

## *Chapter 4*

# **Russia and the West: What Went Wrong and Can We Do Better?**

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Unsuccessful attempts by Russia to push Ukraine to join the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and successful Russian pressure on the country to drop its Association Agreement with the EU led to political protests in Kyiv in fall 2013. In spring 2014, while revolution brought pro-European regime change in Ukraine, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and started a war in Donbas, violating international law, various bilateral and multilateral agreements as well as undermining the foundations of the post-Cold War order in Europe. It led to the most serious crisis in Russian–Western relations since the end of the Cold War, involving mutual sanctions by the United States, the EU and some other Western allies on one side and Russia on the other.

However grave the crisis is, these events are yet another in a whole series of crises between Russia and the West over the 25 years since the breakup of the Soviet Union. On the other hand we also witnessed periods of quite positive, pragmatic cooperation between the two during that time. Unfortunately, none of these lasted long, nor was able to create a critical mass allowing for a positive breakthrough in mutual relations.

This chapter is a modest attempt to offer some interpretations which may be helpful in answering questions: why it has happened and where we should go from here? In the first part it assesses differences between Russia and the West<sup>1</sup> related to perceptions, political cultures, values and interests. In the second part it provides several conclusions based on analysis of past periods of both cooperation and conflict between the two sides. In the third part it gives recommendations on Western policies towards Russia: what approaches should be avoided and why, as well as what policies should be pursued.

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning essentially the U.S., Canada, EU/EFTA Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

## Russia and the West: What Keeps Us Apart?

Current Russia differs considerably from what is considered to be a Western model of liberal democracy. The nature of the current authoritarian political regime in Russia, where a very small group of people tend to participate in decision-making processes, while sharing a very peculiar mentality and world perception, seriously and adversely influence Russian policy and Russia's relations with its neighbors and the West. The following—mutually reinforcing—systemic problems seem to play an especially negative role:

### *Clash of (Mis)Perceptions*

The biggest problem of Western analysis of and policy making toward contemporary Russia is a habit of projecting those elements of political and strategic culture, ways of thinking or understanding institutions that are dominant within the developed West. This tendency carries with it the risk of underestimating differences between the formal and real power systems in Russia and various political, economic and social mechanisms peculiar to Russia. This habit of analysis also risks misunderstanding various paradoxes associated with modern Russia, for instance the Russian government may simultaneously recognize serious weaknesses and deficits of the state, including its limited capabilities, yet do nothing to abandon or scale back ambitious policy goals and bold policy actions. The same may be seen in Russian society. For instance, according to opinion polls the majority of Russians simultaneously believe in state propaganda claims yet also believe that the government is lying to them. They overwhelmingly participate in elections, yet at the same time they do not believe elections are fair or influence the government. They declare their trust in President Putin, while simultaneously stating that he doesn't represent the interests of the common people.<sup>2</sup>

Russia's narrow ruling elite (and sometimes, but not always, broader circles of Russian society) suffers from a similar tendency to project Russian ways of thinking onto the political and strategic culture of the West. This problem can be illustrated by the approach taken by mem-

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<sup>2</sup> On peculiarities of opinion poll results in Russia, see reports made by Levada-Center's experts Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharev on democracy [http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/report\\_fin.pdf](http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/report_fin.pdf) and media <http://www.levada.ru/old/sites/default/files/levadareportmedia.pdf>.

bers of the Russian ruling elite towards the so-called “color revolutions.” Various public statements of such persons<sup>3</sup> clearly suggest they believe that so-called “color revolutions” (occurring in some post-Soviet states: Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004 and 2013–14 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and before also in Serbia in 2000) as well as the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa and Middle East, which began in 2010 (especially events in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria), were in fact elements of a U.S.-led Western conspiracy aimed against Russia. They tend to believe these were “special operations” conducted by U.S. secret services through active use of local NGOs, trained activists and modern communication technologies (internet, social networks). Occasionally (as in Serbia and Libya) these were supported by Western military interventions, all aimed at regime change, and perceived as elements of the West’s geopolitical advance at the expense of Russia and its regional influence.

Some statements suggest members of the ruling elite also believe that political protests in Russia (2011–12) were a sort of a failed U.S.-sponsored attempt at coup d’état and regime change.<sup>4</sup> Since these people predominantly draw their background from Russia’s secret services, the influence of their peculiar training and mentality on their analysis is clearly visible. They don’t believe in any genuine social, grassroots movements, instead they treat societal groups as mere objects of actions conducted by hidden actors. They also project their own “professional experience” (provocations, manipulation and other forms of “active measures”) and threat perception onto Western policies. The consequences of such perceptions are far-reaching. Since members of the Russian ruling elite genuinely believe that they are under “Western attack,” various aggressive anti-Western actions are perceived by them as justified as measures of “self-defense.” The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are no effective means for the West to influence such perceptions. Western denials, in fact, only serves to reinforce such notions and are perceived as signs of Western hypocrisy and deceit.

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<sup>3</sup> President Vladimir Putin, head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov, secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, former deputy prime minister and head of Rosneft’ state oil company Igor Sechin, deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin or FSB head Nikolai Bortnikov in particular could be named.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Putin stated on December 8, 2011, that organizers of the protests acted “according to a well-known scenario,” that hasty critique of the Russian parliamentary elections by U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton “set the tone for some activists” and “gave them a signal; they heard that signal and started active work, with the support of the State Department.” <http://ria.ru/politics/20111208/510441056.html>.

