



## REPORT

# DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA

RUSSIA NEEDS TO RESET RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Moscow's resurgent foreign policy and undemocratic state rule under President Vladimir Putin brought to an end the relatively friendly relations between Russia and the West in the 1990s. The last seven years since Russia annexed Crimea and started a war of attrition against Ukraine have witnessed the continuous deterioration of the security situation in the transatlantic region. The Kremlin demonstrates hostility towards the West, crises and security issues continue to multiply instead of being resolved, and the risk of outright conflict comes close to Cold War peaks. There is an obvious and urgent need to lower tensions, but Moscow prefers to demonstrate its readiness to escalate.

This report is aimed at analysing Western-Russian relations and proposing a way forward in conducting dialogue with Russia. It offers conclusions and recommendations to policy/decision-makers and experts in Western countries:

1. NATO, the EU and their member states should abandon the idea of a possible 'reset' in relations with Russia. A new concept could be developed that would be aimed at creating a new basis in Western-Russian relations satisfying Western (security) interests and bringing Russia to the negotiating table. It could be called the 'adaptation of relations' (to the new realities of an adversarial relationship).
2. The 36 Western countries in NATO and the European Union should agree that the two organisations should work out a common and comprehensive long-term approach to Russia. NATO and the EU could agree to establish independent and joint high-level groups of experts in all relevant areas (policy, defence, economy and other matters) who would elaborate policy proposals and concrete steps concerning the most relevant/pressing issues. NATO and the EU should then adopt and start implementing their joint strategy. Acting according to a joint strategy has clear benefits – it strengthens the West, focuses its policy, improves the coherence of its strategic communication and offers probably the best chance to convince Russia to negotiate and de-escalate towards (a new) normality.
3. There is no need to draw subjective/arbitrary 'red lines' that Russia would be tempted to cross. It is sufficient to constantly remind the Kremlin that its obligations under the UN Charter, the documents of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and other legal and political instruments are in essence the 'red lines' that it should not cross (especially the non-use of force and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states). The West should always be prepared to adopt new sanctions, and these must be proportionate to the malign effect of Russia's actions (the aspect of proportionality – which should be always clearly communicated and explained – is of paramount importance). The lessons from August 2008 should be kept in mind – an unpunished aggression inevitably leads to further aggression. The West should make very clear that it does not seek to influence the political choices of the Russian people/voters, but it cannot tolerate the infringement of their basic rights and liberties.
4. The West should continue to strengthen its deterrence and defence in Europe, particularly in NATO's eastern flank. NATO's strategic communication (and that of individual member states) consisting of both political statements and military/defence actions (exercises, deployments, procurements etc.) should be better coordinated and calibrated and signal to Russia the following:
  - The North Atlantic Alliance harbours no aggressive intent against the Russian Federation.
  - It will do what is necessary to honour NATO treaty commitments and maintain deterrence and collective defence in Europe.

- It will do what is required to maintain sovereignty over the airspace and territorial waters of the Allies.
- The Allies will not accept intimidation against their aircraft and vessels in the Baltic and Black seas. These seas are international waterways under international law, and we will not be deterred from exercising our lawful rights.
- Russia's cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, sudden and massive deployments of troops, closures of large sea and airspace areas (as in the Black Sea from April to October 2021) and similar aggressive actions are grave and destabilising acts that will be met with an appropriate response.
- It would be a grave error for Russia, under any circumstances, to put Article 5 of the Washington Treaty to the test, including by undertaking attacks that are meant to fall below its threshold.

The starting point in negotiating security issues with Russia is the reinstatement of the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty. The Allies must find a proper way to convince Russia to give up (i.e. verifiably destroy) land-based mid-range missiles, perhaps along the lines of the 1980s scenario (deploying missiles targeted at Russia's European territory).

5. The West should put forward a new 'Normandy format' with the participation of the EU, the US, Ukraine and Russia (to support President Zelensky's proposal). The EU's positions and proposals should ideally be discussed and coordinated with non-EU NATO Allies, particularly the UK and Turkey. This model should be applied, as appropriate, to all other eastern neighbourhood countries. It is for the Western nations – not Moscow – to decide who represents the West in this context (and others).
6. The West should not create further vacuums that would be filled by Russia. Western countries should continue to support strongly democratic governments/forces and bring relevant issues to the UN Security Council and other relevant bodies. The mistakes made in Syria (the refusal to punish al-Assad's regime in 2013) and Libya (abandoning the country after the toppling of the dictator Gaddafi in 2011) should not be repeated. The Middle East and North Africa (as well as the Sahel region) is not Russia's neighbourhood. The West has to retake the initiative and help rebuild security and stability in these regions. Russia should be included in joint efforts only if Moscow wants to and is able to play a constructive role. The West should emphasise its economic and financial role and ask Russia to contribute economically as well, rather than with troops and means of destruction.
7. EU members should strive for as much solidarity as reality allows. The Kremlin will look for cracks in Western unity and exploit them. Sanctions are a key Western tool, in addition to defence and security measures, in dealing with Russia when Moscow flouts internationally agreed norms of behaviour. Abandoning sanctions in the absence of changes in Russia's policy would have detrimental effects. A Western strategy (mentioned above) should aim towards a coherent policy on sanctions by all 36 Western nations (and any other nations willing to join, such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan) and reflect a vision of a newly emerging world order that is aimed at strategic stability and predictability.
8. The West should be more willing and able to engage China (as well as other BRICS countries like India and Brazil) in jointly helping to rebuild failed countries (particularly in Africa and Latin America), whenever and wherever is possible, the more likely it is that the Kremlin will feel the need to improve relations with the West.
9. The US and/or any other Western country should not accept proposals by Russia to 'exchange guarantees' of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. The practices concerned are already proscribed by basic instruments of international law and political documents. 'Reinforcing'

these principles through bilateral agreements will have the effect of qualifying and diminishing them. 'Non-interference pacts' never mean what they say. Parties with shared interests have no need for them; parties with divergent interests will use them to advance those interests.

