

## *Introduction*

# **The Russia File: Russia and the West in an Unordered World**

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“What to do about Russia” is a matter of almost daily debate among Europeans and Americans. Few of those debates directly include Russian views on contemporary challenges. To offer some perspective, we asked a diverse range of authors from Russia, as well as non-Russian experts on Russia, to present Russian views on relations with Western countries. This volume is the result.

In a nutshell, these essays—written from wide and often contradictory points of view—tell us that Russia and the West are stuck. Experts and officials from each side are talking past each other, their views rooted in different perceptions and oriented to different interests and goals. An initial conclusion we can draw is that for today, and for the foreseeable future, the key question is not how both sides might develop a cooperative relationship or strike a new *modus vivendi*, but whether, and to what degree, they can peacefully coexist.

Our Russian authors are very clear on this. Despite their different vantage points, they believe the Russian leadership sees the West more as a faltering competitor than as a partner. While it may be crucial to agree on some terms for ongoing relations, a substantial improvement is not to be expected. Andrey Kortunov argues in his chapter that any significant change in current relations is likely to be a long, slow, and gradual process. He argues that the Kremlin currently has little reason to rethink its fundamental approaches to the West. For Moscow, the current status quo is not just acceptable, it is preferable to potentially risky changes that could disrupt the position of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who for the moment feels he is on the “right side of history.”

During the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, the paradigm prevailing in the West was of a robust, largely unchallenged, and gradually expanding Western-led order, in which a reformed Russia could potentially find a place. Discordant Russian views were often discounted or ignored. Today, as Russia challenges that order, this post-Cold War framework

seems to have become a paradigm lost. What our Russian authors make clear is that Russia has not somehow gotten lost in transition, it is going its own way. Fyodor Lukyanov asserts that Moscow is intent on establishing (or, in the mindset of the Kremlin, re-establishing) itself as one of the critical poles in a multipolar world, in which great powers determine the rules of the road. Lukyanov posits that on this basis the Kremlin would be ready to negotiate the terms of a new global order, but that the West is still so focused on defending the old, and in his view, crumbling, post-Cold War order that it is unable, or unprepared, to discuss a very different model of relations.

Russia's new assertiveness comes at a moment when the West itself is more fluid and fractured than at any time over the past quarter century. Revisionist powers such as Russia and China have enhanced their critique of the prevailing Western-led order just as Western defenders of that order either seem exhausted or are fighting revisionists within their own ranks who are questioning the elite bargains and social underpinnings that have sustained that order. In fact, the most unpredictable actor in this complicated equation, surprisingly, has turned out to be the ultimate steward and guardian of Western-led order, the United States.

Under Donald Trump, the United States is engaged in a selective burden-shedding exercise of potentially global scope, with uncertain ramifications for Europe and for relations with Russia. Although U.S.-Russian ties are arguably the worst since before the Gorbachev era, president Trump has been reluctant to criticize Moscow and has hinted at possible deals that could put the relationship on an entirely different footing—perhaps at the expense of smaller countries or of U.S. alliance commitments. He has thus far been constrained, however, by the U.S. Congress, including most members of his own Republican party, as well as by ongoing investigations into possible collusion with Russia during the 2016 presidential campaign, and by members of his own cabinet, who have been far more outspoken in voicing U.S. objections to Russia's annexation of Crimea, its military intervention in eastern Ukraine, its activities in Syria and Afghanistan, its interference in U.S. and European elections, and Russian deployments that threaten to undo the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces in Europe.

The new political constellation in the United States has unnerved its European allies, who have themselves been challenged by a conflation of crises. The European Union (EU) has been suffering through a decade-long crisis of confidence, generated by a series of shocks, ranging from

the financial crisis and disruption within the eurozone to Russia's military interventions in neighboring countries, unprecedented migration flows and the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU.