*Clash of Political/Strategic Cultures*

But it is not only perception that is mutually projected between the West and Russia. Western (especially western European) analysts and decision makers tend to project onto Russia their own pragmatic, liberal policy approaches, their culture of seeking compromise, finding win-win solutions and negotiating rationally-defined interests, all of which project Western rationality criteria and its liberal-democratic political/strategic culture onto a different political entity. This can lead to confusion when the Russian side responds with boldness, deception, or zero-sum game approaches. In fact however brutal, radical or irrational some Russian actions may appear, they are in fact perfectly rational, logical and justified within specific perceptions and the political/strategic culture embraced by the Russian ruling elite.

This phenomenon can be illustrated by the “symmetric beatings” incident of 2013. On October 5, 2013 the Dutch police broke into the flat of the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Russian embassy in The Hague and detained him for several hours on charges of harassment towards his children. The Russian side maintained he was beaten by the police during the incident. On October 8, President Vladimir Putin publicly demanded apologies, explanations and for those responsible to be brought to account. Apologies were delivered by the Dutch authorities. However, on October 15, 2013, unidentified perpetrators (dressed as maintenance workers) stormed the flat of the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Dutch Embassy in Moscow and beat him up. Obviously there is a high probability there was no coincidence for the Moscow beating to happen and that it was allowed, if not directly ordered, from a high political level in Moscow. Such suppositions are reinforced by the fact that such cases have also happened before in Russia (as was the case with Polish embassy employees in summer 2005).<sup>5</sup> Why? We can assume the Kremlin believed that maltreatment of the Russian diplomat in the Netherlands was in fact intentional and connected with an incident two weeks earlier in the Arctic, where a Russian assault took place

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<sup>5</sup> On July 31 2005 four children of 3 Russian diplomats and one Kazakh diplomat in Warsaw were beaten and robbed by a group of Polish hooligans in a park. On August 1 President Putin called the attack a crime and ordered his staff to find what Polish authorities were doing to investigate it. Apologies were delivered by Warsaw (later the perpetrators were arrested, trialed and sentenced for imprisonment). Yet, between 5-11 August 2005 four persons (3 Polish citizens and 1 Russian citizen) working in or connected with the Polish Embassy in Moscow (1 diplomat, 2 technical workers, 1 journalist) were severely beaten by unknown perpetrators in a series of incidents in Moscow.

on the Greenpeace ship *Arctic Sunrise*, which was sailing under a Dutch banner, and which caused a spat between the two governments.

The second part of an answer pertains to the problem of Russia's political/strategic culture and values, or rather the peculiar version of it embraced by members of Putin's regime. It can be illustrated by Vladimir Putin's own words from December 2012: "...I am, for that matter, a bad Christian. When someone smites you on one cheek, you should turn to him the other. I am not morally prepared to act in this way. If we are slapped, we must respond. Or otherwise we'll be constantly slapped..."<sup>6</sup> The message is clear: any actor who takes any action perceived as aimed against Russia (or even more against the personal interests or the image of its leader) has to be punished, ideally by a symmetric Russian response. This is so because, among other things, the prestige of the state and the image of its leadership are at stake. This appeals to those elements of Russian culture that traditionally cherish such values as masculinity, toughness, relentlessness, endurance—all attributes of being a "true man" (*nastoiashchiy muzhik*). Within such an (tendentious) interpretation of Russian culture, such behavior as restraint, pacifism, risk-aversion, readiness for compromise or even good manners are despised as signs of weakness or "femininity." The first approach is obviously especially (but not exclusively) popular within both the criminal world and the institutions of force in Russia (to which the overwhelming majority of members of the current Russian ruling elite belong).

### *Clash of Norms and Values*

What can be observed over the past decade is also an increasing discrepancy between Russia and the West in terms of attitudes towards, and preferences for, some important norms and values. In the sphere of international relations this discrepancy is particularly visible with regard to tension over two issues. The first has to do with perceived limits on the principle of state sovereignty. The second is the freedom to choose alliances.

The West (especially Europe) proclaims adherence to the idea that state sovereignty, however crucially important, can no longer be seen as absolute. In particular, it cannot serve as an excuse for committing mas-

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<sup>6</sup> News conference of Vladimir Putin, 20 December 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17173>.

sive violations of basic human rights. These matters are no longer solely the preserve of the internal affairs of any given state. But Western debates lead even further to proclaim that the international community is obliged to react in cases when an individual government is unwilling or unable to protect its own citizens from such occurrences (or especially when it is responsible itself for such occurrences). This concept, known as humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect (R2P), hasn't yet been incorporated into universal international law (mainly due to resistance of various non-democratic governments), but was in fact partially applied (not without controversies) in international practice, for instance by the UN, the United States and some African states in Somalia since the end of 1992, by NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, in Yugoslavia in 2000 and in Libya in 2011). In all these cases humanitarian reasons were important as justification for military action.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Russia, especially under Putin, has increasingly resisted this approach. Sovereignty as an unconditional principle of international relations is often reiterated by Moscow. President Putin regularly has been accusing the West (especially the United States) of violating or misusing international law for aggressive purposes, treating references to humanitarian reasons as mere pretexts, often denying R2P's legality. Russia has vehemently opposed humanitarian intervention in most cases.

