percent of those who viewed the United States positively. The outbreak of the financial crises in 2008 reduced the share of those with good perceptions about the United States to 23 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Similar trends were traced by the sociologists in terms of public attitudes in Russia towards the European Union, albeit positive sentiment toward united Europe was higher than those toward the United States. As per NATO, the alliance remains very unpopular in Russia. In 2007, there is only 30 percent of survey respondents in Russia who have a favourable opinion of NATO, but in 2015, the situation changed. According to the Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey, 50 percent of the Russians viewed NATO as a major threat, 31 percent as minor threat, 10 percent not as a threat at all

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<sup>11</sup> “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016),” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 30 November 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>12</sup> “Отношение к странам,” *Levada Center*, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam/>

while 8 percent did not have an opinion.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, only 14 percent of survey respondents in Russia had a positive opinion of the alliance.<sup>14</sup>

Four years of the Trump administration have not substantially changed Russia's perception about the United States, though there were some hopes for improvement in bilateral relations and even 'a deal' with Washington in 2017. With time, those hopes evaporated which demonstrate mass surveys on Russia-US relations by VCIOM, 2016-2019.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of 2019, an overwhelming majority of Russians (85 percent) viewed current Russia-US relations as negatively as a year ago (86 percent in 2018). Russians tend to see the bilateral relations as "tense" (52 percent), "chilly" (20 percent) or "hostile" (13 percent). At the same time, 52 percent of respondents considered that Russia should strengthen cooperation with the United States in the realm of security.

There was a general opinion that more attention should also be paid to culture (47 percent) and political ties (45 percent). The least important area of cooperation was education (39 percent); one-third of Russians (30 percent) thought that nothing should be changed and 17 percent said that cooperation in this area should be cut. Compared with 2018, the number of Russians who believed that the bilateral cooperation across all areas should be intensified has decreased.

More than half of Russians were indifferent toward President Donald Trump. 53 percent of Russians expressed such views (an all-time high). Almost every second Russian considered that no changes were expected in Russia-US relations (47 percent); this share has increased by 10 percentage points over a year (37 percent in 2018). The share of those who expected positive changes was almost equal to the share of those who saw the future more negatively (19 percent vs 20 percent). However, the number of Russians with positive views was 8 percentage points higher in 2018.

According to another report by VCIOM in late October 2019, the list of the least friendly states included the United States, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. Since December 2018, the share of Russians who say that there is

<sup>13</sup> "Half in Russia Say NATO Is a Major Military Threat," *Pew Research Center*, 8 June 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/russia-ukraine-report-16/>

<sup>14</sup> "Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q8g. NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States," *Pew Research Center*, 9 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/>

<sup>15</sup> "All quiet on the Western front," *VCIOM*, 18 November 2019, <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1724>

a real military threat to Russia has decreased by 12 percent (31 percent). The highest levels of threat reported by Russians were recorded in April 2018 (50 percent), which might have been shaped by the introduction of new anti-Russia sanctions and a conflict with the United Kingdom (Skripal case).

The number of those who say that nothing poses a military threat to Russia has increased from 53 percent in 2018 to 61 percent in 2019. The United States is perceived as a key potential source of military threat to Russia. Nevertheless, the share of those who think so significantly decreased in October 2019 compared to the January measurement (53 percent; 65 percent in January 2019). Besides the United States, the top two countries which posed a threat includes Ukraine (26 percent; down 19 percentage points compared to January 2019) and China (7 percent; down 7 percentage points).<sup>16</sup>

## 2020: An Unexpected Thaw?

The January 2020 mass survey did show that Russians feel somewhat worse about China because of the pandemic, though sympathy to this country remains rather high (65 percent versus 72 percent in November 2019) while their attitudes towards the West substantially improved. According to the Levada Center, two thirds of respondents are in favour of partnership with the West, and 61 percent of them believe that the West has no reasons to fear Russia.

Sociologists are sure that the peak of the anti-Western sentiment has passed and Russians are tired of confrontation. They understand that spending on guns simply means having less money for butter, i.e., healthcare, education, and social support. That is why this readiness to normalize relations with the West substantially increased. Survey data shows that 42 percent of respondents feel positively about the United States (17 percent increase from January 2018) and 49 percent sympathize with the EU (against 32 percent in January 2018, see Table 1).

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<sup>16</sup> "Friends Or Enemies," *WCIOM*, 28 October 2019, <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1719>.



Table 1. General Opinion in Russia towards the European Union, 2018–2020

	Jan.18	Feb.19	May19	Aug.19	Nov.19	Jan.20
Very good	3	5	4	5	7	5
Somewhat good	29	37	33	45	45	44
Somewhat bad	33	30	30	23	24	26
Very bad	13	15	14	11	10	11
Do not know	22	13	19	17	15	15

In 2020, only 3 percent of respondents viewed the West as an enemy, 16 percent regard the West as adversary. 67 percent believe in partnership and 11 percent even in friendship with the West (see Table 2).

Table 2. What is the West to Russia? Mass Survey, 2016–2020

There are different views on Russian relations with the West. What is your opinion on how Russia should treat the West?				
	May 16	Jan.17	June18	Jan.20
As enemy	7	8	5	3
As competitor	24	31	16	16
As partner	55	43	61	67
As friend	4	7	8	11
Do not know	7	7	8	4
Refused to respond	3	5	2	1

At the same, 52 percent share the opinion that Russia should be vigilant towards NATO while 44 percent sense that Russia has no reasons to be fearful. In this regard, it seems that some impact on this trend was made by discontent within the alliance symbolically presented by the President Macron saying that NATO is ‘becoming brain-dead.’<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The French president has warned European countries that they can no longer rely on America to defend NATO allies. “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO,” Macron declared in an interview with *The Economist*. Europe stands on “the edge of a precipice,” he says, and needs to start thinking of itself strategically as a geopolitical power; otherwise, we will “no longer be in control of our destiny.” See “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead,” *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

At the same time, this mass survey shows that there is an increasing share of people in Russia who do not regard the country as a European one. In late 2019, only 37 percent of respondents viewed Russia as the European country (against 52 in August 2018) while 55 percent of respondents believed that Russia was not a European state (against 36 percent in August 2018). Of course, data on ‘Europeaness’ of Russians can vary substantially from region to region and across different age groups.<sup>18</sup>

### The Future is Gloomy

The 2020 US elections had a negative impact on the attitudes of the Russian public towards the United States. In August 2020, there were 42 percent of those who felt positively about the United States and 46 percent who felt negatively. In late November, 51 percent of Russian respondents described it negatively, and 25 percent said their take on the US was ‘very negative’ (see Table 3).

Table 3. Russian Public Opinion of the United States of America, 2020

	01.2020	08.2020	11.2020
Very good	4	6	5
Somewhat good	38	36	30
Somewhat bad	28	26	26
Very bad	18	20	25
Do not know	12	12	14

Thus, Russians are very sceptical about the future of US-Russian relations under the Biden administration. Bad memories about the Obama-Biden anti-Russian policy in 2014–2016 are rather vivid amongst both the Russian

<sup>18</sup> Sociologist Natalia Zubarevich divides Russia into four main subgroups: 1) big cities (36 % of population – middle class and internet users); 2) medium size cities, including mono-towns (25% of population; less developed and hit by the crises); 3) province (agrarian areas, small towns (38%); 4) North Caucasus, Tuva and Altai (6% of population; instability and high unemployment; main recipients of federal transfers). In general, Zubarevich sees Russian politics through the prism of competition between developed cities and backward province whose population share is still larger. See Natalia Zubarevich. “Chetyre Rossii,” *Vedomosti*, 30 December 2011, [https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2011/12/30/chetyre\\_rossii](https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2011/12/30/chetyre_rossii).

elite and public. It seems Washington will continue to support Kiev – politically and diplomatically as well as militarily. Thus, a major irritant in US-Russian relations will continue to exist. As Dmitri Trenin observed, “In Russian eyes, the most dangerous element of US policy has been Washington’s support for Ukraine’s NATO membership... Fears of the dangers associated with NATO’s eastern enlargement are probably exaggerated, but they remain an article of faith within the Russian security and military communities, where memories of Hitler’s surprise attack of 1941 live on.”<sup>19</sup>

Mass surveys reflect such a mood among vast majority of Russians. In 2016, 46 percent of respondents believed in improvement of relations with Washington, while in November of 2020, only 12 percent are optimistic. Moreover, during elections in the United States, more than one half of the Russian respondents viewed the United States negatively. Contrary to the same period in 2016, there is an increase in those who share positive views about the United States. In November 2020, there were 35 percent of such respondents, while in 2016 there was only 28 percent.<sup>20</sup> This means that the window of opportunities for improvement in Russia-West relations remains open. In sum, despite the existing sanctions regime, there is a shift in public opinion in Russia in favour of better relations with both the European Union and the United States, albeit that most Russians believe that relations with America will get worse under the Biden administration.

Mass surveys indicate that the siege mentality in the minds of the people is fading and more and more Russians tire of this confrontation. What might be seen today as ‘rapid’ changes in public attitudes in Russia are not so rapid at all. On the one hand, we see serious shifts in general mind sets of Russians since 2014. The country was able to successfully withstand different external shocks, including sanctions. Polls also show that the Russian people has acquired a sense of self-confidence because of the growing military might of the state. Those two factors might serve as a new foundation for potential rapprochement with the West. Moreover, COVID-19 and other unifying threats also contribute to the change in public attitudes. Russian leaders and official mass media also call for cooperation with the West in fighting common problems.

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<sup>19</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “The World Through Moscow’s Eyes: A Classic Russian Perspective,” *The Foreign Service Journal*, 3 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/03/03/world-through-moscow-s-eyes-classic-russian-perspective-pub-81203>.

<sup>20</sup> “Otnosheniya s SSHA pri dzhozefe Bajdene,” *Levada Center*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/01/otnosheniya-s-ssha-pri-dzhozefe-bajdene/>.

As per NATO, the Alliance's unpopularity is largely determined by the unpopularity of its strongest member state – the United States. In addition to this, NATO lacks what Joseph Nye characterized as 'soft power' – a category which can be attributed to certain group of states that are attractive and influential because of their highly developed economy, superb universities, and rule of law (the case of the United States) or welfare system and great culture ('old' Europe). NATO has none of them.

# Assessing Russian Success and Failure

Keir GILES

## Abstract

In the past several years, Putin and the Russian Federation have abused the absence of global leadership, the lack of coherent rules or global order, and other possibilities to utilize its power and advantages in areas of strategic interests. This paper provides a succinct overview of these claims, as the West has normally assigned Russia failures, embarrassments, or miscalculations in these fields. For example, the situation in Ukraine, in Syria, crackdowns against political opponents, or the relationship with the former President of the United States, Donald. J. Trump, are cited. Inside of Russia, these particular campaigns are nonetheless considered as victories in foreign relations. Nevertheless, the author delivers an outlook within which these Russian activities abroad are explained in relation to certain caveats or results. The Kremlin's actions do receive calculated responses, but the West must be ready to endure this revisionist Russia in the long term, but this might not comply with the traditional international relations principles or understandings – but rather a vision or ideas inside of Kremlin.

Key words: Russia, power, decline, complete victory, superpower, defeat, Nazi, Stalin, politics, policymakers, understanding, Western actions, Russian counteractions

## Costs and Benefits

In September-November 2020, fighting resumed between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's role in the renewal of the conflict – its precursors, its course, and its eventual resolution – was the subject of widely varying assessments. Early commentary spoke of Russia's "error", "embarrassment", "miscalculation" and "failure",<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Dettmer, "Did Russian Miscalculation Spark Nagorno-Karabakh Flare-Up?," *VOA News*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/did-russian-miscalculation-spark-nagorno-karabakh-flare>; Neil Melvin, "Russia's Reach Exceeds Its Grasp Over the Karabakh Conflict," *RUSI Commentary*, 20 October 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/russias-reach-exceeds-its-grasp-over-karabakh-conflict>.

and suggested it showed that “Moscow is almost not reckoned with, it appears like a declining power.”<sup>2</sup> By the time Russia eventually succeeded in brokering a lasting ceasefire in November, these comments had largely been replaced by talk of Russia’s “complete victory”<sup>3</sup> – and those dissenting voices, which had suggested that the episode was indicative of Russia’s weakness and decline that and Moscow faced further trouble ahead, were reduced to a minority.<sup>4</sup>

However, the trajectory of these appraisals of Russia’s success or failure, depending not only on the course of events but also at times on their authors’ appreciation of Russia as a whole, followed an entirely familiar pattern. Over the years, Russia’s actions have caused some pundits to declaim confidently that “This is a huge success for Moscow” at the exact same time as others explain that “This is an enormous setback for Russia.” And in most cases, early predictions of severe consequences for Moscow from a perceived misstep turn out to be misguided, and the long-term reveals a Russia that is, if not undamaged, then at the very least undeterred. Even in military conflicts, where the result might be expected to be incontrovertible, “in some cases, Euro-Atlantic observers see defeats where the Russian view is more ambiguous – or may see victory.”<sup>5</sup>

If we leave aside the influence of partisan commentators writing according to their own predilections, one core reason for this repetitive pattern is that Russia follows strategies that some Western analysts like to think are self-defeating but which in fact achieve acceptable results according to Moscow’s own calculus. Russia having a distinctive perception of benefits compared to costs is nothing new. The achievements most revered in Russia

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<sup>2</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, “What role is Russia playing in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?” *Al-Jazeera*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/19/is-russia-reduced-to-a-secondary-role-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

<sup>3</sup> Anders Åslund, “Putin’s Karabakh victory sparks alarm in Ukraine,” *Atlantic Council*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-karabakh-victory-sparks-alarm-in-ukraine/>; Mike Eckel, “As Guns Fall Silent In Nagorno-Karabakh, There’s One Winner In The Conflict You Might Not Expect,” *RFE/RL*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/as-guns-fall-silent-in-nagorno-karabakh-there-s-one-winner-in-the-conflict-you-might-not-expect/30940966.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Russian Ceasefire Deal in Nagorno-Karabakh Marks Slow, Painful End of Empire in the South Caucasus,” *The Moscow Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/10/russian-ceasefire-deal-marks-slow-painful-end-of-empire-in-the-south-caucasus-a72001>; Thomas de Waal, “A Precarious Peace for Karabakh,” *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 11 November 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83202>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Monaghan, “From Victory to Defeat: Assessing the Russian Leadership’s War Calculus,” *Russia Research Network*, undated.

come at appalling costs, which for other countries would result in a far more ambivalent assessment of their value. Peter the Great modernised Russia and turned it into a contemporary great power at the cost of enormous suffering borne by the Russian people. Stalin defeated Nazi Germany and turned Russia into a superpower, by means including enslaving or murdering millions of its citizens, while leaving millions more on the brink of starvation.

When it comes to foreign policy too, the objectives and methods of Russian state and non-state actors can at times be hard to understand for Western observers. Russian actions can at times seem incompatible with rational state policy. Often, the rationality gap arises because Russia is operating within an entirely different framework of statecraft and assumptions about international relations from Western liberal democracies.

In order to explore this gap, this paper will consider a number of case studies – Russia’s military interventions in Ukraine and Syria and non-military attacks on the societies and political processes of Western states – to identify common themes and draw conclusions from them about the nature of success or failure for Russia, how that may differ from European or North American perceptions, and most importantly how this contributes to Russian actions continuing to surprise the West.

## Russia and Ukraine

The most vivid expression of this divergence, still highly topical at the time of writing, is the conflict in Ukraine. Russia’s seizure of Crimea and assault on eastern Ukraine were launched in response to a notional threat that was imperceptible other than to Russia itself; very few in the West could predict the conflation of Ukraine seeking a closer relationship with the EU with imminent NATO control of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol. As Russia’s countermeasures unfolded, Western responses continued to be driven by a misguided assessment of Russia’s motivations.

In early 2014, US President Barack Obama repeatedly offered Russia “off-ramps” to de-escalate the confrontation over Ukraine; an entirely futile effort since Russia would have no need for or interest in a route out of a situation that was developing entirely in its favour.<sup>6</sup> The key dissonance between

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Russell Mead, “Russia Blows Past Obama’s ‘Off Ramp,’” *The American Interest*, 6 March 2014, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/03/06/russia-blows-past-obamas-off-ramp/>.