Dialogue between the West and Russia will remain extremely difficult and barely fruitful as long as the Kremlin believes that solving any conflicts will weaken Moscow's positions and that frequent and threatening demonstrations of military power are the only way that Moscow will be taken seriously (and 'respected').

and hybrid warfare against the West. However, this is the first paper dedicated to dialogue between the West and Russia. Deterrence, defence and dialogue were the West's main political and military instruments in dealing with/containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The West must use since 2014 the same inventory, but in totally new conditions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1917, the Kremlin has cooperated with Western democracies only twice. The alliance of necessity forged during the Second World War quickly collapsed after the end of the global conflagration and gave way to enmity during the Cold War. Moscow's resurgent foreign policy and undemocratic state rule under President Vladimir Putin brought to an end the relatively friendly relations between Russia and the West in the 1990s. The last seven years since Russia annexed Crimea and started a war of attrition against Ukraine have witnessed the continuous deterioration of the security situation in the transatlantic region. The Kremlin demonstrates hostility towards the West, crises and security issues continue to multiply instead of being resolved, and the risk of outright conflict comes close to Cold War peaks. There is an obvious and urgent need to lower tensions, but Moscow prefers to demonstrate its readiness to escalate. The post-Cold War security architecture lies in ruins. There are no clear rules of the game or strategic communications.

The ICDS has produced a number of reports, policy papers and analyses on deterring and defending against Russia in a Baltic-Nordic regional and/or wider context. It has also produced studies on Russia's use of soft power

Russia is not the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin is not Josef Stalin or Leonid Brezhnev, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have ceased to exist. Even so, Russia is still a major nuclear power and, from a Western perspective, the Kremlin is an extremely difficult and increasingly hostile actor.

This report is aimed at analysing Western-Russian relations and proposing a way forward in conducting dialogue with Russia. It is structured in six chapters and an annex. The first chapter looks at relations between major Western organisations, NATO and the European Union, and Russia. The second chapter includes the opinions of experts from France, Germany, Latvia, Poland and the UK on their country's relations with Russia, and two sections by the author on relations between Russia and the United States and Finland. A brief third chapter considers China's role in this context. The fourth chapter is an assessment of main interests and contentious issues involved in Western-Russian relations. The fifth chapter discusses whether a 'reset' or a purely pragmatic approach would be more effective in rebuilding Western-Russian relations. The last chapter offers conclusions and recommendations to policy/decision-makers and experts in Western countries. The Annex is an annotated overview of events that have had a serious impact on relations between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War.

The report is based on open sources of information and reflects the opinions of the author and foreign contributors.

# 1. NATO, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND RUSSIA

This chapter looks at Russia's relations with, and approach to, NATO and the EU. It discusses whether meaningful dialogue and cooperation between Moscow and Brussels, the seat of NATO's headquarters and the EU's main institutions, is possible and what the role is of European and transatlantic organisations vis-à-vis Russia.

*Russia regards NATO and the EU as antagonistic blocs and relics of the Cold War*

## 1.1. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

It should be stated from the start that fruitful dialogue and cooperative relations between Russia and NATO and/or the EU are hardly possible under current or foreseeable circumstances.

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There are a number of reasons why Russia antagonises NATO and the EU and prefers to conduct and develop relations bilaterally with individual Western states rather than organisations.

First, Russia considers only the US, among all Western nations, to be its equal. This Russia believes even though France and the UK are also nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council, and their economies (nominal GDPs), as well as those of Germany and Italy, are bigger than Russia's. Thus Moscow perceives that it is dealing with all other Western capitals besides Washington from a position of strength. It is obviously far easier for Russia to deal with individual countries, especially medium-sized and small nations, than with the considerably stronger Alliance and Union. Ancient Rome developed the *divide et impera* ('divide and rule') policy, and the Kremlin is attempting to put it into practice.

Secondly, Russia regards NATO and the EU as antagonistic blocs and relics of the Cold War that was declared over in the late 1980s. NATO

has transformed considerably since the early 1990s, but Moscow believes it no longer has a *raison d'être*, because – in Russia's view – there is no Russian threat. The EU developed since 1995 from the former European Communities and was largely underestimated by the Kremlin until 2014, when it imposed politically and economically painful sanctions against Russia.

Moscow's relatively benign position began to change once the EU embarked on eastern enlargement, and it shifted even more markedly after the adoption of the Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership programme in 2009.

Moscow's attitude towards the EU has become sharply negative in recent years, as was most recently demonstrated during High Representative Josep Borrell's visit to Moscow. Russia was left almost alone after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. The Kremlin-led blocs, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), are Moscow-dominated mere caricatures of the former Warsaw Pact and Comecon. Russia wants to demonstrate that it has its own allies and alliances – organisations that have acronyms ending in -TO and -EU – but they hardly mirror NATO and the EU.

Thirdly, NATO and the EU have enlarged to Russia's borders and now include the Baltic states, all former Warsaw Pact members, and most of the countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia. The process of enlargement of both NATO and the EU was entirely open and transparent. Countries from Finland and Sweden to Bulgaria and Albania joined the EU and/or NATO by their own free will, and most of them made serious efforts to be considered worthy of membership. Nevertheless, Russia believes that the enlargements of Western organisations were against its interests and came at the expense of Russia's security (virtually eliminating the buffer zone of the Cold War era).

Russia interprets the open door policy of NATO and the EU – which appeals to Ukraine

and other former vassals of Moscow – as an expansionist geopolitical game/scheme led by Washington (and Brussels) to take advantage of Russia’s weakness and squeeze it into its own national borders. This interpretation ignores the openness of Western enlargements and the absolutely voluntary and sovereign decisions of countries to join NATO and/or the EU. Russia’s perspective shows that it has difficulty accepting that virtually all nations that it controlled after the Second World War rushed to join the West as soon as they were given the opportunity.

## 1.2. NATO-RUSSIA RELATIONS

NATO members had no good reason to disband the Alliance and cut the transatlantic defence link/relationship between Europe and North America after the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed. The North Atlantic Alliance is primarily a strong bond based on shared Western liberal democratic values, tightly interwoven military networks and ‘habits of cooperation’ that the Allies were determined to defend and promote with regard to their neighbours, including Russia, who were invited to join the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme.

The Alliance regards itself not as a Cold War relic but as a vibrant and powerful organisation that is willing and able to transform itself and preserve security in Europe and beyond.