These crises have forced some unpleasant realities. The financial crisis and subsequent eurozone uncertainties have generated considerable economic anxiety and discontent, strained intra-EU solidarity and eroded trust in European elites and EU institutions. The Brexit vote has made it clear that European integration is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Russian aggression, migration inflows, and Trump's demands that Europeans pay a fairer share for their defense signaled that Europe may not be as peaceful and secure as many had thought.

Under the Kremlin's zero-sum logic, troubles within the West not only offer potential gains to Russia, they can be exploited. Yet over the past two years, the Russian leadership has miscalculated in three areas. First, it expected an improvement of relations with Washington under Trump. Second, the Kremlin anticipated—and even sought directly to engineer—political changes via elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany, where right wing populists had the potential to win a considerable number of voters. Third, many Russian elites expected that the Ukrainian state would soon collapse, because for them Ukraine is not really an entity that can survive on its own.

In each of these three areas, Russia deployed assets to facilitate these outcomes. Yet each of these expectations went unfulfilled. Trump is blocked at home. The Front National failed to win French parliamentary or presidential elections. Right wing populists failed to register big successes in the Netherlands. While the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) has emerged as the largest opposition in the German parliament, mainstream parties—and mainstream policies towards Russia—continue to prevail in Germany. Despite Ukraine's many challenges, on balance the country has proven to be more resilient than many Russian observers had come to believe, in part because of its active civil society and in part because of the consolidation of Ukrainian identity as a result of Russian aggression. Furthermore, despite the host of irritating issues currently bedeviling transatlantic relations, there is notable continuity in Western approaches to Ukraine, forward deployment of allied forces to eastern NATO allies, and heightened defense spending all across the Alliance.

Andrey Kortunov argues that this new consolidation of the West is still very fragile and not irreversible. The debate about the future of transat-

lantic relations has only just begun, and the course of U.S. foreign policy under Trump remains an open question. Yet recent European rhetoric about “strategic autonomy” has yet to be given any real substance, despite EU efforts to develop a more robust defense identity. And in terms of ultimate security guarantees, NATO and the United States will remain indispensable for a long time to come.

What is telling about our authors’ perspectives is that despite Russian emphasis on a multipolar world, the United States, and the West more broadly, remain the primary reference points by which the Kremlin assesses its own actions and options. In the end, Vladimir Putin reacts first to what the West is doing or, increasingly, not doing. To the extent that Russia can speak of strengths, they appear to be based on Putin’s political will and tactical ability to capitalize on Western divisions or diminished engagement than on strong and sustainable Russian resources or bold strategic vision. This influenced Moscow’s decision to intervene in Syria, as well as Russia’s rapprochement with, and concessions towards, China.

Russia is still more a spoiler than a security provider. But the less active the West is in regional conflicts such as in the Middle East, the more able Russia is to step into the breach. Mark N. Katz argues that Russia and the West are doomed to cooperate on the Middle East; lack of cooperation will only exacerbate ongoing problems. Russia has shown with regard to Syria or Iran, for instance, that it is not only a spoiler, but also increasingly a mediator in conflicts. Nikolay Kozhanov argues that Russia can add value because it is among only a few countries that have sustained positive relations with Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. He argues that more active involvement of Russia in the Middle East should not be considered automatically as a threat to U.S. and EU interests, but also as an opportunity, even if Moscow’s resources are limited. According to Kozhanov, there are several areas where Russia’s interests converge with those of the West, including ensuring the viability of non-proliferation regimes in the Middle East, stabilization of Iraq and Yemen, and countering the spread of jihadism. He points to Russia’s positive role in securing an effective dialogue, and ultimately a nuclear deal, between Iran and the West. In this regard, Donald Trump’s questioning of the Iran deal raises alarm bells in Moscow as well as EU capitals. For Russia, abrogation of the deal risks destroying fragile balances of power in the region, because several Middle Eastern regimes could consider joining the nuclear club. This cooperative approach has its limits, however, for instance when Russ-

ian authorities believe that they can exercise additional pressure on the United States and the EU via their contacts with Middle East pariah states.