Obama and Putin – and one that lies at the root of a wide range of other miscalculations of Russia’s intent – lay in the perception of war. For Obama, and for many other Western leaders, it was axiomatic that a state of hostilities must be as undesirable to Russia as it was to the West. For Russia, the hostilities were a means to an end and a necessary one after other means were exhausted. This greater acceptance of armed conflict as a means to resolve interstate policy clashes is a recurring feature in Russian calculations; as observed by experienced Russia-watcher Kadri Liik, “war and revolution are not inimical to Moscow if they follow paths Russian policymakers understand and even support.”<sup>7</sup>

Russia has successfully leveraged this differential between its own and Western attitudes to conflict to cement in place its gains from armed interventions. In a pattern repeated in Georgia in 2008, or Ukraine and Syria in the last six years, Russia has co-opted Western leaders to impose on the victims of its aggression ceasefire agreements drafted in Moscow with terms that constrain the victim while allowing the aggressor, Russia, continued freedom of action (while in the case of Ukraine even denying it is even a party to the conflict). Be it Nicolas Sarkozy in the case of Georgia,<sup>8</sup> Francois Hollande and Angela Merkel for the Minsk agreements on Ukraine,<sup>9</sup> or former US Secretary of State John Kerry with successive ceasefires in Syria,<sup>10</sup> in each case, the driving objective of the Western dignitary involved has been to stop the fighting. Russia thus succeeds by virtue of pursuing a different aim; while the West wants to prevent or end conflict, Russia wants to secure advantage in it.

As the Ukraine conflict wore on, assessments of the longer-term consequences for Moscow also arrived at differing conclusions with and without Russia. Former US Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul argues, “It is hard to make the case ... that intervening in Ukraine has strengthened Russia’s long-term national interests or power in the international system. The West imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on numerous

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<sup>7</sup> Kadri Liik, “How Russia is winning at its own game,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 October 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/article/upheaval-in-belarus-and-nagorno-karabakh-how-russia-is-winning-at-its-own-game/>.

<sup>8</sup> “The Nature of the Georgian Ceasefire,” *Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom*, 13 August 2008.

<sup>9</sup> James Sherr, ‘Geopolitics and Security’, in *The Struggle for Ukraine*, Chatham House, August 2017, 11–13.

<sup>10</sup> Keir Giles, “What Russia Learns From the Syria Ceasefire: Military Action Works,” *Chatham House*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/what-russia-learns-syria-ceasefire-military-action-works>.



Russian individuals and companies. Starting in the third quarter of 2014, the Russian economy contracted for nine consecutive quarters.”<sup>11</sup> But a detailed assessment published in 2017 found that worsening international attitudes toward Russia were not a significant consideration, and that economic damage – in part due to sanctions but primarily triggered by a major fall in the price of oil, the key driver for Russia’s economy – was tolerable. In fact, “despite the rational assessment that Crimea was a major policy mistake... for Putin it constitutes an already fundamental pillar of his legitimacy,” and furthermore in Russia, the “newfound feeling of being a great power [can] compensate for a lack of economic success, or civic freedoms and a sense of future prospective.”<sup>12</sup>

## Russia and Syria

Russian actions in Ukraine were driven by overriding national objectives, which Russian foreign policy analyst Dmitry Suslov summarises among others as “preventing post-Soviet countries from joining other economic and security orders”, “maintaining Russia-centric economic and security orders in its neighbourhood,” and “taking an active and permanent part in global decision-making.”<sup>13</sup> In Kadri Liik’s assessment, “if judged against these criteria, Moscow is doing well enough, at least at the moment.”<sup>14</sup>

If measured by Dmitry Suslov’s first two objectives, Russia is “doing well” not only in Ukraine but also by providing carefully calibrated support to President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, facilitating his continuing grip on power in exchange for as yet unspecified concessions, while stopping short of an armed intervention that would risk solidifying Belarusian sentiment against Russia following the pattern set in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> Success in the

<sup>11</sup> Michael McFaul, “Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Fall 2020), pp. 95–139, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00390](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00390).

<sup>12</sup> Anton Barbashin, “Crimea In Conclusion: A Successful Failure,” in Olga Irisova, Anton Barbashin, Fabian Burkhardt, Richard Martyn-Hemphill, Ernest Wyciszkievicz (editors), “A Successful Failure: Russia After Crime(a),” *The Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding*, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Dmitry Suslov, speaking at NATO Defense College online event, 18 November 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Kadri Liik, “How Russia is winning at its own game,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 October 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/article/upheaval-in-belarus-and-nagorno-karabakh-how-russia-is-winning-at-its-own-game/>.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Pifer, “Is Putin about to make a costly mistake in Belarus?,” *Brookings Institution*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/28/is-putin-about-to-make-a-costly-mistake-in-belarus/>.

third aim includes, by any objective measure, the results of Russia's military intervention in Syria from October 2015 onwards. Here too, both the short- and long-term objectives of military action were misjudged abroad, leading to Western predictions of disaster for Russia, most popularly through being bogged down in a "quagmire" along the lines of Vietnam or Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> But both Russia's desired end state for Syria, and the means Russia found acceptable to get there, were misconstrued abroad. Just as in Ukraine, Russia intervened in Syria to stop a deteriorating security situation getting rapidly worse – in this case, the prospect of Western intervention to force the outcome of the civil war, with what Russia saw as potentially catastrophic consequences as demonstrated in Libya four years before.<sup>17</sup> Once that immediate objective was met, and Syria was preserved as a state and the immediate threat of destabilising collapse was averted, Russia began to reap a range of second-order benefits.

Syria became the proving ground for an intensive programme of testing Russia's armed forces under operational conditions, including their organisation, their logistics, their weapons systems, and their people. In the process, and especially when employing weapons systems that were not obviously suitable for the task at hand in order to assess their performance, Russia demonstrated a greater tolerance of risk of failure in testing and experimentation than would be typical for Western militaries where mistakes would have led to a much greater political cost. This applied in equal measure to the widely derided deployment of the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to the Eastern Mediterranean in late 2016<sup>18</sup> and the disastrous consequences of allowing the Wagner private military company to join preparations for an attack on US-backed forces near Deir ez-Zor in February 2018.<sup>19</sup> For any Western country, the mass casualties incurred in the latter

<sup>16</sup> Howard LaFranchi, "One year on, Russia's war in Syria is hardly the predicted 'quagmire,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22 August 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2016/0822/One-year-on-Russia-s-war-in-Syria-is-hardly-the-predicted-quagmire>.

<sup>17</sup> Keir Giles, "The Turning Point For Russian Foreign Policy," *U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute*, May 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Ho Wan Beng, "Assessing the Admiral Kuznetsov Deployment in the Syrian Conflict," *Real Clear Defense*, 22 November 2016, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/11/22/assessing\\_the\\_admiral\\_kuznetsov\\_deployment\\_in\\_the\\_syrian\\_conflict\\_110373.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/11/22/assessing_the_admiral_kuznetsov_deployment_in_the_syrian_conflict_110373.html)

<sup>19</sup> Piotr Żochowski, Krzysztof Strachota, and Marek Menkiszak, "Russian losses near Deir ez-Zor – a problem for the Kremlin," *OSW Analyses*, 21 February 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-02-21/russian-losses-near-deir-ez-zor-a-problem-kremlin>.

incident could have led to severe consequences up to and including triggering a withdrawal under domestic political pressure; however, Russia is subject to an entirely different set of pressures and constraints.

Even the extent of the destruction in Syria caused by the war can be assessed differently. Barack Obama is reported to have asked, “What is it that Russia thinks it gains if it gets a country that has been completely destroyed as an ally that it now has to perpetually spend billions of dollars to prop up?”<sup>20</sup> However, this is to ignore the precedent of Chechnya, where vast subsidies from Russia’s state budget for reconstruction and the maintenance of a feudal leader are considered preferable to the alternative of continuing instability. In addition, according to Japanese researcher Hiroshi Yamazoe, “a development that was advantageous to Russian diplomacy emerged... While Russia’s military operations may have created new humanitarian issues, countries in the West are also beginning to take Russia into consideration as they move to draw up policies on dialogues toward ending the war in Syria and countering terrorism.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Western assessments also pointed to the potential difficulty Russia would face extricating itself from Syria at the end of its commitment there, based on the experience of Western military interventions that need – even if they are not always provided with – an exit strategy. Here too, projecting Western objectives onto Russia can be misleading. As British analyst Rod Thornton notes, talk of extrication overlooks the simple fact that the Russian presence is fully intended to be a long-term, or ideally permanent, project.<sup>22</sup>

## Russia and Murder

Consideration of intervention in Syria leads naturally to an area of warfighting where Russia is regularly accused of carelessness, incompetence, or casual brutality – namely its approach to collateral damage and fatalities among non-combatants. These accusations do not mean that Russia sets no

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Derek Chollet, “The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World,” *PublicAffairs*, 2016, 172.

<sup>21</sup> Hiroshi Yamazoe, “Russia’s Involvement in the Issue of Syria,” *National Institute for Defense Studies* (Japan), December 2016, [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/briefing/pdf/2016/briefing\\_e201612.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/briefing/pdf/2016/briefing_e201612.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Rod Thornton, “The Russian Military Commitment in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean,” *The RUSI Journal*, 17 October 2018, 30–38, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2018.1529892>.

value on human life, either of the adversary, of civilians, or of its own soldiery. Nonetheless, this value has a different relative weight when compared to other considerations of fighting and winning wars.

At the height of the Russian and Russian-backed air offensive in Syria, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley asked, “How many more children have to die before Russia cares?”<sup>23</sup> – but the question missed the point. The perception that Russia lacks consideration for collateral damage and civilian casualties is based on a false premise; both of these are essential elements of Russian policy, aimed at terrorising the enemy and their civilian support base into submission as rapidly as possible in order to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion and restore or impose order. When considering the results of Western interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, one Russian argument is that Moscow’s approach is the more moral one, since the result of crushing the will to resist is swiftly delivered peace and stability as opposed to enduring chaos and destabilisation.

This is not a new phenomenon; Russia has always been considered careless with the lives of its soldiery, and callous with the lives of the civilian population among whom it fights. Incidents during the campaigns in Chechnya are held up as examples of senseless inhumanity. The eventual condition of Chechnya – terrorised but stable – compared to its role throughout the first half of the 1990s as a centre of lawlessness that itself spread terror throughout southern Russia provides a case study where the end is considered, as a rational judgement rather than an automatic assumption, to justify the means. This provides context for Russia’s operations in Syria, where the means to achieve objectives are repellent to Western sensitivities but entirely logical to Russian commanders and leaders.

Similar considerations surround Russia’s campaign of assassinations at home and abroad. The fact that some state murders abroad have been detected and exposed has been cited as evidence that the Russian intelligence agencies are lacking in competence and expertise. Again, this may be measuring success by the wrong criteria. According to an authoritative US assessment, “exposure is not a failure if the attack succeeds in conveying Russia’s ability and willingness to carry out targeted attacks.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, the prominence of apparent failed attacks in public knowledge of Russian

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<sup>23</sup> Speaking at an emergency UN Security Council meeting on 5 April 2017. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSweWsZIHds>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, “Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress,” 24 November 2020, 11, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46616>.

activities obscures the number of attacks that are unknown because they were successful. Russian political figure Aleksei Navalny survived an assassination attempt in August 2020 because the pilot of the flight he was on decided to land immediately; Sergei and Yulia Skripal survived in March 2018 because they fell ill in a public place instead of in their own home where the deadly agent had been applied. In both cases, had the victims died as intended, it is far less likely the cause of their death would have been detected – leaving open the question of how many other individuals have been successfully targeted with Novichok or other means without it coming to public notice.<sup>25</sup>

Murders carried out by the Russian state using less exotic methods can also achieve acceptable results despite detection and exposure of the murderers. In early 2004, former Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was assassinated by Russian intelligence officers in Qatar using a car bomb.<sup>26</sup> The officers were arrested and convicted by the Qatari authorities, in a move which for most countries would be considered a severe diplomatic setback. Russia, however, achieved its objectives with few adverse consequences, even to the intelligence officers involved; returned to Russia with the expectation that they would serve their sentences in a Russian prison, the murderers were instead immediately released.<sup>27</sup> More recent Russian operations have incurred no consequences at all for Moscow, as in the case of the Russian and Russian-backed targeting of British humanitarian James Le Mesurier resulting in his death.<sup>28</sup>

## Russia and Donald Trump

Overt or covert armed force is of course only one of the many tools at Russia's disposal for resolving foreign policy challenges. In the period since 2014, Russia's reinvigorated programme of subversion of democracy has

<sup>25</sup> "Navalny Poison Squad Implicated in Murders of Three Russian Activists", Bellingcat, 27 January 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2021/01/27/navalny-poison-squad-implicated-in-murders-of-three-russian-activists/>

<sup>26</sup> "Ex-Chechen president dies in blast," *NBC News*, 13 February 2004, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4261459#.XpbYYsgzbDc>

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Rainsford, "Convicted Russia agents 'missing'" *BBC News*, 17 February 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4275147.stm>.

<sup>28</sup> "The Times view on the death of James Le Mesurier: Assad's Nemesis," *The Times*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/2f9b9ba8-0582-11ea-a54d-e177f6bc2c05>.

targeted elections and political processes in an impressive array of countries. Some of these attempts at malign influence failed, and in other cases, the effect of Russian interference is unquantifiable, sometimes because – as in the case of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK – there has been no political will to look too closely at whether it was effective.<sup>29</sup> However, Russia's most spectacular success in this domain came against the greatest prize of all, the presidency of the United States.

At the time of writing it is still not possible to say with certainty whether President Donald Trump was pursuing Russian policy objectives for the United States during his term of office consciously, or unwittingly and through coincidence. The consistency with which his words and actions furthered long-standing Russian aims from before his inauguration to the dying days of his presidency makes the coincidence argument – the notion that Trump's own preferences, preconceptions, and whims just happened to precisely match the long-standing objectives of Russia – difficult to sustain. Whatever the actual weight of impact of Russia's attack on the US democratic process in 2016 relative to genuine domestic political factors, the return on investment for the resources expended by Moscow has been immeasurable.

At the strategic level, Moscow's wish list for the United States includes a number of long-term aspirations that have been constant for decades, both in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, which were probably considered beyond reach until Trump attempted, with varying degrees of success, to enact them. These included (with examples): reducing the US role in providing European security (as with the strategically and logistically inane order to draw down the US presence in Germany);<sup>30</sup> further weakening Transatlantic links and undermining faith in US security commitments (as with ceding space in north-east Syria to Russia,<sup>31</sup> or the blocking of defensive measures against Russia under different pretexts – linking defensive aid to Ukraine to undermining Joe Biden, or diverting defensive spending earmarked for eastern Europe to Trump's wall project); reducing the effectiveness of the

<sup>29</sup> David Walsh, "Russia report: UK 'actively avoided' probing possible Moscow meddling in Brexit vote," *Euronews*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/21/russia-report-findings-of-long-awaited-probe-into-russian-inference-in-uk-politics-release>.

<sup>30</sup> Isla MacRae, "Trump and DoD clash over US troop withdrawal from Germany," *ArmyTechnology*, 31 July 2020, <https://www.army-technology.com/features/trump-and-dod-clash-over-us-troop-withdrawal-from-germany/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ben Hubbard, Anton Troianovski, Carlotta Gall, and Patrick Kingsley, "In Syria, Russia Is Pleased to Fill an American Void," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/world/middleeast/kurds-syria-turkey.html>.

US Intelligence Community (passing classified information to adversaries, and causing suppression of intelligence reporting on Russia);<sup>32</sup> and showing the United States, as opposed to Russia, as an enemy of Islam (through hostile rhetoric and direct action including travel bans).<sup>33</sup> Other, less specific aims furthered by Trump included challenging and undermining Western liberal values, eroding US world leadership and global respect, weakening US society and undermining social cohesion, hastening the arrival of a post-truth, post-fact information space and discrediting independent media, and – importantly – seeing Russia treated as a partner and equal, satisfying Moscow’s perpetual status anxiety.

Sceptics note that not all of Trump’s actions were to Russia’s benefit and argue that if he were knowingly working on behalf of Russia, he could have gone even further. But the examples often chosen to support this line of thinking do not stand up to close scrutiny. It is true that Trump did not provide Russia with sanctions relief or recognition of Crimea as part of Russia; neither of these would have been within his ability to deliver. Other examples of Trump being “tough on Russia”, like the development of the sanctions regime and of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) intended to bolster the conventional defence of Europe, represent initiatives that began under the preceding Obama administration and continued under their own momentum, despite rather than because of the Trump White House.

A rare instance of assertive action against Russia by the Trump administration – the expulsion of Russian diplomats in solidarity with the UK after the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal – presents the exception that proves the rule; Trump was reportedly enraged when he discovered the extent of the measures he had approved.<sup>34</sup> This, in turn, highlights the real limitations of what Trump could achieve on behalf of Moscow, as he was prevented from further excesses by those democratic checks and balances that survived his administration and by officials at all levels of government who continued to work on behalf of US national interests even when this clashed with the wishes and instructions of the White House.

<sup>32</sup> Natasha Bertrand and Daniel Lippman, “CIA clamps down on flow of Russia intelligence to White House,” *Politico*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/23/cia-russia-intelligence-white-house-420351>

<sup>33</sup> “Timeline of the Muslim Ban,” *American Civil Liberties Union of Washington*, <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>.