The classical example of Russia's approach has been Moscow's ongoing political and military support for Assad's regime in Syria, despite the crimes against humanity committed by the regime. While Russia did not formally come out against R2P during UN debates, it did insist that any application of the principle would require UNSC authorization and consent by the government of the state in question.<sup>8</sup> One can attribute the Kremlin's approach to its fear of possible Western military intervention geared to regime change should a serious political crisis emerge within Russia, and/or of any resistance to its ability to have a free hand

<sup>7</sup> For more on R2P, see *The Responsibility to Protect. Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/ICISS%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See Gennadiy Gatilov, *Opyt krizisnogo reagirovaniya, ili kogo obyazano zashchishchat' mezhdunarodnoye soobshchestvo? Rossiya v globalnoy politike* 6 November 2012, <http://interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=8883>; Olga Labyuk, "Otvetstvennost' po zashchite" i pravo na vmeshatelstvo," *Mezhdunarodnye Processy*, vol. 6, No.3 (18)/2008, <http://www.intertrends.ru/>. Interestingly enough Russia has annexed Crimea, partly justifying it, among other, by humanitarian reasons (alleged necessity to protect Russian and Russian-speaking population from potential threat).

to crush any potential internal opposition by all means (including use of military force against the civilian population).

Another important norm underlined by the West (and reflected in CSCE/OSCE documents) is the freedom of any nation to choose its alliances, to become or not become a member of any international structures and communities, whether they be political, economic or military. Such an approach was at the core of the process of accepting of new members by NATO (including in subsequent waves of enlargement in 1999, 2004 and 2009) and the EU (e.g. in 2004, 2007 and 2013). Neither NATO nor the EU pushed any country to join. On the contrary, both have imposed difficult conditions on any country aspiring to membership.

From the very start Russia vehemently opposed NATO's eastward "expansion," maintaining that it was aimed against Russia and its interests. To counter the principle that countries were free to choose their alliances, Russia often referred to the principle of "indivisibility of security," i.e., the security of any given state should not be pursued at the expense of security of other state. Russia tends to over interpret this principle, however, as its *de facto* right to veto further NATO enlargement. Moscow has also tried to hamper EU enlargement. In the case of central European states, Russia tried to establish some conditions and receive some degree of economic "compensation." Russia has also sought to derail EU Association Agreements with individual post-Soviet states. It was successful in the case of Armenia, but unsuccessful elsewhere.

Behind all of these efforts was in fact another principle strongly supported by Moscow: the right of Russia to a sphere of influence. Numerous political statements by Russian leaders and elite members, as well as various Russian official documents since the breakup of the Soviet Union, have left no illusion about Moscow's systematic efforts to (re)create and uphold its sphere of influence, at least in the post-Soviet area, and make the West, recognize it, either formally or tacitly. Conceptual frameworks and labels may have changed (whether the "near abroad" of the Yeltsin era, the "belt of good neighborliness," Medvedev's "regions of privileged interests" or Putin's "historical Russia")<sup>9</sup> the essence remained the same. Russia's ruling elite believes that possessing an area of strategic control, where states are not free to choose their

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/22/magazine/on-language-the-near-abroad.html> ; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>; Vladimir Putin, Russia: The National Question, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23.01.2012; <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/migration-national-question-putin-439/>.

policies and cannot decide anything that may harm Russia's self-perceived interests,<sup>10</sup> is simultaneously a basis, condition and reflection of Russia's great power status.

### *Clash of Interests*

It would be difficult to enumerate all of many conflicting interests between Russia and the West. Instead one may focus on two of them which seem crucial, both related to Europe: European security architecture and Europe's political-economic space.

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West has proclaimed and adhered to the idea of a "Europe whole, free, and at peace." In the security arena it was meant to expand the zone of stability to the east of the continent by accepting gradually new members to NATO following the adoption of required standards (in military but also in political, legal and economic terms). From the very beginning one of the challenges was to define Russia's place in that process. Despite Moscow's perception, Russia has never been automatically denied the possibility to participate. It was difficult however, not only due to Russia's size, potential and location, but mostly due to its growing reluctance to accept Western rules and models. Russia felt too proud as a self-perceived great power simply to adjust. Instead, it decided early on to tread other paths, trying desperately to recreate its sphere of influence and stop enlargement of Western structures to the east. Nevertheless, the West was relentless in offering Moscow a security partnership: examples included the creation of NACC (1991/92), privileged dialogue with NATO (since 1995), the NATO-Russia Founding Act and establishment of the Permanent Joint Council (1997), special military cooperation arrangements in the Balkans (1995/1999), the NATO-Russia Council (2002) and EU-Russia security dialogue and arrangements (2000/2001).

Yet Russia was repeatedly frustrated, since none of these arrangements has offered what Russia really wants (and what could not and cannot be accepted): mechanisms that enable Russia to be a *de facto* co-decision maker in European security, with effective veto power over

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<sup>10</sup>One of the recent examples of such an approach was the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's statement in his address in the State Duma (parliament) on November 19, 2014: "Every state has a sovereign right to choose its economic partners, provided it doesn't harm legitimate interests of its neighbours."



NATO (and the EU in security matters) without being a member of Western security institutions. Even if Russia's leadership has occasionally suggested (as in 1991, 1995, 2000 or 2001) that Moscow could seek membership in NATO's political structure, it has never seriously demonstrated the will to follow the path of transformation required in such case. Instead, Russia keeps proposing alternative models of European security, some of them based on CSCE/OSCE, some on new bodies with NATO or the EU. Their labels and institutional details have varied (be it "all-European partnership", a CSCE Executive Committee/European Security Council, US-EU-Russia concert, NATO-CSTO partnership, an EU-Russia Council or a Treaty on European Security).<sup>11</sup> They all, however, reflect the tension between two approaches: gradual integration of Russia into expanding Western institutional security arrangements vs. the creation of new and more "even" arrangements between Western structures and Russia/Russia-led structures.