Neither NATO nor any of the Allies promised, or were able to promise, Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin that the Alliance would stop welcoming new members who would contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area (Article 10 of the Washington Treaty of 1949). Russia has brought out these allegations each time NATO has accepted new members, but former senior US policy-makers, including President George H. W. Bush, vehemently deny that they ever made such pledges.<sup>1</sup>

Russia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and its successor, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, in 1997. It was

the first country to join the PfP Programme in 1994 and one of the first to deploy forces to the former Yugoslavia in support of NATO-led peace operations. NATO and Russia signed a ‘Founding Act’ (Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation) in Paris in 1997. Moreover, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) – a body of consultations on security issues and practical cooperation – was established in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

The North Atlantic Alliance did its utmost to engage Russia in various forms of cooperation and to reassure the Kremlin that NATO and its enlargement were not directed against Russia and did not intend to harm Russia’s security in any way. However, the situation in the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo) in the late 1990s, particularly in 1999,

*The North Atlantic Alliance did its utmost to reassure the Kremlin that NATO and its enlargement were not directed Russia*

proved that political and practical/military cooperation between the Alliance and Russia would both be extremely difficult, if indeed they were possible at all. The only example of practical cooperation became the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) through Russia’s territory, from 2003 to 2014, that allowed the supply of US/NATO troops in Afghanistan. Russia refused to participate with forces in NATO’s ISAF operation, but the NDN was clearly in Moscow’s interest – Russia earned money from the massive transit of military shipments, while the US/NATO fought the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russia’s deception vis-à-vis NATO started in the mid-1990s, when it realised that the PfP programme was not an alternative to NATO membership and that NATO’s door was actually open for the Kremlin’s former vassals. In 1995, at a summit meeting in Brussels, the Alliance unveiled a ‘Study on NATO Enlargement’ that opened the way for Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to be invited in 1997 and join NATO in 1999. Russia could not prevent the

<sup>1</sup> Mark Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (April 2009): 39-40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902773248>.

<sup>2</sup> NATO, “Relations with Russia,” NATO, 21 April 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50090.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm).

enlargement of NATO, so instead it sought to prevent the deployment of Allied troops and command structures to new member states.<sup>3</sup>

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For 17 years, NATO's expansion into the former Warsaw Pact and the Baltic states was 'political'. The new member states raised NATO flags in their capitals, sent permanent delegations and staff officers to NATO's HQ and other command structures, participated in NATO's operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan (as well as in the US-led coalition in Iraq) and hosted rather seldom and usually small scale exercises with Allies. However, no Allied troops and/or command structures were deployed to their territories, either temporarily or permanently, until 2014, apart from the Baltic Air Policing mission that rotationally operated four fighter aircraft in Lithuania.

*The Founding Act declared that NATO and Russia do not consider each other adversaries and gave Russia assurances*

The Founding Act declared that NATO and Russia do not consider each other adversaries and gave Russia assurances that: 'The member States of NATO [reiterate that they] have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members' [a pledge that is still valid] and 'NATO reiterates that] in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing

of substantial combat forces.<sup>4</sup> The document also reiterated two paramount principles that Russia undertook to respect – other states are free to choose their own security partners and arrangements, and no country has the right of veto over the actions and decisions of others.

NATO did not even consider deploying Allied contingents and strengthening the defence of easternmost Allies (Russia's neighbours) in August 2008.

The Alliance (the North Atlantic Council and the Secretary General) condemned Russia's recognition of the 'independence' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the Allies adopted no practical countermeasures.<sup>5</sup>

NATO's position changed fundamentally after 2014, as the Alliance had to freeze cooperation with Russia (albeit keeping open channels of communication) and return to its classical core task of collective deterrence and defence. NATO deployed battalion-size battle groups (one each) to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (the enhanced Forward Presence – eFP) and Tailored Forward Presence forces to Romania and other Central and South-East European Allies. The Baltic Air Policing mission was upgraded and extended (to Estonia). A US presence was established in Poland and Romania (the European Deterrence Initiative), with troops moving around the entire eastern flank.

Russia strongly objects to these deployments of Allied troops, but the Kremlin has yet to acknowledge that the 'current and foreseeable security environment' of 1997, as reflected in the Founding Act, was totally different from the critical situation that emerged after February 2014. In addition, the Allied forces deployed to the eastern flank (about 10,000 troops and support elements) cannot be considered 'substantial combat forces' given their wide-ranging dispersion (from Estonia to

<sup>3</sup> Grzegorz Kuczyński, *NATO-Russia Relations: The Return of the Enemy* (Warsaw: Warsaw Institute, 4 April 2019), <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Nato-Russia-Relations-The-Return-of-The-Enemy-Warsaw-Institute-Special-Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France," NATO, 27 May 1997, [https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/media/59451/1997\\_nato\\_russia\\_founding\\_act.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/media/59451/1997_nato_russia_founding_act.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> NATO, "Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the Russian recognition of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia," NATO, 27 August 2008, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-108e.html>.

Romania), and – most importantly – Russia’s own overwhelming forces in the immediate vicinity of NATO’s eastern flank.

The Alliance recalled the NRC in 2016, but successive meetings between the representatives of NATO and Russia resulted only in mutual accusations of destabilizing Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Russia refrains from discussing security issues in a constructive manner, and especially from the exchange of information. Moscow downplays, for example, the numbers of personnel participating in major exercises, such as Zapad, in order to avoid the notification and observation requirements stipulated in the OSCE’s Vienna Document (2011).

### *The main form of ‘dialogue’ has become strategic communication by showing force*

The main form of ‘dialogue’ has become strategic communication by showing force. Russia is determined to build up and demonstrate military superiority over its immediate neighbours (as well as beyond, e.g. in the North Atlantic region), and NATO is forced to respond by conducting its own (large scale) exercises and displaying political solidarity. Russia has transformed itself from a difficult partner (in the 1990s and 2000s) into an adversary (since 2014) that is preparing for a full-scale war with the Alliance (as demonstrated in Zapad 2017, and will be probably repeated in Zapad 2021, in the months leading to the one-week active phase of the exercise in mid-September). The chances for cooperation or at least constructive/businesslike discussion (on most critical issues) look very meagre.