Marcin Kaczmarek asserts that Russia's cooperation with China remains an important element of Moscow's policy towards the West. Moscow's closer ties with Beijing, he argues, prevented the West from isolating Russia, and enabled the Kremlin to compensate in part for economic losses, following its interventions in Ukraine. This weakens Moscow's bargaining position towards China, however, and prompted the Russian leadership to make concessions, for instance, on oil and gas prices.

While Western influence on Russian-Chinese relations is rather limited, Richard Weitz argues that growing ties between Moscow and Beijing have not given either any leverage over Europe or the United States. The West can, however, exploit differences between Russia and China with regard to economic globalization. Kaczmarek asserts that Beijing is more cooperative than Moscow when it comes to global economic governance. Because Beijing has benefitted more than Moscow from the existing order, it is more inclined to shape it than to challenge it. This might lead the United States and the European Union to conclude that at the margin they could have greater influence over Russo-Chinese ties by leveraging China's interest in international stability and the economic gains it receives from an open economy than by seeking to influence Russian approaches to China.

Can Russia sustain its global activism? In the end, as Kortunov acknowledges, Russia's foreign policy will be defined by its economic and social development trajectory. And the current model is running into serious challenges, including stagnating oil and gas prices.

Despite Western sanctions imposed on Russia following its intervention in Ukraine, both trade and energy exports to the EU grew in 2017. Neither side has an interest in undermining mutually beneficial economic and energy relations. But here again changes under way in global energy markets, and in the energy mix of EU-member states, are likely to have a long-term impact. Andrey Movchan argues that while commercial relations between the EU and Russia will remain stable for many years, their scale will diminish. He expects a gradual decline of Russian oil and most likely gas exports to the EU, due to changes in the nature of EU energy consumption. Russian imports from the EU will also fall, however, simply because a stagnant Russian economy, and perhaps even economic recession, will lead to shrinking exports and limit Russia's ability to buy abroad.

Because Russia is unlikely to diversify its economy and is even less inclined to open itself up to the global economy, Movchan argues that over the next decade or so the EU is likely to become much less energy dependent on Russia and Russia much less reliant on Europe in the financial, industrial and infrastructural spheres. While this decoupling will not lead to complete isolation, it will change the foundations of the relationship.

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Vladislav Inozemtsev is very pessimistic when it comes to potential changes in Russian politics or any possible impact of Western politics on Russian society. While he argues that the EU should do what it can to help Ukraine transform successfully into a prosperous and democratic European nation, he disagrees with those who believe Ukrainian reforms will ripple into Russia. While successful Ukrainian reforms would inoculate the country from reintegration into the Russian empire, for Russian elites and society integration into Europe means abandoning Russia's imperial past and global ambitions. For these reasons, Inozemtsev asserts, Russia will not follow Ukraine on a path to Europe, and could in fact become even more conservative and aggressive if Kyiv succeeds. Lyubov Shishelina offers a counter narrative. She argues that the only real way to overcome the conflict over the grey zone of eastern Europe is for both sides to return to, and reinvent, the so-called four common spaces between Russia and the EU.<sup>1</sup> Whether, and when, either side might be prepared to reestablish such a framework, given current difficulties, remain open questions.

Mikhail Krutikhin argues against any grand bargains or punish-the-aggressor strategies, and favors instead a wait-and see approach. He suggests that the West should simply monitor the situation in Russia and resist the temptation to interfere. This would minimize any negative Russian reactions that could be damaging to Western interests. The most effective way to punish Putin, he argues, is through indifference. Don't take him very seriously and don't overreact to his statements or actions. This could be an effective approach, he argues, especially if combined with a containment strategy that essentially lets Russia's deteriorating economic

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2003 the EU and Russia agreed to reinforce cooperation with a view to creating four EU/Russia common spaces covering economic issues and the environment; issues of freedom, security and justice; external security, including crisis management and non-proliferation; and research and education, including cultural aspects. See European Commission, "EU/Russia: The four "common spaces"," MEMO/04/268 Brussels, 23 November 2004.

and social situation worsen until it reaches a tipping point that would provoke internal change. Krutikhin's strategy harkens back to George Kennan's original conception of containment, or in current parlance, "strategic patience." To support his argument, Krutikhin draws on lessons from international energy company negotiations. These cases demonstrate that the Russian leadership does not take compromise or appeasement seriously, but respects firmness that is based on strength and reinforced by strong personal relations.