The same patterns may be observed in the political-economic sphere. On one hand we have witnessed the gradual enlargement of the EU's normative space in eastern Europe via the process of successive EU enlargement, creation of European Stabilization and Association mechanisms, the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. EU Commission President Romano Prodi's concept of a "ring of friends" (2002) reflected an ambitious goal to establish a zone of stability and prosperity around a growing EU, based on EU norms and standards and their voluntary acceptance by interested neighboring states of eastern Europe and the southern Mediterranean. Here again, Russia was not excluded. Flexible offers were passed on also to Moscow, with whom the EU has been developing privileged partnerships at least since 2000 (including proposals for new institutions such as a Permanent Partnership Council and documents charting "road maps" to develop four EU-Russia "common spaces" in 2005). But in this case as well, Russia has chosen another path. Despite occasional signals of entering into a process of "legal harmonization/approximation" with the EU, Russia has pursued an increasingly anti-European model of internal development and started actively to undermine EU policies in the Eastern neighborhood, and tried to develop alternative models of Eurasian inte-

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<sup>11</sup> On the Russian approach to its NATO membership and Russian proposals of European security architecture cf. M. Menkiszak, *Russian Policy Towards NATO in a Broader European Security Context*, in: Roger N. McDermott, Bertil Nygren, Carolina Vendil Pallin (eds.), *The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties*, Routledge, December 2011.

gration (the recent manifestation of which has been a Customs Union in 2011 and the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015).

### **Lessons from the Modern History of Russian-Western Relations**

The abovementioned clashes have been clearly evident in the history of the last 25 years of Russian—Western relations. During that period we can distinguish four periods of generally positive Russian-Western relations: the “romantic period” of early Yeltsin (1992); a “pragmatic period” of late Yeltsin (1996–98); the “pro-Western-turn” of early Putin (2001–02); and the “Reset” with Medvedev (2009–11). However, we can also point out four periods of conflictual relations: the Chechen and Bosnian crises (1994–95); the Kosovo crisis (1999); the period of “cold peace” and the Georgian crisis (2007–09); and finally the “‘revolutions’ crisis” (since 2012 and continuing). When we take a closer look at these periods of cooperation and crisis, we can find certain regularities. In all we can sum them up in four lessons:

#### ***Lesson 1: The Political Vector in Russia is Key***

The periods of best relations between Russia and the West coincided with those when Russian leadership strived to reform the country towards models that in principle would be compatible with the ideals of liberal democracy and the market economy, and when it actively tried to encourage the West to support such efforts politically but especially economically. That was the case in 1992, when radical market economic reforms were introduced in Russia under the guidance of Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, based on Western models and central European experiences. The pattern was essentially repeated in spring 1997, when a new government of liberal-minded “young reformers” was nominated, headed by Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko and Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov. Some also tend to forget that Vladimir Putin started his first presidential term in spring 2000 as a reformer. Quite radical economic market reform plans were prepared then by a team of experts headed by German Gref (a young Putin aide and head of the Kremlin-supported Center for Strategic Analyses—CSR, who was then nominated to be minister of economic development after Putin assumed power). Finally when Dmitri Medvedev assumed presidential office in spring 2008 he also tried to advance cautious liberal reforms under the slogan of modernization, supported by a liberal-minded group of

researchers at the Institute of Contemporary Development—INSOR (some of whom became government officials). Medvedev’s manifesto “Go, Russia!”<sup>12</sup> published in fall 2009 raised hopes among parts of Russian society that not only economic but political reform could be possible in Russia.

In all these cases, changes away from this pro-democratic and pro-market course either cooled Russian relations with the West or provoked open crisis. That happened when the communist and nationalist-dominated parliament at the end of 1992 hampered reforms and blocked the nomination of Gaidar to the post of Prime Minister. Problems were exacerbated after a conflict between president Yeltsin and parliament culminated in bloodshed in Moscow in September 1993 and led to the establishment of a new system of strong presidential rule in Russia. The dismissal of Kiriyenko’s cabinet and the nomination of conservative Yevgeniy Primakov for Prime Minister in the wake of the August 1998 financial collapse offers another example. The gradual decline in influence of liberal-minded members of the government and the de facto sabotage of the Gref reform plan eventually culminated in a conservative turn in fall 2003 (with arrest of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky as a symbolic event) and the rise of the so-called “Petersburg chekists,” who came to dominate the ruling elite in the Putin’s second term (beginning in 2004). Finally, Putin’s fall 2011 decision to return to the presidency—and not allow Medvedev to run for a second term—led to political protests. Open Western sympathy for the protesters and disappointment with Putin’s return, along with the developments of the Arab Spring and NATO intervention in Libya caused Putin and his conservative-minded collaborators to accuse the West (especially the United States) of anti-Russian conspiracy. Putin’s crackdown on independent NGOs and media, political repression of liberal activists, as well as the Kremlin’s conservative ideological project that has followed Putin’s return in spring 2012 were in large part consequences of that perception. The “reset” was killed and tensions were then further by the Ukrainian crisis.

### *Lesson 2: Russia’s Sense of Insecurity is Key*

Without a doubt Russia’s ruling elite interpreted some Western decisions and actions during this period as detrimental to Russia’s interests

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<sup>12</sup> September 9, 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413>.

or to its security. Except for the Iraq war in 2003, however, all of these Western actions were largely unavoidable due to Western interests and values. Nonetheless, they played an important role in the genesis of the crises in Russia-Western relations.

Western critique of Russia's brutal war in Chechnya at the end of 1994, but especially NATO's bombardment in Bosnia-Herzegovina in September 1995 (an aftermath of the West's "hangover" over its passivity during 1994 genocide in Rwanda and July 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina) were direct causes of brief crisis in mutual relations. Other contributing factors possibly included Russia's unsuccessful attempts to block NATO enlargement to central Europe or, between mid-1993 and 1995, to persuade the West to create an alternative CSCE-based European security architecture. Russia, striving for affirmation of its great power status, felt ignored and humiliated.