### 1.3. EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Relations between the European Union and Russia are, as of April 2021, at their lowest point in the last 29 years. The EU does not include Russia’s arch-rival, the United States, and does not have a strong and distinct

military arm. Its member states buy Russian natural gas and oil and invest heavily in the Russian economy. Nevertheless, it could not avoid the path to confrontation with the

*Many European politicians and policy experts struggle to explain what went wrong, how to improve relations between Brussels and Moscow, and what is actually achievable in the coming years*

Kremlin. Many European politicians and policy experts struggle to explain what went wrong, how to improve relations between Brussels and Moscow, and what is actually doable/achievable in the coming years.

The legal basis for EU-Russia relations is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

The PCA formulates the main joint objectives of the EU and Russia and establishes the frameworks for bilateral dialogue and contacts, including biannual summit meetings and regular consultations on human rights (which have been frozen since 2014). Starting in the mid-1990s, the EU worked on developing a strategic partnership with Russia covering almost all non-military issues, including trade, investment, economic and energy cooperation, climate change, education and culture, and research, as well as the resolution of certain major international issues (e.g. the conflict in the Middle East, as well as nuclear non-proliferation).<sup>8</sup> The EU strongly supported Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2012.

However, major frictions appeared in EU-Russia relations, mainly due to two factors. First, for a long time, Russia underestimated the EU’s soft power and its strong commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Union as a whole, in spite of certain

<sup>6</sup> Robin Emmott, “NATO and Russia to meet again, edge toward regular talks,” *Reuters*, 28 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-idUSKBN16Z26C>.

<sup>7</sup> “Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of one part, and the Russian Federation, of the other part,” EUR-Lex, 28 November 1997, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:21997A1128\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:21997A1128(01)).

<sup>8</sup> Fernando Garcés de los Fayos, “Relations beyond the neighbourhood: Russia,” European Parliament, December 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia>.

divergences among member states, does not consider it possible to separate these fundamental issues from the overall context of relations with Russia, as exemplified by the recent case of Alexei Navalny. Secondly, the EU is determined to support countries in its neighbourhood that seek cooperation with Europe and implement democratic reforms. The idea of a shared, stable and friendly neighbourhood, in a spirit of collaboration and respect for the right of each country to choose its political orientation, is evidently not acceptable to the Kremlin, as it considers the EU's policy a geopolitical power game.

### *The EU fundamentally changed its bilateral policy after Russia occupied and annexed Crimea*

The EU fundamentally changed its bilateral policy after Russia occupied and annexed Crimea, fomented and supported 'separatism' in eastern Ukraine (the Donbas region), and shot down a Malaysian Airlines aircraft in 2014. The Union has progressively adopted and extended restrictive measures against Russian individuals and entities, as well as sectoral sanctions, in the last seven years. The sanctions and other countermeasures adopted by the EU or individual member states, as well as the US, go beyond Ukraine and relate, for example, to Russia's use of the Novichok nerve agent against Sergei Skripal (and his daughter)

### *The EU decided to adopt a new approach that is formulated in the five principles agreed by the heads of state and governments of member states in 2016*

and Alexei Navalny. The EU also suspended the dialogue with Russia on visa issues and talks on a new bilateral agreement to replace the PCA. Bilateral relations are further affected by Russia's various disinformation campaigns and its actions in crises that the EU is interested in resolving, such as Syria and Libya.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> European Union External Action Service, "Facts and figures about EU-RUSSIA Relations," Fact Sheet, 4 February 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/92578/facts-and-figures-about-eu-russia-relations\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/92578/facts-and-figures-about-eu-russia-relations_en).

The EU decided to adopt a new approach that is formulated in the five principles agreed by the heads of state and governments of member states in 2016, and reaffirmed by their foreign ministers in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

The first principle requires the resolution of the crisis in eastern Ukraine by a full implementation of the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015. It should be noted that, in order to avoid a dead end, this principle does not touch upon the issue of Crimea. The EU does not recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea (in fact, not a single country in the world has recognised it, not even Russia's closest ally, Belarus), and Russia most likely will never return the peninsula to Ukraine. However, the implementation of the Minsk agreements (which do not mention Russia or its role at all)

would be very difficult, as the Kremlin demands legitimisation and special status and rights for 'separatist' regions under present conditions of occupation, and a total lack of control by Kyiv and credible international supervision. This principle is deemed fundamental, as relations between the EU (the West) and Russia quickly degraded in connection with Ukraine.

The second principle is about strengthening the EU's relations with Eastern Partners, the countries of Central Asia, and other neighbours (such as non-EU countries in the western Balkans). This principle is closely related to the first one, because Russia's ambition to dominate, and exclude Western political and economic influence from third countries is by no means limited to Ukraine. Almost all the countries affected by this principle are problematic for the EU. Alexander Lukashenko's dictatorial regime in

Belarus survives due to strong support from the Kremlin, but the country becomes far less independent than any of the former Warsaw Pact members were during the Cold War. A pro-European president was elected in Moldova, but the state still faces political turbulence. Georgia has recently taken steps that depart from the path to liberal democracy. Armenia is

<sup>10</sup> "EU reaches agreement on guiding principles of its policy toward Russia," EU Neighbours, 15 March 2016, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/eu-reaches-agreement-guiding-principles-its-policy-towards-russia>.

Russia's Caucasian prisoner, and Azerbaijan had to accept Russian 'peacekeepers' in exchange for cementing its hold over regained territory. Russia manipulates these countries through what are called 'frozen conflicts'. Central Asia is virtually out of Europe's political and economic reach and is more of a potential geopolitical battleground between Russia and China. Western Balkan non-EU and non-NATO countries, such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (especially the Serb-controlled Republika Srpska), have very close ties to Moscow and rely on Russia's economic and military aid (natural gas and arms at preferential prices).