<sup>34</sup> Pat Ralph, “Trump was reportedly furious that his administration was portrayed as tough on Russia after expelling diplomats from the US,” *Business Insider*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-wanted-to-expel-fewer-russian-diplomats-2018-4>.

## Russia and Disinformation

At a lower level of ambition, Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns against Western countries also give rise to mixed and sometimes misguided conclusions as to their impact and success.

In the early stages of renewed interest in Russian subversion campaigns, the emphasis in assessing their effectiveness in Western countries rested on whether they were capable of changing the minds of significant numbers of the target population in support of a distinct political goal. Where this could not be demonstrated, it was tempting to conclude that Russia's efforts were ineffective. However, metrics fixated on specific short-term goals were not suitable for assessing long-term Russian campaigns not tied to specific events.

Taking the longer view requires recognising that subversion is a process rather than an event, and considering long-term trends, for example, what is normal in the information space in English-speaking countries in 2020 compared to 2015. This comparison reveals spectacular change in an astonishingly short time. Assisted by the policies and algorithms of social media platforms, Russia has ridden and accelerated trends of fragmentation, distrust, and the spawning of alternative realities – and is now joined by a wide range of foreign and domestic imitators who choose to emulate Russian tactics for their own political ends, amplifying the damage done.

The focus on measurable outcomes from Russian actions also overlooks the pattern of activities that may not have a specific political objective but are aimed simply at causing harm – or are carried out on what 1950s CIA reports referred to as an “experimental or irritational basis.”<sup>35</sup> Russia is alert for any weakness or vulnerability that it can exploit to inflict damage on Western countries because in a zero-sum view of security, anything that weakens them means that in relative terms Russia is stronger. Racial friction is an enduring soft target for subversive activity in the United States, and with or without a global pandemic, it suits Russia to have its adversaries facing a public health crisis caused by malign influence campaigns undermining vaccination programmes.<sup>36</sup> In some cases, including failed or

<sup>35</sup> “Supplement To The Daily Digest,” CIA, 28 January 1952, [cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T01146A000700190001-5.pdf](https://cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T01146A000700190001-5.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Lucy Fisher and Chris Smyth, “GCHQ in cyberwar on anti-vaccine propaganda,” *The Times*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/gchq-in-cyberwar-on-anti-vaccine-propaganda-mcjgjhmb2>; “Protests in Europe as a consequence of COVID-19 related disinformation,” *GLOBSEC*, 25 November 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/globsec/democracyandresilience15-1?e=3d5bba5760>.



successful attacks on the Olympic Games, it can be hard to discern any motivation for attacks beyond pure spite and malice from Moscow.<sup>37</sup>

## Outlook

Russia's successes are not entirely without caveat or qualification. Its actions in Ukraine, for instance, have succeeded in focusing the West's attention on Russian assertiveness and how to counter it, triggering new deployments, and spending on defence within NATO and beyond.<sup>38</sup> The United States, despite the influence of President Trump, has in some instances successfully exercised deterrence of Russia through cyber and other means.<sup>39</sup> Murders by the state at home and abroad, successful or not, have led to countermeasures against Russia, especially in the case of the Skripals where the limited release of information by the British government allowed media organisations to investigate further, leading eventually to the exposure of entire cohorts of Russian intelligence officers.<sup>40</sup> Russia's persistent state behaviour is that of a habitual offender, who accepts detection as an occupational hazard and appears to accept consequences and countermeasures in the same business-like manner.

There are no simple answers, and often no single answers, as to why Russia takes any given action. Objectives can be multiple, flexible, and incomprehensible by Western measures of success. As part of this, Russia may not be succeeding by Western criteria. However, those are not the criteria that will determine Russia's future courses of action. For as long as its interventions achieve the desired effect at costs considered acceptable, Russia will see little cause not to continue them.

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<sup>37</sup> "Six Russian GRU Officers Charged in Connection with Worldwide Deployment of Destructive Malware and Other Disruptive Actions in Cyberspace," *US Department of Justice*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/six-russian-gru-officers-charged-connection-worldwide-deployment-destructive-malware-and>.

<sup>38</sup> Tom Rogan, "Russia reaps whirlwind with massive Swedish defense spending boost," *Washington Examiner*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/russia-reaps-whirlwind-with-massive-swedish-defense-spending-boost>.

<sup>39</sup> Ellen Nakashima, "Fewer opportunities and a changed political environment in the U.S. may have curbed Moscow's election interference this year, analysts say," *The Washington Post*, 17 November 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-failed-to-mount-major-election-interference-operations-in-2020-analysts-say/2020/11/16/72c62b0c-1880-11eb-82db-60b15c874105\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-failed-to-mount-major-election-interference-operations-in-2020-analysts-say/2020/11/16/72c62b0c-1880-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.html)

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Claburn, "What could be more embarrassing for a Russian spy: Their info splashed online – or that they drive a Lada?," *The Register*, 5 October 2018, [https://www.theregister.com/2018/10/05/russian\\_gru\\_agents\\_car\\_database/](https://www.theregister.com/2018/10/05/russian_gru_agents_car_database/)

It follows that Western assessments of the courses of action Russia might consider in any given situation have to be grounded in the Kremlin's view of the world, as opposed to what is taken for granted in the Euro-Atlantic community. This involves abandoning normal assumptions of international relations and adopting instead Russia's premise that the West is engaged in a long-term campaign against it, and therefore Russia must wage a struggle in every available domain to pre-empt that and inflict damage on its notional adversaries at each opportunity where the costs and consequences will outweigh the benefits. Nonetheless, it is specifically an understanding of Russia's distinctive metrics of what constitutes success, failure, or an acceptable medium that would allow Russia's foreign partners to more effectively tilt the scales of Moscow's risk-benefit calculus, reducing the perceived benefits or increasing the perceived risks to deter unwelcome action by the Kremlin. The natural result would be a relationship with Moscow that is more stable, predictable, and safe.

# **The Future of the Russia's Military Industry: 'Special Deliveries', Functional Needs, Generous Loan Deals, and 'Old Love' from Soviet Times**

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## **Abstract**

The current study analyses the complicated outlook for Russia's military industry in relation to global competition, focusing on external and systematic variables in a medium-term perspective. In general, global trends in the growth of innovation, shrinking budgetary funding because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of normative limitations in the use of some weapon systems will not strengthen Russia's position in global arms market, but, however, there are also aspects that might work in Russia's favour. The central issue here is whether a lack of innovation and investments as well as the pressure of international sanctions can be compensated by other factors like the drop in prices for older military equipment, generous loans, quick deliveries, the support of special forces that comes alongside the delivery of Russian military equipment, and the former reliable partnerships that date back to the Soviet era.

Key words: Russian military industry, Western sanctions, clients, technology

## **Introduction**

The article discusses the complicated outlook for the Russian military industry in global competition with a focus on external and systematic factors in a mid-term perspective. In general, global trends in innovation and moral limitations will not strengthen Russia's position in global arms market, but there are also aspects that will work in Russia's favour. First, as long as Russia succeeds in keeping numerous military conflicts ongoing in the territories of its long-term clients and partners from Syria to Ukraine, there will be a demand for Russia's military products there, and in these cases, a lack of innovation does not play a significant role. Russia might keep some of its

strategic partners despite tighter competition in the global arms market by offering ability special deliveries in terms of speed (Turkey) and manning (Syria), functional need for alternatives to NATO standards (Turkey), and generous loan options (Egypt, Syria, and some former Soviet Republics). Additionally, existing logistical and service capabilities play a critical role in keeping Soviet arms trade partnerships alive. Despite economic limitations, Russia has also been able to challenge and overcome Western and Chinese expectations with a range of ultimate weapons prototypes that would be ready for mass production for its own army and allied forces. In this aspect, investments in the military industry and new technologies are also aimed at creating a deterrence against possible Russian opponents and competitors in the global arena. The last central variable for the Russian military industry is how they will be able to survive, adapt, or even stay innovative while being targeted by numerous sanctions that restrict it from certain technological components that the Russian arms industry is unable even to duplicate or replace with Chinese alternatives.

Previous studies focusing on the Russia's military industry conducted by the RAND Corporation, SIPRI, Chatham House, the Jamestown Foundation, Sendstad<sup>1</sup>, Borshchevskaya,<sup>2</sup> and Conolly that have analysed Russia's strategic role in the global arms market have offered a lot of inspiration and guidance for this current article. Different from these studies, the current research focuses solely on the prospects for the future of Russia's defence industry in the global arena with a focus on the dynamics of external factors and changes in the external environment that could potentially have a significant impact on the competitiveness of Russia's defence industry in the mid-term. In more detail, this study will examine how three developments in the global arms market could affect the future of Russia's defence industry. The first of these developments is the increasing efforts countries are making to modernize their weapons systems and to improve and produce advanced generation weapons, the second is the changing profile of the main arms importers vis-à-vis their intentions to become arms exporters in the future, and the third and final aspect is the growing political-ideological and technological polarization of the global arms market.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, "Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia," *Chatham House Research Paper*, March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East," *Russia in the Middle East*, 2017, 15–16.

## Is There a Demand for Quantity or Innovation?

Clients and demand for modern weapon systems remain, as all global military powers make significant efforts to modernize their national weapons systems and to develop and initiate serial production of advanced next generation weapons. The United States devotes much attention to modernization programs in various military areas, including the modernization of its nuclear force, layered missile defences, capabilities to enhance close combat lethality in complex terrains, and other areas, referring to the 2018 National Defence Strategy of the United States.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to Russia, whose national state armament program for 2018–2027 is oriented towards the modernization of its equipment and surplus of nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Russia's political and military leaders often like to publicly boast about the development of new military technologies. In this sense, visible military innovation with ostentatious presentations for internal and external audience has always played an important role for Russian (and Soviet) political leaders.

Other than the United States and Russia, the world's second-largest arms importer in 2019, India has announced a plan to modernize its armed forces within the next five to seven years.<sup>5</sup> Other large arms importers, like China, either have already made successful efforts in producing modern weaponry, or, like Saudi Arabia, have called for military transformations. Most of them still have an interest in certain Russian technologies or weapon systems at least in the short term.

Thus, a country's ability to develop and produce modern weapons systems seems to have gained an even greater weight due to increasing market demands, making it necessary for countries and national defence industries to consolidate defence sector resources, to devote greater attention to R&D activities and to spend more money on military innovation. According to

<sup>3</sup> The Department of Defence, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," 2018, 6–7. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Richard Connolly, Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's New State Armament Programme: Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027," *Chatham House Research Paper*, May 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-05-10-russia-state-armament-programme-connolly-boulegue-final.pdf>, accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Press Trust of India, "India to spend a whopping USD 130 billion to modernise forces," *The Economic Times, Defence*, 10 September 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-spend-a-whopping-usd-130-billion-for-military-modernisation-in-next-5-7-years/articleshow/71053542.cms>, accessed 22 April 2020.

SIPRI experts, large US companies are already merging to be able to produce next-generation weapon systems that would give them an advantage in winning governmental military contracts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in many countries, defence-related R&D expenditures are considered the main channel through which governments shape innovation. For example, Enrico Moretti and co-authors argue that defence research is not mainly motivated by economic goals but instead is the most effective channel for the federal government to affect the direction and speed of innovation in the economy. Based on data of defence-related R&D spending, they demonstrate that an increase in the R&D spending of a government increases the private sector research spending as well and has a significant effect on both a country's total factor productivity and economic growth overall.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, R&D investments, including military research, should be one of the key priorities of those countries who want to maintain a competitive edge. In this light, the countries that are not allocating resources in R&D, including defence-related research, are automatically placed at a competitive disadvantage both militarily and economically.

Second, some main arms importers globally have decreased their arms imports in recent years. SIPRI data indicate that in 2014–2018, Chinese and Indian arms imports have decreased compared to the period of 2009–2013.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, China has steadily increased its arms export over time as well and has widened the variety of weapons that the country is exporting. Furthermore, military experts estimate that the Chinese defence industry is among the largest national arms industries in the world.<sup>9</sup> This refers to the country's successful efforts in building a large and competitive domestic defence industry that is able to provide advanced weapons and technologies also for its army going forward. Instead of being an important market

<sup>6</sup> SIPRI, "Global arms industry rankings: Sales up 4.6 per cent worldwide and US companies dominate the Top 5," *SIPRI press release*, 9 December 2019. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/global-arms-industry-rankings-sales-46-cent-worldwide-and-us-companies-dominate-top-5>, accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Enrico Moretti, Claudia Steinwender, and John Van Reenen, "The intellectual spoils of war? Defense R&D, productivity and international spillovers," *NBER Working Paper Series*, No 26483, November 2019. <https://eml.berkeley.edu/~moretti/military.pdf>, accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum, 'International Security: 5 charts that reveal the state of the global arms trade,' 14 March 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/5-charts-that-reveal-the-state-of-the-global-arms-trade/>, accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Nan Tian and Fen Su, "Estimating the arms sales of Chinese companies," *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, No 2020/2, January 2020, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/sipriinsight2002\\_1.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/sipriinsight2002_1.pdf), accessed 22 April 2020.

for arms exporters, China is becoming a strong new competitor amongst the current arms exporters. Although the recent decrease in arms imports in India might be related to delays in deliveries from foreign suppliers as argued by SIPRI,<sup>10</sup> India has nonetheless recently set an ambitious aim to become a global arms exporter and to double its defence exports in the next five years.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the world's largest arms importer in 2019, Saudi Arabia, has set an objective for 2030 to manufacture more military equipment domestically to create more jobs locally and keep more resources within the country, referring to the national strategy paper *Vision 2030: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. The long-term aim of the country is to localize over half of the national military equipment spending by 2030. This would be a significant step forward, given that today, only two percent of defence spending of Saudi Arabia is spent domestically, and there are only seven companies and two research centres in the defence sector of Saudi Arabia. According to the national strategy document, Saudi Arabia has already started to develop less complex industries that provide spare parts, armoured vehicles, and basic ammunition and is soon expected to expand in higher value and equipment that is more complex.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, it is likely that both the changing profile and the reorientation of some arms importers to arms exporters could mean that the current arms exporters soon might find themselves in a situation where they have to search for alternative trade partners instead of well-known large export markets, even competing with them for market position.

Third, some evidence suggests that the global arms market is polarizing, both from technological and political-ideological (including growing moral considerations) viewpoints. The United States is the top military power in the world both technologically and in quantitative terms. Other countries lag far behind. According to SIPRI data, there were about 42 American companies listed in the Top 100 arms producing and military

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<sup>10</sup> "Global arms industry rankings: Sales up 4.6 per cent worldwide and US companies dominate the Top 5," *SIPRI press release*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/global-arms-industry-rankings-sales-46-cent-worldwide-and-us-companies-dominate-top-5>, accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Aditya Sharma, "India seeks shift from buying weapons to exporting them," *Deutsche Welle*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-seeks-shift-from-buying-weapons-to-exporting-them/a-52270331>.

<sup>12</sup> "Vision 2030: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," 2016, 48, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>, accessed 20 April 2020.

services companies<sup>13</sup> and the share of the United States of total Top 100 arms sales was 59 percent in 2018.<sup>14</sup> Only 27 out of the top-100 companies are located in Europe, accounting for a quarter of total top-100 arms sales. Ten companies ranked in top-100 operate in Russia, accounting for 8.6 percent of the total.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the United States clearly dominates in global arms market today. The increasing polarization between the United States and the other countries is reflected also in the dynamics of the arms exports. For example, while from 2009–2013 US exports of major arms were about 12 percent higher than that of Russia, in 2014–2018, it was already 75 percent.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, experts argue that in recent years, the United States has further solidified its position in the global arms market as an exporter of advanced weapons like combat aircraft, short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, and guided bombs.<sup>17</sup> However, while the United States seems to further strengthen its dominant role as a top arms exporter globally, there are numerous countries that prefer to buy arms from other countries than the United States (or are rejected by the United States from export), either for economic, political-ideological, or security reasons. From the recent past, Venezuela under the leadership of Hugo Chávez, could be highlighted as a good example of a political-ideological motivation to rely on Russian military technology and support. Today, Belarus, Armenia, and Syria prefer to import arms from Russia instead of other countries for political, economic, logistical, and technical reasons, having decades-long experience with handling and servicing, supported by large reserves of spare parts.

Growing polarization is closely related to arms embargos and targeted sanctions are already shaping the future of the global arms market both directly and indirectly. In a direct way, arms embargos and sanctions are expected to halt the transfer of weapons to armed combatants to end military conflict more quickly. If this does prove to be the case and these

<sup>13</sup> Chinese companies were excluded from the list due to the lack of data.

<sup>14</sup> Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian, Pieter D Wezeman, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "The SIPRI Top 100 arms-producing and military services companies, 2018," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, December 2019, 2–4, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/1912\\_fs\\_top\\_100\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/1912_fs_top_100_2018.pdf), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–6.