This pattern was repeated even more strongly in spring 1999 with NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia over the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo (an attempt to repeat Western success in Bosnia) and NATO's adoption of a new Strategic Concept, which were strongly criticized by Moscow, which feared new NATO military operations without UNSC authorization. In addition, NATO's first eastward enlargement at that time was perceived in Moscow as a symbol of adverse geopolitical change in Europe. The 1999 Kosovo crisis shocked the Russian ruling elite, revealing again Russia's weakness and probably generating a sense of insecurity in Moscow. The Western critique of the second Chechen war (beginning in fall 1999) added to that and angered Moscow.

A series of bold moves by the administration of George W. Bush strongly contributed to the end of the so-called "pro-Western turn" in Russia's foreign policy—especially U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty (December 2001/effective May 2002); its decision to develop ballistic missile defenses in Europe; and the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq without clear UNSC authorization in spring 2003. These actions were perceived by Russia's ruling elite as symbols of U.S. adventurous unilateralism. Finally, recognition of the independence of Kosovo, as well as setting a date for debate on NATO Membership Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia—both in early 2008—provided Moscow with pretexts for aggressive moves.

What really made the Kremlin worry, however, was the series of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet area (2003-2005). In the eyes of

Russia's ruling elite these were mainly the result of Western subversion and part of Western geopolitical advances. EU debate on and development of its neighborhood policy (partly addressed to the EU's east) in 2002–04 was also perceived in Russia as part of this Western geopolitical advance and strongly criticized by Moscow.

During this time, Russian efforts to communicate red lines to the West (BMD, Kosovo, NATO enlargement) and to suggest some geopolitical bargain that would include tacit recognition by the West of Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area did not work. So after issuing a final warning to the West (Putin's speeches in Munich in February 2007 and in Bucharest in March 2008),<sup>13</sup> Putin decided to demonstrate Russian resolve in the brief Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 (the plans of which Putin accepted in late 2006/early 2007—as he publicly admitted)<sup>14</sup> and temporary disruption of Russian gas flows to Europe during the Russian—Ukrainian “gas war” of January 2009. From Moscow's point of view these actions brought success: they put an end to the NATO debate on offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine; they prompted the Obama administration to initiate a “reset” with Russia; and they led the EU to propose a “partnership for modernization.”

This pattern of Russia's “offensive defense” was repeated again when Putin and his conservative collaborators felt threatened by the Arab Spring and especially protests in Russia, both of which they perceived to be sponsored by the West. So when the Kremlin perceived that the West was continuing its provocations by helping to derail Russian efforts to bring Ukraine into the Eurasian Union and “organizing” another revolution and regime change in Ukraine, Moscow responded again with a “counter-offensive.” It shocked the West in Spring 2014 by occupying and annexing the eastern Ukrainian region of Crimea and bringing war into Ukraine's Donbas area, clearly underestimating the West's unity and will to respond.

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<sup>13</sup> See Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 February 2007, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912\\_type82914type82917type84779\\_118123](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912_type82914type82917type84779_118123); Speech of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, 2.04.2008 (translated into English). UNIAN newswire 18.04.2008. <http://www.unian.net/eng/news/news-247251.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, “Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia was Preplanned,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.9, Issue 152, 8 September 2012, <http://www.russialist.org/archives/russia-putin-admits-russian-invasion-georgia-preplanned-814.php>.

### *Lesson 3: Russia's Weakness Fosters Cooperation*

As indicated earlier, Russia's self-perceived weakness has also been an important factor in its relations with the West. When new Russia was making its big opening towards the West following the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was in deep economic and social crisis. During 1992 not only Western financial help but even food deliveries were on the agenda of the Russian-Western political dialogue. It was much less a problem in the 1990s, but events in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 revealed how politically weak Russia still was at that time. The country's weakness was further underscored by its deep financial crisis in 1998 and its political humiliation during the Kosovo crisis in 1999 (with two and a half months of NATO bombardments of Yugoslavia despite fierce Russian protests)—elements highlighted by Prime Minister Putin in his "Millennium speech" of December 1999. Russia's leadership basically realized then that Moscow was too weak to openly confront the West, so it decided to focus on internal strengthening and seeking, at least temporary, a *modus vivendi* with the EU and the United States (after a brief unsuccessful attempt to revive "old" anti-Western partnerships). Obviously the 9/11 terrorist attacks strongly contributed to the new trend, providing Moscow with a perceived window of opportunity to influence Western thinking and policies through its offer of a pragmatic anti-terrorist alliance. When Medvedev started his presidency in May 2008, Russia felt quite confident and strong. This changed dramatically only few months later, when economic crisis struck Russia in September. Therefore, not only the U.S. "reset" initiative, but also internal Russian crisis (the bottom of which was reached in Russia in Spring 2009) contributed to a thaw in Russian-Western relations.

Some signs of a repetition of this pattern can be observed today. Since September 2014 Russia has been confronted with another wave of economic crisis, due mostly to a combination of growing longer-term systemic problems of the Russian economy and the immediate effect of a slump in oil prices. But Western sanctions—and, even more, Russian counter-sanctions—have played a role as they have gradually exposed the Russian economy's very high level of import dependence. As Russian society suffered, the Kremlin realized that agricultural and industrial import substitution was largely a failure, while China was not eager to provide Russia with financial relief (contrary to Moscow's apparent expectations). This overall situation clearly helped to change Moscow's tactics since late summer 2015, which have included de-escalation in the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Donbas and attempts to re-engage with

the West, especially the EU, to persuade it to start relaxing sanctions against Russia.