The third principle is about strengthening the EU's internal resilience, especially in the energy sector, and in fighting Russian hybrid threats and disinformation and propaganda. Strengthening the EU's resilience in the energy sector (gas and electricity) requires that all member states fulfil the provisions of the Third Energy Package, which entails efforts towards diversifying sources of supply rather than increasing dependence on Russian gas (e.g. Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream). On the other hand, Europe is going green, and its dependency on Russian oil (as well as gas, considering LNG imports from other sources) will inevitably diminish in the medium term. Russia's economic importance to Europe would become progressively less significant. Fighting Russia's propaganda and disinformation is far more challenging, especially in social media platforms, but could give tangible results, for example, through a common approach towards the Kremlin-controlled RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik News, and the development of EU Stratcom, through the East Stratcom Task Force of the EU's External Action Service.

The fourth principle concerns the EU's engagement with Russia on other (foreign) policy issues, such as Iran, the Middle East peace process, Syria and North Korea, as well as the fight against terrorism, irregular migration and climate change. The Union stresses that it would prefer a 'selective' engagement with Moscow, but Russia's approach is also selective, and the interests of the two sides diverge significantly in all these issues.

The last principle foresees EU's continued support for civil society in Russia. It envisages people-to-people contacts and exchanges, particularly between European and Russian youth, but the prospects are limited by both the Kremlin's policy and the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Support for civil society in Russia is particularly important so that people in Russia and Europe do not become entirely alienated from each other, especially in the event that political conditions improve*

This principle is particularly important so that people in Russia and Europe do not become entirely alienated from each other, especially in the event that political conditions improve.

The EU's approach based on the five principles was meant to strike a new balance between toughness and engagement with Russia (a deliberate ambiguity in the style of a stick and carrot policy), as the vision – shared in Europe, mostly by France – of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok collapsed abruptly in 2014. The balance sought by the EU also collapsed, as demonstrated by Russia during High Representative Josep Borrell's visit to Moscow in February 2021, when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the EU of being an 'unreliable partner'. Therefore there is a need for further change, most likely by emphasising and promoting the principles and interests and solving the issues that are vital to the EU. The Union's emphasis on a common neighbourhood rather than on internal developments in Russia could send a balanced signal to Moscow.<sup>11</sup>

*It is time the EU member states realised that 'resets', 'Partnerships for Modernisation' and other enthusiastic initiatives towards Russia simply do not work*

It is time the EU member states realised that 'resets', 'Partnerships for Modernisation' and other enthusiastic initiatives towards Russia

<sup>11</sup> Zachary Paikin, "It's time to rethink the EU's Russia strategy," CEPS, 16 March 2021, <https://www.ceps.eu/its-time-to-rethink-the-eus-russia-strategy/>.

simply do not work. A ‘reset’ would imply the EU’s wish to restore a status quo ante (i.e. before 2014) that was at best satisfactory, which is certainly not the case today. Russia’s ‘modernisation’ would suggest Moscow’s readiness to acknowledge and struggle to shed its narrow, stagnating state-led model of development. In fact, the West has shown self-restraint and has taken steps to accommodate Russian sensitivities and privileged the Kremlin over other countries. For example, there is no difference in how the autocratic regimes of Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko treat their political opponents and protesters, how they fake elections, and so on. Yet the West treats Lukashenko as a pariah and treats Putin as a legitimate and great leader (to whom the EU, in good faith, dispatched its high representative in order to deepen dialogue).

The West still believes that the way forward – conducting dialogue and solving pressing issues – is based on maintaining the post-Cold War order (whose legitimacy Russia has repudiated), making mutual concessions and maintaining diplomatic niceties in the face of aggressive and antagonistic behaviour. Russia is not interested in any of these aspects. It wants to change the status quo, it certainly refuses to make any concessions, and it does not believe in niceties.<sup>12</sup> Tactical moves could be made, but neither side is ready to make substantial concessions, because the Kremlin

stability in Europe, especially in their common neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup> Russia has to take into consideration signs that its relationship with Germany and France is no longer ‘special’, and that, for example, the Nord Stream 2 project could be frozen.<sup>14</sup>

Moscow cannot expect to have fruitful relations in the future with Paris and Berlin if it shows total disrespect and neglect for Brussels. Russia would have to acknowledge that it has to balance its approach to individual member states and the European Union as a whole. However, a prevailing view in Russia is that the European Union’s failure to use its (soft) power is not due to shyness: it no longer has the clout that it had about 15 or 20 years ago, and it is therefore unable to become a global player alongside the US and China. Furthermore, according to such views, the EU is not viable, and the Eurasian space needs a new political-economic alternative.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN WESTERN COUNTRIES AND RUSSIA

This chapter incorporates the opinions of experts from France, Germany, Latvia, Poland and the United Kingdom about relations between their respective countries and Russia.

The experts were asked to focus on major political, security, economic, financial and other issues concerning their countries in their relationship with Russia. Their opinions do not necessarily overlap with or reflect the official policy of their countries. The chapter also includes two brief sections by the author of the report about relations between the US, Finland and Russia.

*The EU and Russia will probably not be able to overcome their differences in the coming decade, but they could come to a pragmatic modus vivendi that preserves peace and stability in Europe, especially in their common neighbourhood*

thinks that liberal democracy is in an existential crisis, and the West believes that Russia is in an inevitable and irreversible decline.

The EU and Russia will probably not be able to overcome their differences in the coming decade, but they could come to a pragmatic *modus vivendi* that preserves peace and

<sup>12</sup> Nicu Popescu, “Why attempts to reset relations with Russia fail,” ECFR, 3 February 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-attempts-to-reset-relations-with-russia-always-fail/>.

<sup>13</sup> Sabine Fischer and Ivan Timofeev, “What future for EU-Russia relations?” *Euractiv*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/what-future-for-eu-russia-relations/>.

<sup>14</sup> Nivedita Kapoor, “Russia-EU Relations: The End of a Strategic Partnership,” *ORF Issue Brief*, no. 451 (March 2021), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/russia-eu-relations-the-end-of-a-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, “EU-Russia Relations: What Went Wrong?” *Modern Diplomacy*, 9 March 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/03/09/eu-russia-relations-what-went-wrong/>.