<sup>16</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in international arms transfers, 2018," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2019, 3, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs\\_1903\\_at\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Global arms trade: USA increases dominance; arms flows to the Middle East surge, says SIPRI (2019)," *SIPRI press release*, 11 March 2019. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/global-arms-trade-usa-increases-dominance-arms-flows-middle-east-surge-says-sipri>, accessed 20 April 2020.



military conflicts cease, the arms exports to all parties in such a conflict should be affected as well.

However, academic assessments of arms embargoes are not so unanimous about this issue. Some researchers have pointed to success stories, e.g., that of Angola in 1993–2003,<sup>18</sup> while others are convinced that, in practice, arms embargoes have mostly shown poor results because of malevolent distributional effects and difficulties in effectively curtailing the arms flow.<sup>19</sup> Indirectly, targeted (technological) sanctions are expected to hinder a country in realizing its military aims due to knowledge- and technology-based limitations. In this way, arms embargoes and targeted sanctions clearly affect the outlook of those countries, sectors, and enterprises that are subjects to sanctions.

### **Why Should Russia be Concerned about these Recent Developments?**

There are three main reasons why the Russian defence industry should be concerned about recent developments in global arms market. First, assuming that R&D investments, including defence-related research expenditures, are important to maintain a country's competitive advantage both militarily and economically, Russia is automatically placed at a competitive disadvantage compared to its main political and military opponents. Although Russia is among the ten countries that invest the most in R&D in absolute terms (see Figure 1a), its main political opponents like the United States and China are far ahead of Russia. In 2017, the gross domestic expenditures on research and development (GERD) of Russia in PPP amounted to approximately 42 billion USD, compared to 543 billion USD in the United States and 499 billion USD in China.<sup>20</sup> Next to that, among the top ten global arms exporters Russia's GERD as a share of GDP is clearly lower (see Figure 1b). Furthermore, the share of military R&D has been constantly low in Russia's military expenditures (about 5 percent of the country's total

<sup>18</sup> Michael Brzoska, "Measuring the Effectiveness of Arms Embargoes," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, No 14, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Tierney, "Irrelevant or malevolent? UN Arms Embargoes in Civil Wars," *Review of International Studies*, No. 31, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Science, technology and innovation: Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD)," *GERD as a percentage of GDP, GERD per capita and GERD per researcher*, 2020, [http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN\\_DS&lang=en](http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS&lang=en), accessed 20 April 2020.

military expenditure) over the last two decades compared to other expenditure categories like expenditures of personnel, and operation and maintenance.<sup>21</sup> Research and innovation in Russia, including military research, is challenged by the ageing of R&D workers as well as by inadequate linkages between country's higher education system and the labour force demand of the companies operating in the defence sector.<sup>22</sup> As a balancing argument, the purchasing power of the USD in the Russian military industry is by far different from its purchasing power in NATO countries.

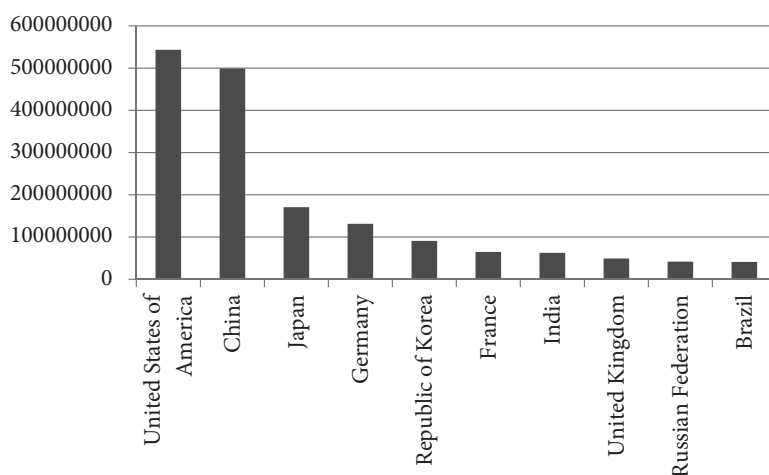


Figure 1a: The gross domestic expenditures on research and developments (GERD) in PPPs (in USD) of the countries that invest the most in R&D, 2017\*

Note: \*Data for India are for 2018, as information about 2017 was missing in the database.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), *Science, technology and innovation: Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD)*, [http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN\\_DS&lang=en](http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS&lang=en).

<sup>21</sup> Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces*, RAND Corporation, 2019, 11–12. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND\\_RR2573.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, *Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter. The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia*, Chatham House, 2017, 24–25, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>, accessed 20 April 2020.

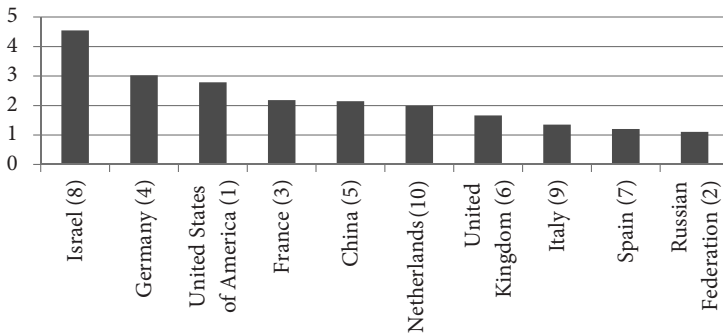


Figure 1b: The gross domestic expenditures on research and developments (GERD) as a percentage of GDP of Top 10 arms exporters in the world, 2017\*

Note: \* Number in the brackets reflects country's position among the Top 10 arms exporters.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020). *Science, technology and innovation: GERD as a percentage of GDP*, [http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN\\_DS&lang=en](http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS&lang=en).

In 2019, Russia ranks only 46th among the 129 countries in the Global Innovation Index, which measures national innovation capabilities. The rankings of other Top 10 arms exporters are higher and most of them are far ahead of Russia, like the United States that ranks third, the Netherlands fourth, the United Kingdom fifth, Germany ninth, Israel tenth, China 14th, and France 16th. Only Spain and Italy lag somewhat behind the other top exporters but are still ahead of Russia with ranks of 29 and 30, respectively.<sup>23</sup> A similar gap between Russia and other top arms exporters can be observed when the rankings of other innovation indices like the Global Competitiveness Index and the index of the World Economic Forum are compared. As compensatory argument, the Global Innovation Index does not include the input from Russia's top-secret military laboratories and technologies, not yet revealed to the public. Additionally, Russian military scientists are often also restricted from publishing their research results in open sources and academic journals.

<sup>23</sup> "Global Innovation Index (GII) 2019," World Intellectual Property Organization, section Ranking, 2019. <[https://www.wipo.int/global\\_innovation\\_index/en/2019/](https://www.wipo.int/global_innovation_index/en/2019/), accessed 20 April 2020.

Assuming that both the level of R&D expenditures and military research remains as moderate as it is in Russia in 2020, the country most likely will continue to 'modernize' its old systems and to upgrade them with new features instead focusing on completely new solutions. As a result, the Armata T-14 tank and Su-57 fighter will not appear in their expected quantities for at least the upcoming 3–5 years and will be replaced by latest upgrades of the T-72 (T-95) tank and Su-27 (Su-35) instead.

Although the country has made visible progress in areas like air defence, cruise missiles, electronic warfare, and radars, Russia seems not to have the economic potential to make a major leap forward in general terms to gain comparative advantage in regards to the other top five leading arms exporters.

Second, the fact that China and India are currently decreasing their arms imports to increase domestic military production and to become arms exporters in the future could have a particularly negative impact on the Russian defence industry. India and China have been the main export markets for Russian defence companies for more than two decades, followed by Algeria, Vietnam, and Egypt.<sup>24</sup> Over the last decade, Russia's arms export to India and China (as the country's share in total arms export of Russia to those five countries) has decreased (see, Figure 2). Military experts argue that this could be linked to China's and India's attempts to buttress their domestic defence industries and to the increasing competition for the Indian arms markets between Russia, the United States, Israel, and France.<sup>25</sup> Next to this and despite smooth cooperation, Russia and India have recently had some disputes about the development of the fifth generation stealth fighter Su-57 that could preclude growing tensions in the former long-term partnership. India was the co-developer of the Su-57 alongside the Russians, but the country has recently cancelled cooperation with Russia due to concerns about the inadequate performance of the Su-57 engines and poor stealth characteristics,<sup>26</sup> as well as Russia's unwillingness to share the source code

<sup>24</sup> "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, TIV of arms exports from Russia, 2000–2019: Figures are SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) expressed in millions," SIPRI, 2020, [http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export\\_values.php](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Sergey Denisentsev, "Russia in the Global Arms Market," CSIS, August 2017, 19. [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170816\\_Denisentsev\\_Russia\\_GlobalArmsMarket\\_Web.pdf?VHDgCY.h54QWJm1lPCa2w1Lc.BjElJH](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170816_Denisentsev_Russia_GlobalArmsMarket_Web.pdf?VHDgCY.h54QWJm1lPCa2w1Lc.BjElJH), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>26</sup> "Russia offers India co-development of stealth fighter, submarine," *The Week Magazine*, 10 July 2019. <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/07/10/russia-offers-india-co-development-of-stealth-fighter-submarine.html>, accessed 20 April 2020.

of Su-57's flight computer and mission software with India.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it seems that military cooperation between Russia and India is nowadays not as healthy as it was over the last two decades and that Russia might not have high-level technology to sell to India anymore. As a balancing argument, in terms of latest air defence systems and fighters, neither China nor India are not able to copy the Russian technologies and search for alternatives from France (India) or buy components from Russia (China) even in 2020.

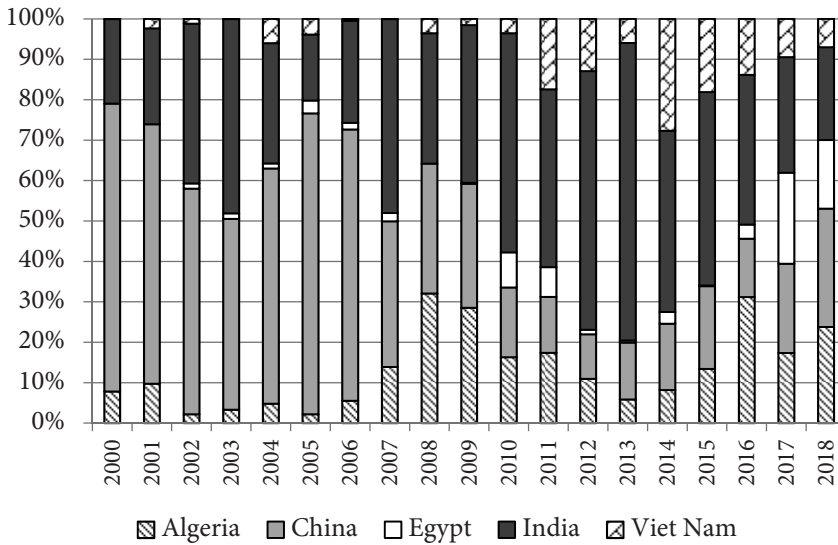


Figure 2: Country's share in total arms export of Russia to Algeria, China, Egypt, India and Viet Nam from 2000–2018

Source: author's calculations based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (2020).

TIV of arms exports from Russia, 2000–2019: Figures are SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) expressed in millions. [http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export\\_values.php](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php).

Should Russia lose its main arms export markets in India and China, it would be a serious blow to Russia's defence industry, particularly being aware that international competition is tightening in other highly relevant

<sup>27</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "Russia offers India its Su-57 stealth fighters (again)," *The Diplomat*, 16 July 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/russia-offers-india-its-su-57-stealth-fighter-again/>, accessed 20 April 2020.

export markets from Russia's perspective, such as German and French companies that are increasing their sales to Egypt. Not only in Egypt but in other North African countries as well, Russia still has a visible advantage in light of upcoming procurements because of long term partnerships, preexisting logistical support, and predeployed Russian equipment (which mostly integrates only with Russian own military production).

Furthermore, it could have negative impact on Russia's economy in general as the defence industry and arms export is an important source of revenue for the Russian economy. It is little wonder then that Russia uses every opportunity to praise and demonstrate its weapons around the world to attract both old and new customers and to create an image of itself as a reliable supplier and strategic partner with whom it pays off to have special long-term relations. Moreover, Russia's recent efforts to keep close contacts with India, to develop joint projects,<sup>28</sup> and to find flexible solutions on how to make it possible for India to pay for Russian weapons<sup>29</sup> are actually more important than appears at first sight.

Third, as long as Russia is aggressively pushing for its global ambitions, the future of Russia's defence industry remains highly vulnerable to international sanctions. The impact of the embargo of Western countries and Ukraine on the import and export of arms and related materials and components to and from Russia in association with the conflict in Ukraine is an example of this. Gressel (2020) argues that before the West imposed sanctions on Russia in autumn 2014, Russia regularly turned to the Western European countries to import machine parts and dual-use items due to the lack of domestic production, but after the implementation of Western sanctions, Russia had to face serious constraints in its supply chain. As a result, Russia switched to Chinese machinery, but turning to lower-quality parts and items has recently caused some accidents like the fire on the Russia's research submarine AS-31 as well as has hindered Russia in the initiation of the serial production of new "wonder weapons" as some key subcomponents and precision machinery were missing and could not be replaced

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<sup>28</sup> Rosoboronexport, "Rosoboronexport to organize display of 1,000+ pieces of Russian military hardware at Defexpo India 2020," *Press release*, 3 February 2020, <http://roe.ru/eng/press-service/press-releases/rosoboronexport-to-organize-display-of-1-000-pieces-of-russian-military-hardware-at-defexpo-india-20/>, accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>29</sup> The Economic Times, "India finds permanent solution for payment of Russian arms," 9 July 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-finds-permanent-solution-for-payment-of-russian-arms/articleshow/70134550.cms?from=mdr>, accessed 20 April 2020.

by lower-quality Chinese products.<sup>30</sup> Russia has domestically initiated an import substitution programme; however, the country even lacks a modern machinery base to produce replacement for the items previously acquired from the Western countries.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this, restrictions on the exports from Ukrainian firms to Russia have caused shortages of air-to-air missiles, helicopter engines, heavy airlifts, and gas turbines for naval ships.<sup>32</sup> This problem is probably going to grow as many Ukrainian companies that specialized in components needed by Russian military industry are not only blocked by sanctions but also going out of business (like Antonov). Thus, potential embargos and targeted sanctions clearly affect the outlook of Russia's defence industry, should they remain subjects to sanctions in the future. Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that embargos and sanctions will be even more imposed on political-ideological reasons. The way in which the United States has recently threatened, e.g., Turkey and India, to impose sanctions for their military transactions with Russia (and partially has even imposed them for a short period) could be taken as a clear sign in this direction.

### **Will Special Deliveries, Beneficial Loan Deals, Existing Logistical Solution, and Decades-Old Soviet Partnerships buy Peace of Mind for Russian Military Industry?**

All three general developments, such as the growing trend towards greater military innovation, the change in the profile and reorientation of some main arms importers, and the growing political-ideological and technological polarization will not help Russia to strengthen its current position in the global arms market. As Western sanctions have shown, Russia lacks innovation and is therefore unable to domestically produce certain high-level components that are critical to begin any serial production of the country's

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<sup>30</sup> Gustav Gressel, "The sanctions straitjacket on Russia's defence sector," *ECFR commentary*, 13 February 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_sanctions\\_straitjacket\\_on\\_russias\\_defence\\_sector](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_sanctions_straitjacket_on_russias_defence_sector), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger and Nicu Popescu, "Defence industries in Russia and China: players and strategies," *EU Institute for Security Studies*, December 2017, 15. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report\\_38\\_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_38_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Connolly, Cecilie Sendstad, "Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia," Chatham House, Research Paper, March 2017, 25.

military inventions that could, in turn, take the potential of Russia's defence industry to the next level. The situation becomes even more critical for Russia in the longer term, as according to estimates, Russia's defence exports has already reached a plateau and would be extremely difficult to transcend in normal circumstances.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Russia is already losing its position in big markets like China and India should make Russia even more worried because it could mean that Russia is not only losing its two biggest arms export markets, but it is likely that in the mid-term Russia has to face strong competition from China in other countries that have previously imported arms from Russia. In more detail, as argued by Borshchevskaya (2017), one of the advantages of why some countries have preferred to buy arms from Russia instead of, e.g., the United States or the Western European countries, is that Russia does not restrict its clientele by setting limitations or preconditions, such as the prohibition of secondary arms sales, the prerequisite to improve human rights in the importing country, or other restrictions. Until now, Russia has offered several advantages to its partners, e.g., to Iran, Syria, Algeria, Egypt, and Libya in the form of better negotiating terms, loans, and quicker deliveries that have made it more beneficial for them to import arms from Russia instead of other countries.<sup>34</sup> However, it is likely that China could take over some of Russia's market share, keeping in mind China's military ambitions to strengthen its position in the global arms market and the country's ambition to increase its political power globally. In this light, Russia should be clearly worried about maintaining its current position in the international arms market and should not even dream about being a military power centre and main source of military innovation in the global arena.