#### ***Lesson 4: Personalities Matter***

The history of modern Russian-Western relations suggest that the role of individual leaders is difficult to overestimate. This is especially the case with Russia. Boris Yeltsin was not a naturally-born democrat, but he understood the Soviet system couldn't work. He needed a democratic movement to be his springboard to power and an instrument in his political struggles, first with Gorbachev and the Soviet federal center, and then with the communist and nationalist opposition. His strong personality and readiness for bold action helped in the early years of the new Russia to provide political cover for economic reforms and the development of generally positive relations with the West. Yet in his late years his personal weaknesses opened the way for an oligarchic system and then created social demand for more authoritarian rule, which was soon over satisfied by his chosen successor, Vladimir Putin.

Even Putin initially played a moderately positive role in fostering cooperation with the West, while he was focused on creating a strong power center and advancing some economic reforms early on in his presidency. Unfortunately, the more unchecked power he assumed and the more he benefited from growing economic prosperity based on rising oil prices, the less inclined he was to bring Russia closer to the West. His deeply rooted traumas and grievances towards the West (partly related to his personal experiences in the dramatic events in East Germany and the breakup of the Soviet Union) became more and more visible and were fueled by his growing suspicion. He fell victim to anti-Western conspiracy theories, partly due to his secret service background, partly probably due to information filtered for him by those services.

Medvedev's presidency was a brief interlude. He also wasn't "liberal" in the Western sense, but his background was different than that of Putin and he had around him people who believed in the necessity of gradual economic and political modernization. He was too weak, however, both personally and politically, as Putin created enough checks to stop him whenever he wished and to a large extent remained a key decision maker. Medvedev never decided to fight for real power. His decision to give up and not resist Putin's return was detrimental for Russia both internally and externally. It not only compromised him in the eyes

of liberal-minded Russians, it killed hope for Russia's peaceful gradual modernization and long-term pragmatic cooperation with the West.

As the Russian regime changed from authoritarian to almost autocratic under Putin's third term, with a high level of centralization and personalization of the decision making processes, Putin himself determined the course of Russian-Western relations. He felt personally offended by the West's open preference for Medvedev. He also felt personally threatened by what he believed was a U.S.-led Western policy of regime change and geopolitical advance. In addition, he has seemed to cherish a real desire to rebuild Russia as an empire, and he wants to make history. These attributes, together with his inclination toward high-risk, bold actions, have put Russia on an open collision course with the West and played an important role in generating the deepest crisis in post-Cold War relations between Russia and the West.

The personality factor obviously has played a role also with regard to the West—for instance the cowboy-style boldness of U.S. President George W. Bush and the interventionism embraced by his neo-conservative collaborators; Barack Obama's belief in dialogue and compromise, his indecisiveness and aversion to foreign military interventions; and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's cautious yet illusion-free approach to Russia definitely have all had an impact on Russian-Western relations.

## Conclusions

### *Preconditions for Positive Russian–Western Relations*

This analysis suggests that there is a way for Russia and the West to build a positive, constructive long term relationship or even create a truly common space, be it Greater Europe or something else. But there is one important precondition for that: Russian policy and Russia itself should profoundly change. This means a Russia that embarks on a course of profound, systemic internal economic and political reform and modernization, a Russia that refrains from the use of political, economic, energy coercion and threats to use, and actual use of military force, a Russia that does not seek a sphere of influence but develops integration through cooperation and by increasing its own attractiveness. This Russia should be fully supported by the West, politically and economically and invited to integrate with the European space or joining European or Euro-Atlantic structures if it wished to do so. Unfortu-



nately, today's Russia is the opposite of that Russia. And since any perspective of change along these lines is perceived by Russia's current narrow ruling elite as a mortal threat, any movement in this direction is highly unlikely until this elite—not only Vladimir Putin but also his like-minded collaborators—are no longer in power in Russia.

***Policy Responses: What Should the West NOT Do?***

For the West not only to recognize but to engage Russia “as it is,” and to develop intensive political and economic cooperation with it, would be a strategic mistake.

First, such an approach would suggest to the Russian leadership that an aggressive, adventurous, anti-Western foreign policy that violates principles and norms really works with the West, advances Russia's policy goals and is rewarded. It would be an open invitation for Russia to continue such policies and create a great danger of a repetition of crises comparable to those surrounding Ukraine, or even something much larger.

Second, such a stance would give the Russian leadership arguments vis-a-vis its own society about the effectiveness of its actions, and would be likely to increase its legitimacy. At the same time such a policy, being a betrayal of values and principles proclaimed by the West, would compromise Western policy in the eyes of the liberal-minded minority within Russian society and prove to them and others the hypocrisy of the West, essentially validating claims made to this effect by Russian state propaganda.

Third, by developing even deeper and unconditional economic cooperation with large Russian companies closely linked to the members of ruling elite, especially by providing significant capital and advanced technology, the West would in fact be helping to prolong Russia's current economic system, and would be providing members of the Russian elite with opportunities for self-enrichment at the expense of the Russian state. Such actions would decrease the chances of a real improvement in the investment climate in Russia, make economic reforms less likely, and eventually undermine the long-term prospects for Western companies in the Russian market. Above all, they would increase the risk of transferring Russian shadow economic practices to the West in general and Europe in particular, and exporting corruption through the development of corruption networks—a phenomenon that is already under way.

Another mistake would be to offer a geopolitical “grand bargain” between the West and Russia. One variant of this approach would be to suggest that “guarantees” of Ukraine’s non-aligned status (in essence, a ban on NATO membership) would lead to a certain “Finlandization” of this country, allowing it to expand its links with the EU without Russia’s opposition, and thus ultimately solving the conflict and stabilizing Russian-Western relations. A related assumption is that forging formal ties or even possible economic cooperation between European Union and Eurasian Economic Union would stabilize the situation and persuade Russia to develop a constructive approach.