## 2.1. FRANCE'S POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA: THE HARD ART OF 'AT THE SAME TIME'<sup>16</sup>

TATIANA KASTOUÉVA-JEAN

Conflicts and tensions have increased in Russia-Europe relations since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Mutual trust is as low as during the Cold War, if not lower. Despite this unfavourable context, France, under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, has launched a 'policy of openness' and 'renewed strategic dialogue' with Russia.<sup>17</sup> Misunderstood and often disapproved of by some European states, such as the Baltic states, Poland and even Germany, it raised certain hopes in France in 2019, but it collapsed one year later due to a lack of tangible results and the poisoning of Putin's opponent Alexei Navalny.

*France, under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, has launched a 'policy of openness' and 'renewed strategic dialogue' with Russia. It raised certain hopes in France in 2019, but it collapsed one year later due to a lack of tangible results and the poisoning of Putin's opponent Alexei Navalny*

### 2.1.1. A NEW CHARLES DE GAULLE? THE FOUNDATIONS OF FRANCE'S POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA

Faithful to its great diplomatic traditions and former international influence, France often looks for touchstones from its past. Thus the legacy of Charles de Gaulle is far from forgotten, particularly with regard to his policy towards the USSR during the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> While remaining strongly rooted in the transatlantic and European alliances, de Gaulle pursued

a policy of military autonomy with regard to NATO and of openness ('Détente-Entente-Cooperation') toward the USSR, marked by his 1966 trip to Moscow. This positioning enabled France to enhance its international standing by attempting to play the role of mediator between the two antagonistic camps.

*President Macron took up the same dichotomy of 'dialogue and firmness': the European sanctions that France regularly votes to renew do not forbid the conduct of strategic dialogue with Moscow*

All French presidents since then have likewise practiced the art of 'at the same time'. Nicolas Sarkozy, an Atlanticist who undertook France's return to the integrated military command of NATO, also signed a contract to sell two helicopter carriers (Mistral-class) to Russia, despite Russia's war against Georgia in August 2008. President François Hollande cancelled the sale following the annexation of Crimea, but he pushed for the creation of the 'Normandy format', consisting of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany. It still stands as the framework of negotiations for the settlement of the conflict in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. President Macron took up the same dichotomy of 'dialogue and firmness': the European sanctions that France regularly votes to renew do not forbid the conduct of strategic dialogue with Moscow.<sup>19</sup>

However, this historic continuity is not the only basis of President Macron's policy towards Russia. As a young, ambitious politician who overturned the traditional political chessboard in France, he undoubtedly hoped to be able to achieve a similar result in France's foreign policy. (Thus he set aside the personal attacks the Russian media made against him during the 2017 election campaign.) He likely sought to achieve success where successive American

<sup>16</sup> "At the same time" is one of Emmanuel Macron's favorite expressions, which allows a synthesis between elements that are difficult to reconcile.

<sup>17</sup> "Emmanuel Macron, interview exclusive à la RTS [Exclusive interview by Emmanuel Macron to the RTS]," *Radio Télévision Suisse*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/19h30/video/emmanuel-macron-interview-exclusive-a-la-rts?urn=urn:rts:video:10500328>.

<sup>18</sup> Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Le Général De Gaulle et la Russie* [General de Gaulle and Russia] (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> "Dialogue and firmness" is an usual formula used by French diplomacy since the presidency of François Hollande. For example: "Conférence de presse de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, sur l'OTAN, à Varsovie le 9 juillet 2016 [Press conference by Mr. François Hollande, President of the Republic, on NATO, in Warsaw on July 9, 2016]," *Vie Publique*, 9 July 2016, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/199851-conference-de-presse-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique/>.

presidents or German chancellor Angela Merkel had failed. Macron's France showed a strong will for European leadership, which envisages the stabilisation of relations with Moscow and the countries of the eastern neighbourhood that often find themselves torn between Russia and Europe. These countries are the real bone of contention. Russia seeks to keep them in its sphere of influence and is ready to support loyal authoritarian regimes despite the aspirations of their societies, as in the case of Belarus since the last presidential elections in August 2020. The EU, on the other hand, seeks to help these countries to move forward on the path of reforms and democracy through the Eastern Partnership and Association Agreements.<sup>20</sup>

*Macron's speeches on foreign policy reinforce his view that Europe can be neither stable nor secure if it maintains confrontational relations with Russia*

Macron's speeches on foreign policy reinforce his view that Europe can be neither stable nor secure if it maintains confrontational relations with Russia.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Russia cannot be ignored due to many international issues – the so-called 'frozen conflicts' in the Eastern Partnership countries, Donbas in eastern Ukraine, Syria, Iran, Libya, and more recently sub-Saharan Africa, where France has its own longstanding strategic interests.

Paris increasingly fears the strategic diminution of Europe and France, as well as changes in the global balance of power and the rising geostrategic competition between China and the United States. From this point of view, France perceives the rapprochement between

<sup>20</sup> Esther Ademmer, *Russia's Impact on EU Policy Transfer to the Post-Soviet Space: The Contested Neighborhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), [https://books.google.fr/books?id=EkUIDwAAQBAJ&ipg=PP1&dq=EU\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Neighborhood](https://books.google.fr/books?id=EkUIDwAAQBAJ&ipg=PP1&dq=EU_and_Eastern_Neighborhood).

<sup>21</sup> "Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la politique étrangère et de sécurité de l'Union européenne, à Munich le 15 février 2020 [Statement by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the foreign and security policy of the European Union, at the Security conference in Munich on 15 February 2020]," *Vie Publique*, 15 February 2020, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/273427-emmanuel-macron-15022020-politique-etrangere-de-lunion-europeenne/>.