Nikolay Kozhanov underscores the importance of maintaining communication channels, even at difficult times. Building trust is the foundation of any improvement in relations, he argues. This will take time. Moscow wants to be heard and respected. If it is isolated, it can become an even more unpredictable troublemaker. At the same time, Kozhanov reinforces Krutikhin's point that the West needs to be able to defend its red lines. Putin and his team respect strong counterparts and ignore the weak.

Russia can definitely survive without the West, argues Andrey Kortunov. But given the structure of its economy, it will only prosper if commodity prices rise. The alternative is stagnation. What this might mean for Russia, in turn, depends on how other countries address globalization and economic change. If the international system evolves in the direction of nativism, protectionism and a negotiated balance of interests among great powers, together with an erosion of international institutions and international law, survival would be the main game in town, according to Kortunov, and understanding national survival in terms of security rather than societal development is something Russia and its leadership are good at. If, on the other hand, the United States and the European Union invigorate their economies and civilize their politics, and if China becomes a main driver of development in the world, the trendlines would be different, and the pressures on Russia to reform, correspondingly, would be greater.

Kortunov proposes three horizons for relations between Russia and the West in an uncertain environment. The first is de-escalation, which must include a stable cease-fire in Donbas, more moderate rhetoric on both sides, a truce in the information war and the reestablishment of political and military contacts at all levels. The second is stabilization with a more general settlement of Ukraine, gradual lifting of sanctions and counter-sanctions, confidence-building measures, and cooperation in areas of mutual concern, including limitations on military deployment. Third is the reinvention of the concept of a Greater Europe that includes Russia

and the EU, and that can involve a common economic space. But this is a rather optimistic long-term vision, given the current state of affairs.

Indeed, for the foreseeable future, moving Russia from spoiler to stakeholder seems to be a difficult proposition. This is not a moment for resets or grand bargains. The more relevant analogy is less architecture than art. The structured frameworks of the post-Cold War—and even the Cold War—have given way to a much more fluid landscape, less akin to a grand edifice than a Calder mobile.

Mobiles tend to spin less when their anchors are sturdy and winds are mild. That suggests a return to basics. In this regard, András Simonyi argues for the reinvention of the West. The best way the United States and its European partners can act together vis-a-vis Russia is by getting their respective acts together within their own respective domestic systems. While our Russian authors may disagree with Simonyi's prescriptions, a number do agree that Putin's challenge is as much about the West as it is about Russia.

In that regard, Simonyi also argues for a shift of our communication away from president Putin. He argues that the West must define a more relevant democratic message for the 21st century, and use that message to reconnect and engage fully with the Russian people. The West should not only blame Vladimir Putin for the deterioration in relations, it should look to itself. Western actors have largely ignored what is going on in Russia and disconnected from Russian society. They should engage as robustly as possible with the Russian people, including with alternative elites, civil society, media and opposition figures, as well as opportunities for student and professional exchanges and visa-free travel. Such initiatives will be difficult as Moscow seeks to isolate its people from Western non-governmental organizations. But Russia is not the semi-autarkic Soviet Union. It is integrated in many ways in the global economy, and the digital age offers many points of access to Russian society.

Vladislav Inozemtsev would answer that Russian politics is dominated less by Vladimir Putin than by a long history of antidemocratic and quasi-despotic rule that no leadership and society can reverse within 30 years. But both authors agree that it is crucial to stay firm, defend your credibility, and stick to your values. This task, whether in Russia or in the West, starts at home.