Such propositions are both unrealistic and counterproductive. It is true that Russia demanded guarantees of Ukraine’s non-aligned status in the course of the current crisis, yet it is clear that Moscow did not start a war with Ukraine solely because of the prospects of Ukraine’s NATO membership (which was totally unrealistic), but because it failed to bring Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union. Russian moves suggest not only that Moscow is unable to accept Ukraine’s future EU membership (which is perceived in Moscow as a low probability), it is unable to accept any kind of integration of Ukraine into the EU’s normative space. In fact, the Putin regime considers the perspective of the successful European transformation of Ukraine as a mortal threat. Therefore any comparison between current Ukraine (regarded by Russia’s elite as natural part of “historical Russia”) and Cold War Finland (used to be treated by Moscow as peripheral buffer zone) are simply divorced from reality.

The same goes with relations between the EU and the EEU. The latter, despite its formal resemblance to EU’s institutional model, offers a completely different model of integration. The EEU is based on Russian norms and standards, largely incompatible with those of the EU. The EEU is asymmetric and politically dominated by Russia. Unlike in the EU, new EEU member states are blackmailed (Armenia) or bribed (Kyrgyzstan) to join. In addition, EEU integration is largely unsuccessful; trade conflicts erupt regularly among its members. Moreover, Russia’s current economic crisis puts a question mark over the EEU’s future. Above all, the EEU is in fact Russia’s geopolitical project. It is the current institutional form of Russia’s effort to rebuild a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. EU cooperation with it is therefore economically unfeasible and politically doubtful.

It may be tempting to think that a realistic policy for the West that could bring stability would be to recognize tacitly Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area and abandon any ambitions to help those eastern neighbors of the EU who wish to integrate into its normative space. In fact, however, such a policy would be detrimental for all actors. Social frustration in such neighboring countries as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would grow, leading to political instability. Russia would be strongly tempted to exploit such situations and try to lure or force these countries to join the EEU, which could contribute to even more chaos or even provoke new bloody crises. One cannot exclude the possibility that Moscow, emboldened by Western retreat, would be also encouraged in such cases to raise the stakes vis-a-vis the West by demanding "Finlandization" of the Baltic states, causing another large European crisis.<sup>15</sup> Finally such a Western policy would have adverse effects on Russia itself. By derailing processes of European transformation and integration in neighboring states, Russian society will not be provided with precedents or role models for itself, which would lower the chances that sustainable reform processes could also occur in Russia.

### *Narrow Windows for Cooperation*

Yet another option is to decouple the "Ukrainian problem" (or broadly "common neighborhood problem") with other issues, put it aside and focus on areas of prospective mutual cooperation between the West and Russia. Three such fields of cooperation should be assessed in that context: energy; the fight against radical Islam/terrorism; and regional crises.

Energy is perceived as a natural field for Russian-Western cooperation, since Russia is dependent on its energy exports and many EU countries are dependent on energy imports, are close geographically to Russia and already have developed infrastructure links with Russia. Russian-European gas relations, however, have been subjected to regular conflicts (unlawful practices, political pressures, gas disruptions of supply etc.). On the other hand, development of the EU's internal gas market and infrastructure links have forced a reluctant Gazprom to make partial adjustments to European regulations. As this process is

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning in this context that until the mid-1990s even relatively weak Russia tried to retain its influence in central Europe, offering "security guarantees" and multilateral economic cooperation mechanisms. Even in 2002 president Putin demanded that the EU guarantee that it would honor Russia's "traditional" economic links with central European states in the process of EU enlargement.

likely to continue, Russia may participate or even expand its presence in an increasingly competitive European market on a purely market basis. There is no reason, however, for the EU or its member states to grant Russia any “special arrangements” or concessions. Prospects for additional Western investment in Russia’s energy sector (where some large Western companies have operated for many years, despite the worsening investment climate) will depend primarily on economic incentives or guarantees from the Russian government, such as tax policy, ownership safety, full gas export liberalization etc.) as well as economic profitability. Yet current low oil price levels are likely to render development of the most investment-intensive prospective oil and gas fields in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Arctic as economically unfeasible. In all, Russia will remain the West’s energy partner to the extent it will be ready to play according to market rules and it increases its attractiveness.

Radical Islam and terrorism related to it clearly present challenges to both the West and Russia. Cooperation in that field, however, faces important hurdles. Moscow accuses the West of a selective and instrumental approach to Islamic radicalism and terrorism, or even of sponsoring it, even as it pursues such policies itself. Examples include Russia’s clandestine support for Turkey’s PKK in the 1990s and its open political (and clandestine military) support for Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Brutal Russian policies in the Northern Caucasus contributed to the rise of Islamic radicalism in the region. Moreover, recent reports have charged Russian secret services with facilitating the flow of Islamic radicals from Northern Caucasus to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Russian bombardment in Syria, which the Kremlin proclaims to be aimed mostly against ISIS, in fact has been directed predominantly against other anti-Assad groups, indirectly helping ISIS. In such circumstances one can cast serious doubt on the future development of Russian-Western anti-terror cooperation.