Russia and China as a setback for Europe.<sup>22</sup> President Macron stated on several occasions (in speeches publicly hammered out by some of his advisers, such as Special Representative for Russia Jean-Pierre Chevènement and former foreign affairs minister Hubert Védrine)

*In France, the subject of Russia is very divisive, but prevailing attitudes are far from Russophobic*

the need to avoid 'pushing Russia into China's arms'. For Paris, whatever the political regime in Moscow, Russia's place is in Europe, and the dialogue must continue.<sup>23</sup>

In France, the subject of Russia is very divisive, but prevailing attitudes are far from Russophobic. France's historical memory has no parallel to the traumas experienced by Poland and the Baltic states. In 2017, among the five main presidential candidates, three held openly pro-Russian stances, including Marine Le Pen, the president of the National Front (known since 2018 as Rassemblement National). Russian president Vladimir Putin received her a few days before the presidential elections in France, and her party benefited from Russian loans. Among the French people, barely more than a third (35%)

*The Kremlin seems to have effective channels of influence in many groups of the French political class*

have a positive opinion of Russia as of 2020 (compared to 57% with a negative opinion). However, among members of Rassemblement National, the share is 55%.<sup>24</sup> The Kremlin seems to have effective channels of influence in many groups of the French political class, including some senators and deputies who have loudly called for the recognition of Russia's annexation

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Discours du président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices de 2019 [Speech by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the conference of ambassadors 2019]," Élysée, 27 August 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-14146-fr.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Christine Huang, "Views of Russia and Putin remain negative across 14 nations," Pew Research Center, 16 December 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/16/views-of-russia-and-putin-remain-negative-across-14-nations/>.

of Crimea. They also demand the lifting of sanctions and the restoration of a 'normal' relationship with Russia.

Several large French companies are strongly committed to Russia. France is one of the major European investors, and the biggest international employer, in Russia. These companies are engaged in projects with Russian participation (such as the utility company Engie in the construction of Nord Stream 2) and are actively lobbying for the lifting of sanctions.

Many French military personnel have sympathies toward Vladimir Putin; they see him as a strong leader who defends his country's national interests.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, among the civilians in the Ministry of the Armed Forces and at the Quai d'Orsay, one can find a generation of convinced Atlanticists who regard Russia as a source of various threats and do not trust it at all.<sup>26</sup> It was to them that Macron's warning was addressed in August 2019 during his speech to the ambassadors. He called on the 'deep state' not to sabotage his initiatives with regard to Russia.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.1.2. FROM VERSAILLES TO BRÉGANÇON: MACRON'S RESET

President Macron rolled out the red carpet for Vladimir Putin in Versailles just two weeks after he took office. He visited Moscow twice during the following year, for the St Petersburg Economic Forum and the Football World Cup.

The summer of 2019 saw a set of French initiatives that, taken together, can be qualified as an attempt to 'reset' Franco-

Russian relations. Timing is important. At that moment, France appeared to be the only country in Europe in a position to formulate relevant initiatives with regard to Russia. Paris wished to make progress and needed successes, given Brexit, its chair of the Council of Europe and the G7, and Germany's relative political marginalisation (linked to the approaching end of Angela Merkel's term of office, as well as the renewal of the European Commission). However, the keys to all main issues, from Ukraine to Iran, were in Russia's hands.

*France appeared to be the only country in Europe in a position to formulate relevant initiatives with regard to Russia*

Another important element in this context was the election of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. Emmanuel Macron established a good relationship with him between the two rounds of the Ukrainian presidential election, when Zelensky visited Paris. The Elysée certainly believed that after the July 2019 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, which gave Volodymyr Zelensky full power, there was a unique opportunity to make progress on the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has blocked relations between Russia and Europe.<sup>28</sup>

*The Elysée certainly believed that after the July 2019 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, there was a unique opportunity to make progress on the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine*

Russia's prime minister, Dmitri Medvedev, met his counterpart, Eduard Philippe, in the summer of 2019. France thereafter contributed to the reintegration of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In August, the meeting in Brégançon between Presidents Macron and Putin was considered an opportunity to resume 'strategic dialogue'. In September 2019, the '2+2' security

<sup>25</sup> Personal conversations by Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean in Paris.

<sup>26</sup> This perception is clearly expressed in the articles 115-117 on the "Renewal of Russian power" of the Strategic Review of Defence and National Security, 2017: "While denouncing "Western expansionism", Russia seeks to weaken the transatlantic link and divide the European Union. In an unprecedented way since the Cold War, it developed a policy of all-out assertion (NATO's eastern flank, Mediterranean, Syria, Balkans) in all fields. This subscribes especially to a logic of spheres of influence that is accompanied by a worrying use of forms of strategic intimidation".

<sup>27</sup> "Discours du président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices de 2019 [Speech by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the conference of ambassadors 2019]," Élysée, 27 August 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-14146-fr.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, "La position de la France à l'égard de la Russie est loin d'être confortable [France's position towards Russia is far from comfortable]," *Le Monde*, 17 August 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/08/17/tatiana-kastoueva-jean-la-position-de-la-france-a-l-egard-de-la-russie-est-loin-d-etre-confortable\\_5500197\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/08/17/tatiana-kastoueva-jean-la-position-de-la-france-a-l-egard-de-la-russie-est-loin-d-etre-confortable_5500197_3232.html).

dialogue (ministers of foreign affairs and defence of France and Russia) restarted after a long interruption. Finally, a Normandy-format summit meeting was held on 9 December in Paris. The four heads of state set a date for their next meeting in April 2020, but that never took place.

Covid-19 was the official pretext for cancelling this planned summit meeting, but the real reason lies in the fundamental divergences that make a political settlement impossible. Russia insists on the strict application of the Minsk agreements and the organisation of elections in the secessionist regions as a precondition for returning control of the Russian-Ukrainian border to Kyiv, while Ukraine highlights the security conditions and wishes to regain control of the border before the elections are held.<sup>29</sup> (Ukraine insists on the implementation of a security package that includes a full cease-fire and the withdrawal of foreign forces from occupied territories before a political package could be implemented, especially

leader Alexei Navalny led to the cancellation of both. The uncontrolled or organised leaking of the contents of the telephone conversation between Putin and Macron, in September 2020, reveals the French president's dismay at Putin's allegations that Navalny had poisoned himself.<sup>30</sup>

*Since September 2020, France has kept a low profile on the Russian front, without proposing new initiatives*

*The contents of the telephone conversation between Putin and Macron, in September 2020, reveals the French president's dismay at Putin's allegations that Navalny had poisoned himself*

considering disagreement between Kyiv and Moscow regarding the 'special status' of those territories.) The Minsk process is at an impasse, despite some progress in humanitarian issues (exchanges of prisoners or the opening of crossing points on the contact line in the Donetsk region).