However, next to these disadvantages are also several advantages that stem from the same factors and changes in the external environment that could work in Russia's favour. First, although Russia is mostly unable to start serial production of its newest military inventions and designs, such as third post-war generation tanks, next-generation amphibious assault ships, and so on, the country clearly does its best to sell its second-best options in the

<sup>33</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger and Nicu Popescu, "Defence industries in Russia and China: players and strategies," *EU Institute for Security Studies*, December 2017, 16, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report\\_38\\_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_38_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf), accessed 20 April 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East," *Russia in the Middle East*, 2017 <https://jamestown.org/program/tactical-side-russias-arms-sales-middle-east/>, accessed 20 April 2020.



market, for example, selling upgraded models of Mig 29/31 instead of Su 35. Thus, as long as conventional conflicts break out around the world, there also exist clients for a large variety of Russia's "classical" weapons such as the AK-47, T-72, Tunguska air defence, and Mig-29 fighters, which are quite simple but cheap and easy to handle. In this light, it is clearly in Russia's "best" interest to keep the international security environment unstable and the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and other countries or regions ongoing. From the perspective of Russia's defence industry, as long as there is a need for brutal force and a demand for Russia's military weapons exists, its primitiveness in innovation does not play a significant role. Even without a qualitative leap in military innovation in Russia that is most likely not going to take place in the coming years, Russia's defence industry might still have better prospects for the future than initially expected because Russia's new arms export markets will be in conflict zones that are often initiated or co-initiated by Russia itself.

Another potential advantage for the Russia's defence industry is related to so-called path dependence. If somebody has purchased your weapons, they also depend on your supplies like ammunition, spare parts, and training. Similar to other Great Powers, Russia offers to its partners combined services referring to the combination of Russia's military weapon systems and mercenaries – or even regular forces, as was the case in Syria. This allows Russia, first, to make more money, second, to avoid the spread of its technology and, third, to gain political control over conflicts. In this light, as Russian mercenaries are better trained and prepared to work with the modern weapon systems of Russia, it also allows the country to make better marketing for Russian products because of the better results in the battlefield. To quote Vladimir Putin:

"Syria is not a shooting range for Russian weapons, but we are still using them there, our new weapons. This has led to the improvement of modern strike systems, including missile systems. It is one thing to have them, and quite another thing to see how they fare in combat conditions."<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, traditional supply and service chains are definitely cheaper and safer to keep operational than to change in order to create a new supply chain. Switching fully to another supplier in the middle of a conflict or after a decade-long confrontation is clearly not an option in this respect. Thus, the structure of the global arms market in terms of who is selling to whom

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," *Kremlin*, 18 June 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57692>, accessed 19 February 2020.

might not change as dramatically as could be initially assumed. However, the question remains whether Russia will be able to fulfil its promises to the market with real deliveries or depends solely on the performative contract signing without real serial production capabilities.

## Conclusion

According to Western indicators, the outlook for the Russian military industry is worsening in upcoming years, as the visible innovation level is worse than that of Spain and R&D investments in nominal levels are lagging far behind the five main global weapon exporters. Russia is also suffering from an inability to deliver already agreed quantities to India and Egypt, forcing those countries to find partners elsewhere. In many cases, well-known Russian industrial companies like Sukhoi and Uralvagonzavod are unable even to fulfil the demand of their own defence ministry. In this aspect, sanctions targeted against Russian military industry already have visible and disturbing effects which are only about to grow in upcoming years.

However, at least in 2020, the Russian military industry is far from collapse as there are also several aspects in favour of the Russian military industry. First, there are traditional clients from all over the world asking for upgraded Soviet classics: the AK-47, T-72 tank, Su-27/29 fighter, Mi helicopters, and the Tunguska and Shilka air defence systems. These are cost efficient and simple, and the clients know how to handle them and have necessary spare parts. Russians on the other hand know the needs of clients and are ready to credit them for the sake of maintaining long-term partnerships. In many cases, deals are softened with generous loan conditions. For numerous clients from Syria to Afghanistan, it has also been important that next to weapon systems, Russia is ready to deliver both regular forces and mercenaries to bring out of the best of exported weapons.

Cooperation and ideological partnership is also an important variable for Russia when choosing whom and what to sell. Russian political and ideological leaders see Western powers led by the United States under the umbrella of NATO as a global anti-Russian alliance that needs to be balanced with its own allies and military agreements. Allies need modern weapons, and once they begin to use Russian weapons, they depend on these supplies and in many cases even cannot use these weapons against Russian assets.

Finally, yet important, there are clients who do not want to buy or cannot get the necessary weapon systems from other providers (mostly US companies) or are directly interested to use procured weapon systems against United States and its allies. As there are not many neutral weapon exporters available, Russian is often seen as next best option. Beginning with Russian air-defence systems (like Turkey, Libya, and many others), these clients soon find out that it is reasonable to use also Russian planes and helicopters with Russian ammunition.

Under the mentioned circumstances, Russian willingness to continue export is also fully understandable, as there are not too many other Russian industrial products for which demand is much higher than the Russian ability to put them to market and receive hard currency and ideological partnership in exchange.

# Russia and the Global Order

Bobo Lo

## Abstract

The unravelling of the liberal order, past failures of American leadership, and growing anxiety over the rise of China give Russia real opportunities to carve out a role in global governance. But it is unclear whether the Kremlin possesses the wisdom to exploit these circumstances. The signs are mixed. On the one hand, Putin continues to pursue anachronistic ideas of great power-centred, 'multipolar' governance. On the other hand, there are modest signs of a new internationalism, as Russian foreign policy becomes more diversified and inclusive. Putin's overriding aim remains the same: to position Russia as an independent centre of global power. To achieve this, however, the Kremlin cannot rely on the usual levers of Russian influence and the missteps of others. It will need to rethink its approach toward international order and what it takes to be a major power in the 21st century world.

Key words: world order, multipolarity, tripolar, the United States, Russia, China, power vacuum, centre of power, great power, decline, partnerships, exceptionalism

## Introduction

A global order in flux presents Russia with significant risks but also real opportunities. The unravelling of the post-Cold War liberal order, the failures of US leadership, and growing international anxiety over the rise of China give Moscow scope to carve out a niche in 21st century global governance. But does Putin – or a hypothetical successor – possess the wisdom and foresight to make the most of the chances offered by circumstance? Will the Kremlin temper its historical sense of entitlement with self-awareness, flexibility, and pragmatism?

The signs so far are mixed. Putin's recent statements point to business as usual. His call at UNGA 75 for a G-5 summit that would reaffirm 'the key principles of behaviour in international affairs' suggests he has learnt little.

The implicit premise underpinning this scheme is that ‘the great powers decide, the others abide’ – a throwback to the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the 1945 Yalta Conference.

At the same time, there are some small indications that Moscow recognizes that a global order based on such antiquated principles may not be achievable or even to Russia’s advantage. With the United States likely to remain the leading global power for at least the next decade or two and China’s further rise seemingly unstoppable, Russia could become steadily marginalized unless it finds new ways to make itself relevant. That means a rethinking not just of its approach toward global governance but also of what it takes to be a major power in the 21st century.

## Russia and the Liberal Order

Russia’s intellectual and psychological journey from traditional conceptions of ‘greatness’ and ‘great power-ness’ (*derzhavnost*) promises to be bumpy. Many in Moscow believe it was the biggest loser from the ‘new world order’ that emerged after the end of the Cold War. Initial hopes that Russia might be recognized as an equal partner to the United States were soon dashed. Instead, it became an economic mendicant while its geopolitical weight diminished drastically. NATO’s eastward enlargement underlined the extent of Russia’s strategic decline and, in the eyes of many, disgrace.

Viewed from the Kremlin, the post-Cold War order merely confirmed long-standing truths, such as ‘the weak get beaten’ – an axiom of Stalin, later repeated by Putin. Its message of positive-sum cooperation glossed over the reality that the West, and the United States in particular, was as engaged as ever in the pursuit of selfish national interests. Unlike China, whose development benefited hugely from US global leadership and Western-driven globalization, Russia derived little apparent advantage from this new world.

During the heyday of the liberal international order in the 1990s, Russia lacked the ability to challenge this, not least because it was preoccupied with its own domestic problems. Regrettably, Western policymakers mistook Russian weakness for agreement. They believed Moscow had come to accept the virtues of the rules-based order, signing on to the ideals of liberal democracy and internationalism while abjuring great power and imperialist ambitions.

This illusion was short-lived. By the early 2000s, the Kremlin was visibly turning away from the liberal order – first, in response to the 2003 Iraq invasion, then to the Orange Revolution, and especially following misguided attempts to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. For Putin, Russia's economic recovery gave him the means and the confidence to consolidate his political authority, project Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood, and reassert Russia as a major international actor on his terms.

Lately, Putin has exulted in the troubles of liberalism and the liberal order – even more so since these have been largely self-inflicted. His declaration in a 2019 Financial Times interview that liberalism was 'obsolete' reflected a conviction that a global order based on its values and principles was defunct. With Transatlantic relations at their lowest point since the Suez crisis of 1956 and the concept of a united Europe 'whole and free' ever more tenuous, the way appeared open to more congenial visions of global order.

## **The Concert of Great Powers**

Moscow sets great store by a 'multipolar order' or 'polycentric system of international relations'. With the end of US 'hegemonism', power has become more diffuse and is now distributed among several centres of regional and global power. Any viable vision of global order must therefore reflect these realities.

The Kremlin's emphasis on great power-centred governance has its origins in the 19th century Concert of Europe. The composition of a modern 'Concert' would obviously differ from that of 200 years ago, but the underlying principles would remain the same. State-actors, the major powers above all, would be the building blocks of the international system. Global order would function on the basis of a natural equilibrium – the balance of power – between them. They would pursue their national interests but remain mindful of the sensitivities of their peers, and they would not impinge on each other's sovereignty.

Multilateral organizations and agreements would have a place in this imagined world, but it would be tightly circumscribed. They would supply a legitimating framework to support the authority of the major powers. In Moscow's vision of global order, there is no room for the application of universal values or for supranational institutions to exercise independent influence. The distinction between power-based and rules-based governance

would be moot. Power and those who exercise it determine the rules. Smaller states are rule-takers. Everything else is decoration.

Over the past two decades, Putin has flirted with various models of great power-centred order. Besides the Concert, he has expressed considerable admiration for the achievements of Yalta, which was a tripolar (or two-and-a-half polar) strategic accommodation between the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The ‘membership’ criterion of a notional Yalta 2.0 would be stringent: the capacity to pursue a fully sovereign foreign and defence policy, a standard met only by the United States, China, and Russia – the ‘Big Three’ of our time.

Of course, a Yalta 2.0 is a non-starter. The rapid deterioration of US-China relations during Trump’s presidency has made the prospect of bipolar confrontation much more likely than a trilateral accommodation. While Joe Biden’s election as American president may ease US-China tensions, his view of Russia as a threat to international order makes a Yalta-type grand bargain highly improbable.

Putin’s G-5 proposal is just the latest version of the Concert model. It looks to turn the clock back – not to Yalta 1945, but to the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco later that year. Global order would centre on the Big Five as they were then – including the United Kingdom and France, but not Japan, Germany, or India. It effectively ignores power shifts in the last seven decades, and instead invests the five Permanent Members of the Security Council (P-5) with a timeless legitimacy.

## **The Use and Abuse of Multilateralism**

A great power-centred view of global order does not sit well with Putin’s public commitment to the ‘democratization’ of international relations, based on the ‘equality of sovereign states.’ It is also inconsistent with sentiments he voiced at UNGA 75: ‘the UN should not grow stiff, but evolve in accordance with the dynamics of the 21st century and ... the modern world that is becoming more complicated, multipolar and multidimensional.’

The Kremlin has attempted to square the circle by raising Russia’s multilateralist profile. In the first instance, this means emphasizing the formal primacy of the United Nations in global decision-making. It also involves upping the level and quality of Russian participation in multilateral bodies across the board. In November 2018, Putin attended the East Asia Summit

(EAS) for the first time. He has become more active within the G-20 framework. And in January 2021 he participated at the Davos Forum after more than a decade away. Such activism aims to communicate the message that Russia is a good international citizen – an increasingly important consideration given the deterioration of Moscow's relations with the West.

Nevertheless, Russia remains a reluctant multilateralist. Its refusal to entertain meaningful reform of the UN Security Council testifies to a belief that the circle of real decision-makers should be kept as exclusive as possible. This is not just a matter of practicalities, but also of symbolism. Putin has set himself firmly against any moves to weaken or qualify the power of the veto, or even to extend it to others. For it is precisely this privilege along with strategic (nuclear) parity with the United States that the Kremlin sees as placing Russia at the top table of global decision-making. (Conversely, it matters relatively little that Russia's share of global GDP is a measly 2–3 per cent.) For Moscow, the appearance of power is as important as its substance; in fact, the first frequently makes the second.

While Moscow pays lip-service to the importance of multilateral cooperation and its institutions, it regards these as an addition to, and not a substitute for, the primacy of the great powers. The distinction between form and substance is likewise evident in post-Soviet regional structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). These bodies exemplify Moscow's 'pseudo-multilateralism' – they are nominally multilateral, but in practice Russia-dominated and driven. They advertise a post-imperial Russia, committed to developing cooperation with its former subject republics on a qualitatively different basis. But in fact they are intended to perpetuate its strategic primacy in the post-Soviet space – this time through indirect control rather than direct rule.

## **The Exceptionalist Gene**

For the Kremlin, the modalities of global order are secondary to the overriding goal of maximizing Russia's international status and influence. Thus, Moscow seeks to maintain the UN Security Council in its existing form because it is a reliable mechanism for achieving this very purpose. Reform, on the other hand, would introduce a major element of uncertainty and even jeopardy.



The ceaseless quest to advance Russia's international position is not motivated by self-interest alone, but also by messianic zeal and a sense of history. As the journalist Konstantin von Eggert once quipped, 'all peoples think they are unique, but Russians think they are more unique than the others.' The exceptionalist gene rides strongly in the character of Russia's rulers, not least Putin. It manifests itself in various ways, above all in the conviction that Russia is a timeless great power. This self-appointed status transcends the swings of success and failure. One of the (many) mistakes of Western policymakers in the 1990s was to think that Russia's economic and geopolitical misfortunes would lead it to rethink its destiny and to become a 'normal' country like others. Instead, they discovered that 'normal' and 'great power' are synonymous in Russian political consciousness – in bad times as well as good.

Russian exceptionalism has been stoked further by the spectacle of rampant American exceptionalism. From the 2003 Iraq invasion to the excesses of Donald Trump, the United States has appeared to operate on the basis that, in a rules-based international order, rules are for other countries to follow. Ironically, Russia agrees with the unspoken premise that those who can, make and break the rules. While it has condemned Washington's 'unilateralist' behaviour, it has also been quick to grasp the upside; American exceptionalism makes it easier for other major powers to justify their own actions. To employ a crude analogy, for every Kosovo there is a Crimea, for every Iraq a South Ossetia. In the world of great powers, exceptionalism for one means exceptionalism for all.

Russia's self-perception as a great power brings with it the belief that it possesses certain 'natural' rights and privileges. The most important is the right of sovereignty, defined principally by the rule that other states and multinational institutions cannot interfere in Russia's domestic affairs. Another important 'right' is that of a sphere of influence or interests. Just as the United States dominates the Americas and China much of East Asia, so Russia claims a legitimate *droit de regard* over the post-Soviet space. This does not mean a right of conquest or occupation, but that its interests and sensitivities deserve special 'respect' from other parties. A third aspect of Moscow's sense of entitlement is the belief that Russia, as a great power, has a reasonable right of involvement in any issue or region around the globe. It may not always follow through on this, but that is its decision to make and not anyone else's.

## Russia in the New World Disorder

It follows from such feelings of exceptionalism and entitlement that Putin and the political elite see Russia as an independent centre of global power. At various times, it might lean toward Europe, the United States, or China. But at no stage does it commit itself irrevocably to one side, for to do so is to sacrifice its own autonomy. In recent times, there has been much speculation about an emerging Sino-Russian alliance, encouraged from time to time by Putin himself. Yet this is not a realistic prospect. Although the Kremlin has relished playing on the insecurities of Western leaders such as Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, it knows that such an alliance – in the unlikely event Beijing were interested – would constrain its freedom of manoeuvre, especially as the Sino-Russian relationship becomes ever more unequal.

True independence is predicated on strategic flexibility and breadth of choice. So, while Putin prizes the Sino-Russian partnership, he has increasingly diversified Russia's relations across Asia, reached out to Europe, and cultivated a personal rapport with Trump. He has also been careful not to hitch Russia to Beijing's agenda or take on burdensome security commitments. For example, he has adopted a neutral position on the question of Chinese participation in future multilateral arms negotiations and sought to keep Russia out of escalating US-China tensions in the western Pacific.