Prospects for Western cooperation with Russia over regional conflicts also seem overestimated. In some cases Russia’s approach was indeed cooperative, as in the talks on the North Korean nuclear problem, Israeli-Palestinian conflict or fighting piracy in the Horn of Africa. However in all these cases Russia’s role was in fact rather marginal, either

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<sup>16</sup>See Yelena Milashina, Khalifat—primanka dla durakov, *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 July 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/inquests/69364.html>; Michael Weiss, “Russia is Sending Jihadists to Join ISIS,” *The Daily Beast*, 23 August 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>.

because of objective reasons or because Moscow chose to limit its engagement. In various other conflicts, Russia's role was dubious, partly helpful and partly harmful. That was the case with the wars in the former Yugoslavia (support for Bosnian Serbs and Milosevic vs. participation in NATO peacekeeping), with Iran (energy and military cooperation with Tehran vs. support for limited sanctions and participation in the Western nuclear agreement with Tehran) and partly with Afghanistan (helping in transit vs. pressure on the United States to leave Central Asia). Russia also has been undermining Western policies in Syria with its unconditional political and military support for the Assad regime, which has been responsible for massive atrocities. In short, the West's past and current experience of cooperation with Russia on regional conflicts is at best mixed, which should cause caution with regard to future expectations. We can expect limited cooperation only in cases when Russia feels directly threatened or has no important interests.

***Policy Responses: What Should the West Do?***

Three directions are the most important:

*Engage not Russia but the Russians.* The West should continue pressure Russia with sanctions, until the reasons for their adoption disappear. This is especially important given Russia's current economic crisis, which makes Moscow more susceptible to such pressure and creates incentives for it to fulfill the most important obligations of the Minsk agreements. As has been said, however, only positive regime change in Russia can open up perspectives for closer, productive cooperation. Despite the Kremlin's paranoid accusations, the West has not assisted such a regime change in Russia before and it could not and should not try it in the future. It is up to the Russian people alone to decide their future. What the West should do, however, is to pursue an active, positive policy aimed at helping the Russian people maintain contacts with the West, have access to reliable information, and develop civil society in Russia based on democratic values. To that end, the West should increase its political, technical and financial support through various official and non-governmental channels to develop programs of humanitarian contacts, exchanges (including youth), especially aimed at education about the West, its institutions (NATO, EU) and democratic civic education. In doing this it is important not to allow the Russian government to control and direct such cooperation or use it to pursue its goals (e.g. to influence Western public opinion to accept current Russian poli-

cies). However, since the Russian government actively suppresses such activities within Russia and trying to close almost all channels of Western support, focus should be made, on the one hand, on at least maintaining political-free contacts and cooperation schemes and on the other hand—on activities outside the Russian borders. Especially Western non-governmental structures should make use of large and growing communities of Russian fresh émigrés (scientists, journalists, NGO activists or entrepreneurs), engaging them in various educational and information activities. High quality Russian journalists and experts in the West should be helped to develop various Russian-language media outlets, TV and radio stations, journals, newspapers and internet portals—all providing Russians and other Russian speakers with reliable information and alternative viewpoints. In the long term such efforts can help to build abroad alternative, democratic Russian elites who could return to the country should regime change take place.

*Put our own home in order: increase the resilience of the West towards negative Russian policies.* The West has no instruments to change Russia directly, but it can stop Russia from changing the West. Russia's provocative military activities aimed against individual NATO member states and non-aligned countries in Europe, its attempts to exert political or economic pressure on some of these countries, its aggressive state propaganda aimed at Western audiences in various languages, its support for radical parties and groups of both the far right and the far left in Europe, its corruption networks and shadow business practices in the West—all of these tactics are part of the Russian challenge towards the West.

The West should respond with concerted actions aimed at building resilience against Russian negative policies and influences. There are many ways to do this. In the security sphere NATO should adapt strategically. It should increase its military capabilities and its effectiveness, especially on its eastern flank, thus creating credible deterrence against Russia. Here strong U.S. leadership is indispensable and no "power outsourcing" would be feasible. On the other hand, European NATO members, both individually and collectively, should embark on a serious increase of their defense capabilities. In the economic sphere the EU should improve business transparency, if necessary with additional legislation. EU member states should engage in concerted actions to fight corruption and execute European law more effectively. They should build a truly common EU energy market with expanded infrastructure

links and storage and solidarity mechanisms in case of crises, and actually implement the EU's declaratory policy of diversification of energy imports. The EU and the United States should engage in more robust transatlantic cooperation both in trade, through signing and implementing the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and in energy, through U.S. energy exports to Europe.

*Create positive precedents by supporting democratic transformation in the Eastern neighborhood.* While the West cannot change Russia directly, it may help to do it indirectly by changing the EU's and Russia's neighborhood. Despite serious deficits and mixed results to date, the West should increase its engagement in promoting democratic and market transformation in individual states of eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus. If the process of transformation based on European standards fails in countries like Moldova, Georgia and above all in Ukraine, it will not only bring more instability to that region, but it will contribute to increased challenges coming from Russia.

The West should pursue a proactive policy towards those Eastern neighborhood countries that demonstrate their commitment to democratic and market transformation and European integration. Part of this policy should be pressure on full implementation of the EU's Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, including their Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Russian efforts to influence such processes adversely should be denied. Both the United States and the EU, as well other willing Western allies, should provide those countries with substantial technical and financial support, subject to strict conditionality that agreed policies and reforms are implemented. Western and Western-dominated international economic structures such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD and EBRD play a crucial role here. In the military and security sphere the supportive role of NATO and its individual member states is crucial. Western support should be also directed more towards civil society structures in Eastern neighborhood countries to help NGOs and local watchdogs hold their respective governments accountable for introducing European standards and pursuing declared and agreed policies. Russian attempts to derail such processes (e.g. by using trade embargoes or energy blackmail) should be met with even greater Western support for these countries. The West should eventually realize that what is at stake here is not only future of individual neighboring countries but in fact the future of Europe, Russia and relations between Russia and the West.