In an ideal world, Russia might aspire to play the role of balancing or 'swing' power between the United States and China. But in the current disaggregated environment – what might be described as a new world disorder – this is fantasy. Maintaining foreign policy independence, however, is feasible. A post-hegemonic system, where there is no clear leader or unifying ('universal') set of norms, enables Russia to promote its interests and 'play the field'.

Indeed, Moscow is arguably the chief beneficiary of today's new world disorder, with its ambiguities, power vacuums ('blank spots'), and blurring of boundaries. For such circumstances tend to have an equalizing effect, helping to mask Russia's relative weakness in key areas – economic development, technological advancement, political institutions, social infrastructure, and soft power. In a more ordered and predictable environment, the vast superiority of the United States and China in most dimensions of power would be clearer. However, in a world of volatility and confusion as exemplified by the chaotic international response to the coronavirus pandemic, Russia can feed off the failures and shortcomings of others.

## The Future – Stretching the Possibilities

The question is whether this essentially parasitic approach to international engagement is sustainable. Russia has benefited until now from the disruption of the Transatlantic alliance, catastrophic US decision-making, and America's plummeting reputation. Equally, it has been fortunate that Xi Jinping has badly mismanaged the international politics of China's rise – to such a degree that Beijing, not Moscow, is now regarded in many capitals as *the* existential threat to global order.

That may be about to change. Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election heralds a new era of US internationalism, but also one tempered by greater self-awareness and inclusiveness. Transatlantic relations will get a shot in the arm while America's alliances in Asia will likewise be boosted. The election of Biden also improves the chances of US-Chinese cooperation in certain areas, such as combating climate change, even as their strategic rivalry endures.

In these revised circumstances, simply not being the United States or China will hardly be enough if Russia is to avoid becoming marginalized. Moscow will have to raise its game instead of relying on the ineptitude of others. It will need to demonstrate an ability to pursue a constructive internationalist agenda of its own and not just to obstruct, spoil, or destroy the ambitions of its competitors and enemies. It will come under growing pressure to give substance to its rhetoric about multilateral governance and the 'democratization' of international relations.

All this will be immensely challenging, both in terms of developing concrete policies and altering the basic mind-set of Russian decision-making. Is Moscow up to the challenge? How and where can it make a positive difference? Will it be able to ensure that Russia remains an important player in a dynamically evolving international context?

The temptation for the Kremlin is to keep to what it has been doing: maintain strategic and tactical flexibility; portray Russia as a committed multilateralist and good international citizen; and talk up its traditional strengths as a member of the UN P-5, a nuclear superpower, and a leading energy exporter. However, such a response not only represents a failure of imagination; it will scarcely be viable beyond the short to medium term.

If Russia is to be a real player in a world increasingly shaped not by the usual great power 'virtues' but by advanced technologies, climatic shocks,

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and the information revolution, it will need to adapt accordingly. For the new global order is one that will require not just new skills but also fresh modes of thinking. The great powers will play key roles in this world. But the meaning of 'greatness' itself will be fundamentally transformed.

# Perceptions of Russia's Pivot to Asia

Dr. Fraser CAMERON

## Abstract

Military adventurism in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 were the two critical junctures for the Russian Federation in its relationship with NATO and the European Union. The Kremlin made its message crystal clear: stay away from the near abroad, as it is perceived as Russia's sphere of influence. As relations have continued to deteriorate, Russian pundits have sought new and different partnerships across wider Eurasia. Despite Russia's role as a strategic partner and a major military power, not all partnerships especially in Eurasia are straightforward. Contraposed against Moscow's interests in such partnerships, this article investigates the prospects for cooperation with China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, India, and South East Asia. In conclusion, this article delivers a succinct overview on how Putin and Russia is perceived in different parts in Eurasia.

Key words: Russia foreign policy, China, Japan, Korean peninsula, South East Asia

## Introduction

As Russia's relations with the West soured over its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, President Putin started a slow but steady pivot towards Asia. This resulted in a significant deepening of the strategic partnership with China and an increase in trade, albeit from a low base, with China and other Asian partners, notably in the fields of energy and arms sales. But Russia has made little progress in strengthening its political ties in the Asia-Pacific region despite its membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and its partnership with ASEAN. In Central Asia, it has adopted a defensive posture seeking to limit China's influence while participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Initiative (SCO). It has also had scant success in attracting new Asian partners for the Eurasian Economic Union.

Overall, Asian countries have been sceptical about the Russian pivot, mainly because they view Russia as too closely tied to China. Most are

doubtful of the added value of closer links. They are also aware that the United States is opposed to increased Russian influence in the Asia-Pacific and have no wish to upset Washington.

Although over 70 percent of Russian territory is in Asia, its leaders, whether during the Czarist period, under Soviet rule, or today, have never considered the country predominantly Asian (most Russians live in the West of the country) Throughout history, Russia has looked down on Asian cultures, a feeling that has been reciprocated on the Asian side. Despite sanctions, more than 50 percent of Russian exports (overwhelmingly oil and gas) still go to Europe. Moscow has traditionally looked West for political, economic, and military influence. To the East (and South), it has largely adopted a defensive posture seeking to ensure that its lengthy borders were not threatened by a potential adversary. Less than 10 percent of the population live in Siberia and the Russian Far East where the infrastructure and communications lag way behind that in European Russia.

The 1905 naval defeat by Japan, its limited involvement in Asia during the Second World War, and the disastrous Soviet involvement in Afghanistan from 1979 onwards did little for Russia's image in Asia. For most Asians, Russia rarely impinges on their lives. It is not regarded as an attractive place to do business, nor a centre of innovation, nor a tourist destination, nor a country to send their children for education. Few Asians learn Russian or take an interest in Russian culture. As elsewhere, Russian soft power comes up short.

## **Moscow's Motives**

Western sanctions against Russia following the occupation of Crimea was the major reason for the Russian pivot to Asia, although Putin had started his wooing of China years before. Moscow noted that nearly all Asian countries refused to go along with the US-led sanctions on Russia and hoped that increasing trade and securing finance and technology from Asia would mitigate the impact of the sanctions.

Russia also aimed to be an actor in the Asia-Pacific arena, to be closer to the strategic competition between the US and China and if possible, seek advantage. Although rarely discussed in public, there was also the assessment that, in the longer-term, China was likely to pose a significant threat to Russia. It was not forgotten in Moscow that the two countries had fought

a war over disputed territory just 50 years ago. Many Russians are also worried at the growing Chinese presence, legal and illegal, in the Russian Far East. For these reasons, a closer relationship with the world's second biggest economy with many shared political interests was thus very much in Russia's national interest.

Knowing the country's willingness to use armed force, Asians may have paid more attention to Russia if it had increased its forces in the Asia-Pacific region. However, growth in military capabilities in the past decade has been modest and its forces are no match for those of the United States (or indeed China) in the Asia-Pacific.

## China

Russia's engagement with China has been aptly described as 'an alliance of convenience.' Both share an antipathy to what they call American hegemony and liberal interventionism. They have taken common positions on several foreign policy issues, ranging from Iran and Syria to North Korea and Venezuela. China has become Russia's main trade partner and there are increasing joint military exercises, including in North East Asia, which are viewed as a threat by Japan. Moscow and Beijing seem to have reached a modus vivendi in Central Asia and the Arctic. The two partners meet in the BRICS, the SCO, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the EAS, and other fora as well pursuing an active bilateral visits programme.

There is little doubt, however, who is the senior partner. China's economy is more than eight times the size of Russia's, and the gap is likely to widen further in coming years. This must be galling to the Russian elite who now must accept, for the first time in modern history, the primacy of China.

The relationship with China is viewed as a personal triumph for President Putin and as he (and Xi) are likely to be in their current positions for many years, it is unlikely that they will allow relations to deteriorate. Putin and Xi have met more times than any other two major world leaders but this level of interaction has not led to any significant increase in people to people contacts. Transport links are limited and Russians and Chinese still prefer to send their children to be educated in the West rather than in each other's countries.

China views Russia through different prisms. Above it all, it remains aghast that the Communist Party allowed the Soviet Union to disintegrate.

There is a small industry in Chinese think tanks that continue to analyse the reasons for the failure of the Soviet Union to maintain control of the country. Such a failure is the worst nightmare scenario for the CCP. The lessons learned by President Xi and the CCP are the importance of party vigilance and discipline. Western liberal thoughts are to be countered and eradicated. The Chinese can travel, start a business, and make money – but they cannot challenge the authority of the Party.

President Xi respects the efforts and partial success that Putin has had in restoring Russian prestige and influence. Nonetheless, China does not want Russia to play a bigger role in Asia unless it keeps to the Beijing line, whether on the South China Sea, Taiwan, or the Korean Peninsula.

For Russia, China is now the leading trade partner, but for China, Russia lags in 14th place – behind even Thailand and Malaysia. There is significant cross-border trade in Siberia but elsewhere little Chinese investment. In 2018, Chinese FDI was a mere \$1 billion. As one Chinese official remarked to this author, 'Russia is not a major player in global finance, trade or technology.'

China has been ready to buy more Russian oil and gas, albeit on favourable terms, and is a selective purchaser of Russian arms. Chinese firms have also increased their penetration of the Russian market in high tech, (including 5G), shipping, and even oil technology.

In terms of popular views of Russia, there is little coverage of Russia in the media. There are almost no Russian films or plays in theatres, and few people study Russian. Academics and intellectuals do not look to Moscow for ideas.

Most Chinese were also annoyed that Russia chose to close the border with China at the end of January 2020 due to fears about the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Chinese social media had many comments about racial stereotypes as travellers from Europe were not stopped entering Russia until the end of March. Politics and economics are likely to trump social concerns and if, as likely, China emerges stronger from the pandemic, it could lead to a further boost in trade relations.

## Japan

Japan's views on Russia remain coloured by the Soviet occupation of the Kuril Islands in the final days of the Second World War. Japan also must set



its relations with Russia against the background of its vital security alliance with the United States and its efforts to contain the rise of China.

With the departure of Prime Minister Abe, Russia has probably lost a golden opportunity to improve relations with Japan. Abe visited Russia more than a dozen times during the past eight years, put forward plans for closer economic ties, agreed to only limited sanctions after the occupation of Crimea, and displayed considerable flexibility in seeking an agreement over the occupied territories. Despite his relentless optimism, Abe was constantly rebuffed by Putin, and it is likely that his successor, Suga Yoshihide, will not pursue ties with Russia with the same eagerness.

Most Japanese analysts view Russia as little more than China's junior security partner in Asia. Bilateral trade has not exceeded \$30 billion annually, and in 2018, it was only about \$20 billion. As in the rest of Asia, there is little popular enthusiasm for Russian language or culture.

## **The Korean Peninsula**

Russia is viewed with suspicion in South and North Korea. South Korea had hopes that Russia might be a moderating influence on the nuclear ambitions of the DPRK. However, Seoul recognised that if China failed to stop the DPRK from developing a nuclear capacity, there was little Russia could do to prevent such a development.

Russia's relations with the DPRK remain limited. The DPRK leadership shares China's horror at the way the CCCP collapsed. Under Putin, Moscow has done little to boost trade or investment with the DPRK. There have been spats over illegal fishing and Moscow even expelled North Korean workers following a UNSC resolution.

Moscow played no part in the Trump-Kim talks on denuclearization. South Korean analysts assess that Russia, like China, prefers the current status quo to unification, which would likely be achieved on South Korean terms and lead to an increase in US influence in the region.

South Korea has attempted to develop its economic links with Russia, including cooperating in energy and infrastructure projects in Siberia. Nonetheless, this 'New Northern Policy' has made little progress with most Korean companies reluctant to engage in what one businessman described as the 'Wild West of Siberia.' The two sides have agreed to explore a possible FTA. Trade between the two sides has increased to a modest \$25 billion in 2018.

Throughout the Korean Peninsula, there is little interest in Russian culture.

## India

Russia is viewed slightly more positively in India, which is the largest market for Russian arms exports and a significant customer of civilian nuclear reactors and technology. There are also no bilateral difficulties. New Delhi, like Moscow, opposes Western liberal interventionism, supports the idea of a multipolar world, and has criticised the imposition of sanctions against Russia. Moscow helped India join the SCO and partners with New Delhi within the BRICS.

India also recognises that it is unlikely to receive support from Russia in its intermittent border conflict with China. Russia has also developed closer ties to Pakistan, India's number one adversary. India, meanwhile, has joined forces with the United States (and Japan and Australia) in efforts to counter China in the western Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Apart from arms sales and some limited energy projects, trade between India and Russia is stagnant. As elsewhere in Asia, there is little appetite for Russian culture.

## South East Asia

Leaders in South East Asia are also sceptical about the Russian pivot despite Putin hosting a meeting of ASEAN leaders in 2016 to boost relations with the 600m population bloc. Both sides agreed on the goal of building a strategic partnership and an action plan to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and crime as well as expanding trade and investment. Although there has been an expansion of arms sales and some limited energy cooperation with individual members of ASEAN (mainly Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar), both sides have been disappointed with the overall results.

Despite its desire to join organisations such as the EAS and partner with ASEAN, Asian diplomats note that South East Asia is not a priority for Russian foreign policy. South East Asia tends to take a backseat not only to China, but also to Japan, the Korean peninsula, and India and Pakistan. Nor – according to officials in the ASEAN secretariat – is Russia helpful in boosting the standing of ASEAN as a regional security provider and pillar

of the existing multilateral system. They accept that Russia is not going to side with ASEAN countries in their territorial disputes with China or to join them and the United States to contain the expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

And despite the rhetoric about a strategic partnership, Russia prefers to pursue its interests in the region through bilateral ties. Like the US, and to some extent the EU, it acknowledges that ASEAN is primarily a talk shop incapable of taking decisive action due to divisions among its members.

Trade remains low amounting to a mere \$19.2 billion in 2018. Vietnam is Moscow's main trading partner in the region but trade with Russia is less than 5% of Vietnam's trade with China. Russian FDI in ASEAN countries is less than \$10 billion, while the latter's FDI in Russia is less than \$5 billion. Several South East Asia countries, with bigger defence budgets, have bought substantial arms purchases from Russia, which tends not to ask intrusive questions about human rights.

Russia has considered joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), but no agreement has been reached. It only has two bilateral FTAs, with Vietnam and Singapore.

## Conclusion

Neither Russia nor Putin have a strong reputation in Asia. In a 2017 Pew survey of views on Russia, only 41 percent of those polled in six Asian countries had a favourable view of Russia. Only around a quarter in Japan (25 percent) see Russia in a positive light while 49 percent in India have a favourable opinion.

Most Asian countries have remained sceptical about Russia's pivot to Asia largely because there has been little substance behind it and Russia has focused almost exclusively on China. This is widely recognised throughout the region and makes it difficult for Russia to deepen its relations with other Asian powers. Russia's overall trade with Europe has remained considerably greater than that with Asia – and there is more interest in Russian culture and language in Europe than in Asia. If Russia is perceived to be hanging on to the coattails of China, it is doubtful that views of Russia in Asia will change.

# How the Empire Struck Back: Russia's Long Quest for a Post-Soviet Soul

Konstantin VON EGGERT, MBE

## Abstract

At times, the Russian Federation remains a hostage of its past. Soviet Russia might have stripped the empire of its name, but it maintained and fostered its rather expansionist and exceptionalist gene. As such, the Soviet Union subjugated multiple states to the its east and launched an ideological contest played out through more than five decades until its collapse. At the collapse, even if multiple newly independent states were coping with similar challenges and reborn Russia, some aspects remained different. As the genealogical descendent of the Soviet Union, the extended time Russians spent under communism became a key part of historical memory. There was yet the attraction of imperial grandeur. The West presented the end of the Cold War as a mutually beneficial outcome, but for many Russians, it represented a humiliation through the loss of imperial greatness, dominance, and territories. This paper will explain how Russia copes with these past challenges under Putin and what is probable in the future.

Key words: Russia, communism, great power, ideology, Putin, Navalny

On 22 August 1991, I came back home in the evening after a hectic and exciting day at my newspaper office. The hard-line Communist coup had just collapsed, Boris Yeltsin was in full control in Moscow, and sensational news was breaking nearly every minute. There was joy in the air after what seemed to be a decisive victory of the democratic forces in Russia.

I found my 67-year old mother sitting in front of the TV, which was showing what immediately became an iconic moment of that historic August. In front of the KGB headquarters on the Lubyanskaya Square, the crowd was pulling down a statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the dreaded head of Lenin's Cheka, the Soviets' first but by no means last secret police organisation. When they finally managed to hook Dzerzhinsky's bronze figure with a crane and lifted it off the pedestal, tears appeared in my mother's eyes. I asked her, 'Why are you crying? This is such a happy moment!' She replied,

‘Because I realised that in all my life I only had two truly happy days – one when you were born and today!’

I immediately understood my mother. She could never forget how the NKVD arrested my grandfather in front of her when she was thirteen years old and how he returned from the GULAG ten years later, a broken and aged man with missing teeth and sheepish smile, how other relatives ‘disappeared’ never to be heard from again, how they ‘confiscated’ the family belongings, and how she never got a place in the university – being the daughter of ‘enemy of the people’. That day we thought everyone in Russia felt as we did – relieved, elated, and looking forward towards a brighter future. The following 29 years showed, we were wrong – and in the clear minority among Russians. It was never as clear as today with Vladimir Putin having ruled the country for twenty-one years already – and counting.

There are many reasons why Russia’s post-Communist experience was so disappointing and led to Putin’s authoritarian rule. Some point to the reluctance of President Boris Yeltsin in dismantling the Soviet-era bureaucracy, including the KGB. Others suggest it was the hasty and corrupt privatisation scheme of the 1990s that was designed to introduce capitalism but instead robbed tens of millions of their jobs, created an oligarchy, and laid the foundations of the ugly modern day Russian state capitalism.

All of this is true. However, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States also had residues of Communist bureaucracy. Some of the apparatchiks there became heads of state or government, such as Poland’s Alexander Kwasniewski, who brought his country into NATO and the EU, being one of the most memorable examples. They implemented privatisation schemes with different degrees of success, fairness, and resulting hardship for the population. However, none of them ended up where Russia did.

To me, three factors made the key difference between Russia and its former satellites: time spent under the Communist rule, the lure of the Soviet imperial grandeur, and the West’s decision to present the end of the ‘Cold War’ as a ‘win-win’ outcome.

When I went on vacation as a child with my family and later as a young adult to what used to be then ‘the Soviet Baltic Republics’, it did not take long to discover that many local families we met held vivid memories of life before the Communist occupation – as well as painful and tragic ones of deportations and executions that followed Stalin’s invasion in 1940 and re-occupation in 1944. I remember once opening a cupboard in an Estonian

flat, which the family rented out, discovering a photographic portrait of the interwar President Konstantin Päts carefully attached to the back of the cupboard so that only the owners could look at it.

By the time Lithuania became the first Soviet Republic to proclaim the restoration of its independence in March 1990, there was still a significant number of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians who, although advanced in years, remembered life in the sovereign Baltic States. The same goes for Poland, Romania, or any other country of occupied Central Europe. That pre-Communist life may have been not prosperous or that the regimes in many of those states were authoritarian (mostly mildly) had become nearly irrelevant in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The living memories of grandmothers and grandfathers carried an important message – another life is not only desirable but is also practically possible. In Russia, hardly any family had any members alive that could have described what life was before the 1917 Bolshevik takeover. The only memories that citizens of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic had were those of existence under the Soviet regime in its various iterations of cruelty. Private property, religious practices, and even normal social courtesies were nearly erased from the national consciousness after 74 years of Communism, a quarter of a century longer than in Central Europe and the Baltics.

The imperial hubris is a second factor that was – and still is – psychologically important to Russians. Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, and Hungarians were shedding foreign occupation for the sake of their newly reconstituted nation states. The Russian people had nothing but the empire to fall back to in historical retrospectives stretching back for nearly 400 years. It was the Romanovs and then the Communists who provided Russians with an emotionally exhilarating combination of lordship over the others and military might. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, most Russians in Russia proper were interested in shedding the Communist political and economic shackles and embracing the glamorised consumer culture of the West. Nonetheless, they were not ready for the collapse of a state which, as professor Geoffrey Hosking sharply observed, the Russians came to consider as ‘theirs’ by right.<sup>1</sup>

In the understandable elation following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the nearly bloodless collapse of the USSR in 1991, the United States and their European allies failed to see historical differences that set Russia apart

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

from her Central European neighbours. The West promoted the narrative that the end of the Cold War was actually a victory for everyone, which was manifestly untrue – at least not in the short historical term. The Western side won, and the Soviet side lost in the conflict that consumed the world for the more than 40 years after the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, no one dared to say this at the time for the sake of keeping the tenuously shaky process of reforming Russia going. In hindsight, I think an honest admission of defeat may have served Russia better – as a reality check, a chance for contrition, and an invitation to a different future. Instead, the new leadership under Boris Yeltsin and its Western supporters maintained an illusion of a quick and painless transition to a democratic and prosperous future. They can hardly be blamed though. The danger of an anti-democratic revanchism seemed real in the 1990s. It looked too many as if Russia needed just a few years of hard transformation and democratic stewardship before it became an oversized version of the Czech Republic.

These dreams were quickly shattered by the reality of economic hardship, the collapse of what remained of Soviet industry and welfare, and a sudden burden of personal responsibility that fell on the Russians shoulders after decades of reliance on the state. In addition, they now had to treat the former imperial ‘subjects’ as respected citizens of new independent nations.

30–40 years previously, the British and the French could sail away from India or Senegal and try to forget that they ever ruled them. This choice was not available to the Russians. Their empire was a huge land mass and all former ‘dependencies’ were as visible as before – but with newly found zeal for independence and frequently, grudges to be revealed and past scores to be settled with the former metropolises.

Russia’s imperial pushback did not happen immediately. In the 1990s, most Russians were preoccupied with survival in the new circumstances of wild capitalism and chaotic democracy. Things started to improve with the oil boom of 1999–2008. It was then, with salaries paid on time, new cars, TV sets bought, and new petrodollar-created jobs emerging on the market daily that Russians noted – ‘their’ empire was no more. They wanted again to feel mighty and feared by the world as it was in Soviet days. This was a delayed but not illogical reaction to the swift disappearance of the Soviet Union. The US-based emigre Russian historian Alexander Yanov was probably the first who predicted that this would happen in his 1993 article, later developed into a book called ‘After Yeltsin. Weimar Russia’. British journalist Bruce Clark followed it shortly with the book ‘An Empire’s New Clothes: the End

of Russia's Liberal Dream.<sup>2</sup> At the time, many, including this writer, derided both professor Yanov and Mr Clark as 'alarmists'. They were prescient where academics as well as most think-tankers, politicians, and I were wrong.

Vladimir Putin came to symbolise the 'revanchist' or 'post-Weimar' Russia long before he invaded Georgia or grabbed the Crimea. Early on, his public persona caught the imagination of Russians because he looked and sounded ordinary – a post-Soviet (or rather former Soviet) man of a certain age, social habits, and prejudices. A vast majority of Russians saw him as a healthy and fit version of Ivan Petrovich, the dacha neighbour. They were glad to entrust the burden of taking big decisions to the man in the Kremlin in exchange of making them 'great again'. This is still Putin's main source of authority, if not legitimacy, and this is how he succeeded in making his administration a real government of Russia, suppressing independent media and turning state-owned enterprises like Gazprom, Rosneft or Rostech into sources of immense personal wealth for his 'in-crowd' of former KGB operatives and their families. 'The Putin majority' continued to follow him even after the oil-fuelled prosperity of the early 2000s disappeared in the tumult of the 2008 world economic crisis. It forgave Putin his muzzling and even killing of political opponents, rampant corruption on all levels of government, and rigged elections. Today this majority shrunk – maybe even significantly – but it is still sizable.

Putin uses 'great power' rhetoric to not only control and shape public opinion. His goal is much more ambitious – to give Russians a new identity. In this respect, even the high point of Putin's domestic 'glory' – the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – takes second place to his systematic attempts to rewrite the country's history so that his regime outlives him. He can laud the KGB chief Yuri Andropov one day and open a monument to the victims of Stalinist terror on the next. Many in Russia and in the West see it as a contradiction.

It is not a contradiction, however, if one looks for answers not in official pronouncements but in the output of the Kremlin's sprawling propaganda factory. It includes all major TV networks, film production (largely financed by the state), publishing projects, and – increasingly – social media. A popular 2018 mini-series called 'The Demon of Revolution' serves as a good example. Filmed by one of Russia's most popular directors, Vladimir Khotinenko, it tells the story of the 1917 Russian revolution as part of a

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Clark, *An Empire's New Clothes: The End of Russia's Liberal Dream* (London: Vintage, 1995).



Western plot to dismantle Russia. Weirdly enough, both Emperor Nicholas II and Vladimir Lenin come across as sympathetic, each in his own way a patriot of 'his' Russia. The foreigners, be it the Germans or the Entente allies, are invariably sinister, cynical, and cunning. Their Russian friends from the short-lived liberal bourgeois Provisional Government look naive, silly, and weak. Blasted by historians as an 'ahistorical fairy tale', the series boasts a strong, even charismatic performance by Russia's leading stars to drive home important points: the West is Russia's eternal enemy ready to betray it; any authority is legitimate as long as it is strong while weakness is the main crime in politics; all talk of democracy and liberty is nothing but a cynical cover for naked interests; true Russian patriotism means accepting and obeying a strong political leadership, no matter of which political persuasion as long as this leadership keeps the country strong, whole and out of reach of the perfidious West. Countless other propaganda projects across the media spectrum relentlessly recycle these three points. For those who disagree with such a vision of the country's past, present and future the Kremlin keeps the borders open. Many left, especially in the last ten years. A mix of co-optation, cynicism, and resignation is dominant among those who remained.

This political narrative of the new '*velikoderzhavnost*' – 'great powerism' – to some extent affected even the Russian opposition. Most of its leaders until recently tried to avoid or at least not go too deep into the critique of Putin's foreign policy. They prefer to concentrate on systemic corruption, falling standards of living, and a housing crisis – anything but the war with Ukraine, reckless provocations against NATO, Russia's isolation, and its abysmal relations with the United States and the European Union. Being too friendly to the West was perceived as a political handicap. Asked in 2014 about his attitude to the annexation of Crimea, Alexey Navalny famously said that the peninsula 'is not a sandwich to be passed around' – meaning 'what's done is done'. In what seems like a genuine change of attitude in 2015 in an interview with a Moscow radio station, he condemned Vladimir Putin as a 'war criminal'. The interview has been heavily edited.<sup>3</sup> I remember this moment crisply; I was the one who conducted the interview and was fired because of a phrase that Navalny said live on air. The owner of the station – one of Russia's richest men – was afraid the Kremlin would punish or humiliate him. By making me redundant, he showed his loyalty to the

<sup>3</sup> "«Партия Прогресса Имеет Право На Участие в Выборах»,» Коммерсантъ, 2015, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2804109>.

authorities and earned political absolution, which in Putin's Russia is always provisional. Therefore, in some sense, the empire managed to strike back at me – although luckily it was nothing compared to what my relatives had to endure under Stalin.

Will this tragic arc of Russian history change? Maybe. Putin has been around for twenty years. In an age of social media, fast technological change, and globalised entertainment, the Russian regime looks increasingly obsolete. More and more people, especially in the big cities, are getting bored with Putin's image, his repetitive pronouncements, and artificial machismo. Recent findings by a group of researchers headed by economist Mikhail Dmitriev and psychologist Anastasia Nikolskaya seem to prove it.<sup>4</sup> Their ongoing project analyses long-term trends in the Russian society over many years. In early 2010, Dmitriev and his colleagues were the only ones who predicted a wave of anti-Putin protests in Moscow in the winter-spring of 2011–2012, provoked by the rigged State Duma elections. The group's recent findings show popular mistrust of central authorities rising and citizens' desire to self-organize growing, even in the poorer regions that are more dependent on the authorities' handouts than Moscow or Saint Petersburg. There is also a visible shift in public focus from purely local problems (corrupt mayors, rapacious development, social welfare inadequacy) towards bigger national issues like the future of federalism (which Putin all but liquidated) and deficiencies of Russia's political system. Russians are growing weary of the omni-powerful executive presidency and want the Duma to play a bigger role.

The group's conclusion most unpleasant for Mr. Putin is that people are also tiring of the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy. "More and more Russians want peace and normal relations with the outside world, including the West," Mr. Dmitriev told me. "As far as I am concerned the so-called 'Crimean consensus' is over," he said, referring to the waving of nearly universal adulation of the regime that swept the country after Crimea was annexed.

The main question is 'What will eventually replace this regime?' Ten or fifteen years ago, it was fashionable to cite Germany as a successful example of a nation coming to terms with its past and becoming peaceful and 'normal'. Although few doubt the overall success of Germany's

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<sup>4</sup> "«На вопрос об отношении к власти люди все чаще отвечают матом». Эксперт Михаил Дмитриев об изменении общественных настроений," *The Insider*, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://theins.ru/opinions/the-insider/223648>.

transformation, it can hardly serve a model for Russia. Firstly, the Germans were defeated militarily; their country occupied and steered to denazification, demilitarisation, and democratisation by the victorious Western allies. Secondly, with all due reference to Germany's long romance with 'blood and soil' nationalism, the German Empire lasted only forty seven years, and the Nazi regime – a mere twelve, too short for a lasting overhaul of a national psychology, horrors of the two world wars and the Holocaust notwithstanding. Crucially, as opposed to the Communists, the Nazis did not eradicate private property or religion – two important mainstays of individual autonomy. Thirdly, Germany's '1968 generation' forced their parents to face and own the country's Nazi past only twenty years after the Third Reich collapsed, when the memories were still fresh and relevant.

All these conditions are lacking in Russia. For more and more young people, even the times of Gorbachev and Yeltsin are ancient history that they know little about. These youngsters lived all their life under Putin's regime. Its efforts to shape the new Russian identity with the old 20th century neo-Pagan worship of the 'strong state' also bore fruit.

I think the transition from an empire to a nation state will take a much longer time than it took the Germans to change themselves and their country. Apart from the evident necessity of cleaner governance and democratisation, this transition can eventually succeed on three conditions: resurrecting and developing Russian federalism and local self-government; adopting a Russian equivalent of the US First Amendment, guaranteeing unrestricted civil liberties; plus making just, honourable, and lasting peace with Ukraine. The first proposition will lead over time to people getting used to managing their own lives without Moscow's control. The second one will show that the government is not afraid of the people and of a long overdue frank and open debate about Russia's past, present, and future. The last point, in my view, is of paramount importance. To accept responsibility and correct an injustice committed against Ukrainians will have a transformative effect on the Russian society. It will be very difficult, especially if giving back Crimea and accepting Ukraine's desire to join NATO would be involved. Settlement with Georgia will have to follow suit and revive Russia's relations with the neighbours and the world at large. 'Self-respect' and 'trust' are the key words for this revival. Atomised and cynical today, Russians will have to learn to trust each other and their neighbours. This would eventually make them respect themselves instead of seeking respect by humiliating others. It will be hard for the people of a former empire who over the last four hundred

years lived through serfdom, revolutions, a civil war, two world wars, and the GULAG. Today's moral crisis perpetuated by the Putin regime is Russia's biggest problem, and in some ways, it is more profound and more important than modernising the economy or holding free elections. Only overcoming it will make me and my late mother's 1991 dreams of a new Russia come true.

# Putin's Chains

Sir Andrew Wood

## Abstract

The fact that Russia's President has been living and working from a "bunker" for most of 2020 is emblematic of a regime in a straitjacket and of its intention to keep Russia's people strapped into one too. The need to protect Vladimir Putin from COVID-19 is said to demand strict control over those hoping to see him face to face. The person however, who has shut Putin in both literally and figuratively is Putin, not a virus. The rest of us need to consider the possible consequences. This piece explores the reverberations of these consequences, providing insights as to the possibilities in Russia for 2024 and beyond.

Key words: Cold War, Putin, Russia, Spring 2012, Navalny, Russia's scenarios, 2024/2030

## Background to January 2020

There can be no quarrel with the proposal that the outside world should deal with Russia "as it really is." There are of course long running themes in Russian history, as there are in the history of other nations. Moreover, it is only common sense to try to deal with any country or international organisation as it really is, not as we might like it to be. But the catchphrase when used for Russia implies that there is a constant to which others must adapt by accepting the constraints arising from it, somewhat reminiscent of the fact that the United States, and other Western countries, had to take the Soviet Union and its interests as the leader of the Warsaw Pact into particular account during the Cold War. However, looking at the present day in patterns drawing on parallels with the Cold War is misleading. Today's Russia's belief in its equivalence – in justice – to the United States as a force in the world is as unrealistic as its effort to persuade itself that its history as the core of the Soviet Union is essentially honourable – with Berlin in 1945 the proof.

Transatlantic powers and international institutions have struggled to work effectively with Russia in efforts to mitigate periodic shocks through resets intended to promote mutual trust, which would include respect for the interests of the now separate ex-Soviet or ex-Warsaw Pact states in Europe. Putin's election as President in 2000 was welcomed by most of the countries of the West with the belief that he might well prove to be an effective moderniser for Russia and at least to some useful degree a welcome colleague in the international field. There were however tangible signs from the beginning of the Putin era that the mutual understanding essential to mutual trust was not on offer. The new President's guiding star was and remains securing centralised and personalised control of a Russia to be restored to what he and many Russians saw and see as its rightful position as a Great Power. Building a new Russia ruled by law under a government accountable to its people has not been party to this ambition. Restoring Moscow's right to dominate its "near abroad" has.

The Soviet roots of the assumptions behind the policies of both Putin and his colleagues, including their attachment to 'strategic resources' being subject to the interests of the state, were clear from the early years of their rule. It was also obvious that while the USSR had a recognisable, if inefficient, economic and political system, Russia had yet adequately to develop its own. A broad summary of the way that the Russian state has developed over the last two decades would record the evisceration of its constitutionally defined autonomous institutions and its translation into a personalised autocracy. Such things as a legal system, business structures, Parliament, a federal system, a degree of regional governance, and political parties have gone through the same process of decay while increasing sums have been devoted to Russia's security networks.

A second and parallel world has also grown into an essential element of the Russian state: a murky and deeply corrupted world with deniable but powerful structures within it pursuing their often-predatory interests while also acting as needed on government orders. The sacrifice of the institutions of government, the subordination of the interests of the Russian people to the variable and often contradictory instructions of those that wield the power of force, the confusion and abuse inherent in governance by "understandings" not law binding high and low alike, and the suffocation of public debate have robbed Russia of the essential means of arriving at a common vision of its future and of the instruments needed to build it.

Putin's return to the Kremlin in May 2012 was and remains a defining moment in deciding Russia's present condition. Dmitry Medvedev was never able to establish himself as President with the full power of that office, but Putin's insistence in September 2011 that Medvedev give way to him to run as President in 2012 provoked significant and widespread street protests, nullified the uncertain moves Medvedev and President Obama had made towards a less strained US-Russian relationship, and demolished what had seemed to be moves agreed with then presidential candidate Putin towards a fresh if modest approach to Russia's economic and by extension social development over the next eight years. Conditions after the 2008 global economic crisis, which shook Russia severely, together with the growing realisation that oil and gas alone were not going to secure Russia's future well enough, were stimulus for a rethink. However, Putin's decision on returning to the Kremlin in 2012 was instead to clamp down domestically, to build up the state's dominant role in directing the economy, and to press forward towards hegemony over Russia's neighbourhood, bolstered by greatly enhanced military might.

## January 2020

There is, it seems to me, a clear link between what happened in 2012, and the "constitutional amendments" crudely enforced between 15 January and 1 July this year – fear for the future. Whether he intended it or not, then President Medvedev had contributed while in office to a way of thinking increasingly shared with significant elements of wider official Russia, however tentatively, of a need for the country somehow to open up to new possibilities. Putin had little faith in Medvedev and a lively concern, fed by the scale of public unrest in the run up to the presidential election of spring 2012, as to what might be the political consequences of even limited economic or social reforms over the course of the next presidential term, from 2012 to 2018.

He shared the proposition with a substantial quota of his closest colleagues, and the security organs in particular, that vigilant control of Russia's citizens and their ideas was both needed and should be increased. That remained the case as Putin began his second consecutive term in the present cycle in 2018, then due to end with his replacement in 2024. The amendments to the Constitution put as a single item to a "popular vote" spun out

over the week up to 1 July 2020 were not about “modernisation” but, coupled with far reaching changes to voting rules and practices, designed to double down on the repressive system built up since President Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012.

Clearing the way for Putin to stay on as President after 2024 was a necessary corollary to that essential aim. There appeared to be no way for him to move to another position while retaining ultimate control over the government of Russia. He had not had a comfortable ride since 2018 and was losing popular trust but the 2024 question could not by 2020 be left open for too much longer without sapping his authority and that of others still then in charge. Such fears always concern autocratic regimes, but particularly so when as in Russia’s case no tried and tested means exist of transferring personalised rule from an entrenched leader to an agreed successor who might command the allegiance of the inner circle of power.

The Politburo, which chose the next Secretary General, has no equivalent in today’s Russia. The Russian Constitution speaks of contested elections but the officially accepted political parties that might in theory nominate presidential candidates lack credibility. The tandem option that worked in its way with Putin keeping Medvedev on a leash for an interim period would be hard to repeat this time, if only because Putin will be 71 by election time in 2024. To return after a six-year gap in 2030 would be impractical.

However, simply scrubbing the constitutional obligation for Putin to leave the Kremlin in 2024 has not put the succession issue into limbo; it has merely postponed it to an uncertain time. The system created under Putin has worked as it does with the public and its component operative parts because, like it or not, he is there, and seen as the necessary bulwark against the unknown. He protects the security organs for example in their corruption while they in return guard him and the system he oversees from the potential antagonism of the public at large. Protests as to individual concerns have become regular across the federation, not just in the big cities.

Furthermore, fear of what might happen if discontent now focused on specific grievances were to broaden into a more general and active demand for change has so far inhibited that possibility. Something with at least the appearance of a more clearly articulated system of government, including Putin, has had to be sought by the Kremlin; the constitutional changes imposed on Russia this year demanded it if they were to be given some sense of wider purpose and to provide cover for the envisaged interval between 2024 and Putin’s eventual departure. Putin himself pointed out in response



to the last minute adoption by the Duma on 10 March of the annulment of his 2024 duty then to leave office that “I am convinced that a time will come when the supreme power in Russia, that of the President, will no longer be personified and will no longer be associated with a specific person” (Putin of course).

## Frozen Anarchy?

There is a dismaying and ever narrowing circularity governing Russia’s evolution over the Putin era, as though building ever-tighter defences against the inherent threat of change is the state’s first and overwhelming duty. The inevitable irony of the work being undertaken to construct the appropriate legislative framework to put the amendments to the constitution into practice is to build up the role of the President at the cost of further side-lining the already enfeebled other elements of the Russian state, judicial, legislative, security or executive as the case may be.<sup>1</sup> The President in this case is however no abstract theoretical figure, but Putin – the guide to what the outcome will be and its first enabler. What he does or fails to do will therefore shape what his successor or successors will one day inherit, whoever they may be, and whatever form their relationship with the Russian Federation may take.

The underlying purpose of reshaping Russia’s governing structures is intended to convey the message of their improvement and clarification so as to ensure their effectiveness for the longer term. The President of the day would be able to step back from day-to-day governance while still retaining control. He (or in theory she) could structure decision-making between his subordinates on national priorities across branches of power and layers of the federation, the new united system of public power under the Great Presidency having suitably blurred or removed formal separations between different levels of the state.

It is difficult to imagine how such structures could possibly work as advertised, or even to be sure of what exactly they are supposed to mean beyond anointing the President with the power to do pretty much whatever he wants. Putin has his own practices and habits of mind but even he would require restraint and the confidence to allow his more important

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<sup>1</sup> See Nikolai Petrov, Ben Noble, Fabian Burkhardt, *Rebooting the State Council Increases Putin’s Power*, 28.10, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/10/rebooting-state-council-increases-putins-power>

subordinates to develop their own approaches if a practice of giving them responsibility over broad areas that could be removed at a moment's notice were made a long-term reality.

It would also need well-grounded confidence on Putin's part that domestic security would be sufficiently preserved. No eventual successor would have Putin's acquired authority over Russia as he took office. The powers being handed to Putin by means of the further corrosion of Russia's Basic Law read impressively enough in their way, but their passage has undermined the authority of the Basic Law itself and thereby that of the president and/or an eventual successor. In a country like Russia, where the rule of law is weak but the rule of governance is exercised top down, what seems to be autocratic power can when most needed prove to be impotence.

The marked increase in repression since the popular vote was engineered by 1 July to pass the constitutional amendments and allow the passage of legislation to implement it suggests that Putin is not altogether confident on the score of security. Measures have been taken to ensure that the Procuracy and the FSB are in safe hands from Putin's point of view. It is not however clear how far Putin brought those among what used to be his principal confidants on board with the changes he had in mind or whom he consults now.

Personnel changes are in progress to appoint or retain younger loyal, obedient, and expendable persons throughout the Federation to assist him in pursuing his purposes. Those appointed to the regions are sent to them as answerable to Moscow, rather than the inhabitants of the regions, whose ability to choose for themselves at the polls has been severely limited. The state Duma elections due next year, whether in the spring or the autumn, are of special concern to the Presidential Administration, and in particular need of rigging. The failed assassination on 20 August of Navalny was a notable instance of regime concern as to the threat of domestic unrest, although the shock of it was greater abroad than in Russia itself.

There are other matters to be addressed before this change can be looked at as more than yet another vulnerable attempt to sustain the regime's control over Russia by guarding itself against future risks. Such is at best a negative and self-serving ambition. It needs a sense of shared public purpose to sustain it. The other deeply corrupted Russia that has grown as a parallel reality over the last twenty years has been left untouched by "modernisation" in 2020. It is indeed more of a useful and evolving ally to the Kremlin than a matter seen by Russia's rulers as needing to be addressed if Russia is to become more prosperous, content, and stable.

There is nothing on offer or indeed in prospect that suggests that Putin or anyone else in power sees the virtue of even tolerating the possibility of public discussions as to options for fresh approaches to Russia's problems, let alone discussions of such matters with the regime itself. The tensions between the Moscow based authorities and the regions forced for example to address the pandemic have been virtually ignored by Putin and his immediate circle. 2020 has not even resolved the question that provoked what was posed in January: How long will Putin stay and what will happen when he goes, on his feet or feet first?

## 2024/2030

The next few years being particularly unpredictable and the fact that the changes put through by Putin and his allies have increased rather than moderated the fragility inherent in the way Russia is governed lead me to conclude with the notes below:

First, it is by no means a done deal that Putin or a designated successor will willingly be accepted by Russia's people as all-powerful President in 2024, let alone once more six years after that. But that is what the present authorities will wish to fix.

Second, if Putin remains in office or nominates and installs a pliant successor in 2024, Russia's overall prospects will remain flat. There have been no signs of fresh ideas being aired or even allowed to be put forward in regime-approved circles to improve Russia's economic record or to make good to any significant extent the decorative elements included among the constitutional amendments promising fuller attention to the medical or other social needs of the population at large.

Third, it is conceivable that if a fresh regime-tolerated candidate is put forward and elected in 2024 he/she could revisit paths to a broader process of evolution for Russia, but that would be a long process and is unlikely to happen in the predictable future.

Fourth, the manner in which the Kremlin has asserted control of voting and managing its outcome is likely to build increasing resentment in Russia. Tensions between the federal centre in Moscow and the regions will prove difficult to manage.

Fifth, the viability of Putin's long-term ambition to construct a special interest zone around Russia has come into question. The domestic euphoria

following Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 has faded. The Kremlin has alienated the great majority of Ukrainians since then, risks doing the same now to the citizens of Belarus and Armenia, and is having to live with the intrusion of Turkey in the South Caucasus. But Putin is still guided by his preoccupation with what he imagines were Soviet realities and achievements.

Sixth, the failed attempt to kill Navalny was a trigger for a previously hesitant Germany, and other countries in Europe, removing at least for now the supposition that Putin could be trusted and that some form of convergence between Russia and European states was practicable in time, as it seemed to be for West Germany in earlier years.

Lastly, and personally, the humiliation and in some cases the brutalisation of the Russian people inherent in the way they have come to be ruled, along with the apparent inability of their rulers however gradually to change it but instead repeatedly to reinforce it puts them on par with other kinfolk driven in the end to popular revolution. May they be spared that outcome.

## Conclusions

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While the Baltic Defence College's Conference on Russia is taking place for the seventh time this year, this work is the first ever issue of conference proceedings. In a sense, these proceedings functionally serve as published record of our international forum for discussing foreign, security, defence, and military policies of Russia from both Euro-Atlantic and Russian perspectives.

However – and more importantly – this work acts as an important platform for analysing the security challenges linked with Russia and the required responses of the Euro-Atlantic community to the complex challenges posed by Russia's actions in the region and on a global scale. The goal of the dual format of the conference and its proceedings is to have a biennial rotation of topics by alternating the research focus between the Russian actions and threats from one hand and the responses of NATO and EU from the other hand. Accordingly, in 2021, the event and proceedings have emphasized the perception of Russia shared by NATO, the European Union, Russian pundits as well as the regional actors. The uniqueness of current volume is in ability to propose in equal measure pragmatic policy solutions, as well as academic ones, to those critical global issues.

The inaugural 2021 iteration of the Conference Proceeding is discussing the broader theme of “Responding to Russia in a Multi-Threat World.” From the Euro-Atlantic side, special attention was paid to the efficiency of transatlantic deterrence of Russia and its importance for security in the wider-Baltic region, the multiple Russian hybrid actions of 2019–2021, the lessons learned from Russia's actions in Ukraine, Belarus, and Armenia, and potential threats that might emanate from Russia's military modernization. Thinking from the Russian side, elite and domestic discourses, popular perceptions, and future potentialities are presented and synthesized within this wider paradigm.

As such, these conference proceedings allow our multidisciplinary community of Russia experts to reflect on our own actions and responses to avoid the mistakes of the past, finding common ground for raising

international awareness about Russia and improving the quality of decision-making and academic debates on those topics. During the conference and in these current proceedings, the organizers aimed to include as many high level and intense debate partners as possible. We drew our expertise from a broad range of disciplines and proficiencies, searching to provide the most holistic picture as possible of the opportunities, challenges, and hypothetical futures.

Looking to the East from the West, the first section of our proceedings introduced views on and of Russia for a variety of Euro-Atlantic standpoints and contexts. First, we have the Baltic region, where Šrāders and Terry situate German historical parallels with the Baltic States in their future alignment. Next, Pagung showed that the rather incoherent Germany policy toward Russia will tend more and more toward containment rather than engagement. Cieślak and Śliwa then provide a dyadic dive into Polish elite and popular perceptions of Russia and what that can mean for future engagement. Binnendijk places the Baltic States within the context of NATO, stressing an optimistic trend of adaptation for the alliance in the future. Lastly, Jakniūnaitė and Šrāders and Gvineria present the nexus of the Baltic States, the West, and Russia with Belarus more widely, concluding that this current flashpoint of geopolitics and values nonetheless represents a point for further Baltic and Western unity, as well as an opportunity for engagement.

By situating Western opinions and possibilities, we then move to Russia. First, Lanko discusses Russian discourses on Western responses to Russian actions, helping us to find more common ground for peaceful coexistence and cooperation with our neighbors in Russia. Then, Lomagin provides an overview of Russian opinions on the West more widely, concluding a nuanced range of possible cooperation between Russia and the West on issues that would affect both equally.

Giles refocuses logics around Russia's success and failures, stressing that any analysis must consider Russia's own set of metrics for success. Veebel then concludes that despite some fears, the best days for Russian military industry are over in high-end sector to the point that it may not be able to even meet domestic military demands due to ageing equipment. Widening the view once more, Lo paints a picture of the possibilities of Russia in a world order wherein conceptualizations of greatness have changed and continue to change. Cameron presents a pessimistic vision of Russia in Asia, one where Russia has not actualized itself as a Euro-Pacific power. Penultimately,

von Eggert examines Russia's evolution into neo-imperialism and aspirations of being recognized as a great power in constructing a new Russian identity under Putin, and what this could mean in the future. In conclusion, Wood traces development of the Putin regime, wherein the Russian president has conceded to historical and structural conditions in order to keep his control over the state, contributing hypotheses for the coming decades.

In the forward of this work, we ask a question: "Is Russia a tentative partner or a strategic challenge for the West, or is it a historical phenomenon that cannot separate itself from demons of the past?" From these presented perspectives of the authors in this volume, we have seen a wide array of answers to this question that point us to different possibilities for the future – optimistic, pessimistic, and neutral. However, these possibilities only exist on paper for now. As the ink has now dried and the pixels are now fixed on the screen, it is now up to decision makers to choose which of these possibilities will become a reality. Let the ideas presented within these proceedings act as a map to help in furthering cooperation and mutually beneficial arrangements when possible and avoiding any conflicts and confusion when likely.

In conclusion, we can then provide an answer; it is better to let Russia just be Russia. Closer partnerships and stronger, clearer positions can avoid the resurgence of those demons of the past even more. As such, we should work together where possible and avoid unnecessary antagonism when possible. Thus, no regional or major power should challenge or provoke the present Kremlin, which is still the major military force but is increasingly showing signs of economic weakness, political instability, obstacles for cooperation, and ideological pivots to the past. Instead, we must vigilantly observe domestic conditions inside Russia and apply the best practices from the past – to tame potential consequences from domestic instability and simultaneously contain Russia. Such actions would include mounting defences against Russia's adverse activities abroad by meddling politically into domestic affairs of foreign countries, includes the United States, military activities return territories lost during collapse of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire, or the revision of the rules based liberal world order, which benefits not only Russia, but China as well.

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**Ambassador Shota GVINERIA**

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July of 2019. Until then, he was a part of the Economic Policy Research Center from 2017. Earlier, Ambassador Gvineria has worked in various positions in Georgia's public sector. Among

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