The Covid-19 pandemic also prevented Macron from going to Moscow in May 2020 to take part in the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazism in 1945. However, France persisted in its initiative: a video conference with President Putin in June 2020 led to the creation of several working groups. A new '2+2' meeting and a visit by Macron to Moscow were announced for September 2020. However, the poisoning of opposition

### 2.1.3. POOR RESULTS AND UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS

The malaise of French diplomacy is palpable. Since September 2020, France has kept a low profile on the Russian front, without proposing new initiatives after the cancellation of Macron's visit and the '2+2' meeting. However, France shuns confrontation with Russia. French authorities rarely criticise Russian domestic developments. France has reacted weakly to Russia's constitutional reform and new repressive laws against civil society, apparently scalded by Russian accusations of Western interference.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from some positive points regarding economic,<sup>32</sup> cultural and societal relations,<sup>33</sup> political, strategic and military dialogue between France and Russia is no longer progressing. France is disappointed by the lack of tangible results and is suspicious of Russian policy in former

<sup>29</sup> Iuliia Prudnyk, "Cacophony of the Minsk Process," SIPRI Commentary / WritePeace blog, 16 May 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/cacophony-minsk-process>.

<sup>30</sup> Piotr Smolar, "Dialogue de sourds entre Macron et Poutine au sujet d'Alexei Navalny [Dialogue of the deaf between Macron and Putin about Alexei Navalny]," *Le Monde*, 22 September 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/09/22/entre-macron-et-poutine-un-dialogue-de-sourds-sur-navalny\\_6053139\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/09/22/entre-macron-et-poutine-un-dialogue-de-sourds-sur-navalny_6053139_3210.html).

<sup>31</sup> These accusations are recurrent and still stand out concerning the 1996 presidential elections, where the West was accused of supporting Boris Yeltsin against his communist rival Gennady Zyuganov. They also target the Russian population and are particularly virulent during social protests in Russia, such as the rally for the release of Alexei Navalny from prison, on 23 January 2021. (See for example "Putin condemns Navalny protests as Western concern grows," *BBC*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55790699>).

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Putin regularly receives representatives of French big businesses in Russia, but this does not help France to protect its citizens in Russia, as showed by the arrest in 2019 of banker Philippe Delpal, accused of fraud.

<sup>33</sup> The Trianon Dialogue created in 2017 at the Versailles meeting has launched some interesting initiatives for intensifying links between civil societies, but these remain modest.

Soviet republics (such as Belarus), cyber actions and the manipulation of information on its own territory. It is also wary of Russian policy in Africa (particularly in the Central African Republic), which Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian has described as 'anti-French'.<sup>34</sup> The results of a renewed (and loudly announced) dialogue are meagre and the successes ephemeral (joint humanitarian action in Syria, announcement of coordination in 'small groups' with the Astana process, and Macron's intention to respond to the Russian proposal for a moratorium on medium-range missiles that was rejected outright by other NATO countries).

*French policy is firmly anchored within the European Union, and France will not put European solidarity and cohesion at risk for Russia*

For its part, Russia has also expressed disappointment that France continues to follow the hard line on sanctions and accept the extraterritoriality of American law.<sup>35</sup> Last October, the former ambassador and executive secretary general of the Trianon Dialogue declared that Macron's credibility on Russia was low and no concrete action followed the communication, while European and French policy contributed to isolating Russia.<sup>36</sup>

French policy is firmly anchored within the European Union, and France will not put

<sup>34</sup> "Centrafrique: Le Drian relève la présence de mercenaires russes [Central African Republic: Le Drian notes the presence of Russian mercenaries]," *Le Figaro*, 23 January 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2019/01/23/97001-20190123FILWWW00322-centrafrique-le-drian-releve-la-presence-de-mercenaires-russes.php>.

<sup>35</sup> The principle of extraterritoriality in US law gives the United States the power to enforce its own standards to non-US legal subjects. A real turmoil was ignited in France by the sanctions imposed on BNP Paribas in June 2014 by the State of New York and the US federal authorities for the bank's deliberate violation of the US embargo against Sudan, Iran, and Cuba. American sanctions can strike European companies that work with sanctioned Russian entities: that's why, for example, some European companies abandoned the participation in the construction of Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Russian diplomats put always their finger on this sensible issue.

<sup>36</sup> François Clemenceau, "Alexandre Orlov, ex-ambassadeur Russe en France: sur la Russie, Macron n'est pas crédible [Alexander Orlov, former ambassador of Russia to France: Macron is not credible with regard to Russia]," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/Europe/alexandre-orlov-ex-ambassadeur-russe-en-france-sur-la-russie-macron-nest-pas-credibile-3999269>.

European solidarity and cohesion at risk for Russia. Russia's lack of concessions does not offer strong support or further incentives for French initiatives. The Kremlin has clearly missed opportunities to grasp France's

*The Kremlin has clearly missed opportunities to grasp France's outstretched hand by giving positive signs*

outstretched hand by giving positive signs. Vladimir Putin probably did not see in Emmanuel Macron a new de Gaulle and interpreted the French overtures as a breach to be exploited in order to divide the Western bloc.<sup>37</sup> Since abandoning dialogue is not an option for Paris, Franco-Russian relations are likely to continue with a few minor ups and many deep downs. If the policies of the Biden administration<sup>38</sup> and the next German chancellor become tougher toward Russia, it will be difficult for France to come out with new initiatives related to Russia. France would then follow a rather hard line, at least in part. Therefore, French-Russia relations at the strategic and political level would be aimed at avoiding further deterioration. The 'art of the possible' has its limits.

*German-Russian relations are in rough straits*

## 2.2. GERMANY'S PERSPECTIVE ON DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA

LIANA FIX

German-Russian relations are in rough straits. The year 2020 was a test case for Germany's main principle that dialogue with Russia remains important despite difficult circumstances.<sup>39</sup>

A number of issues strained the bilateral relationship. The Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny was treated in a Berlin hospital after he was poisoned with a nerve agent;

<sup>37</sup> Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, "La position de la France à l'égard de la Russie est loin d'être confortable [France's position towards Russia is far from comfortable]," *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> New US sanctions are expected on Nord Stream 2 or following the poisoning of Navalny under Joe Biden's administration.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Sauerbrey, "Is Germany Turning Against Russia?" *The New York Times*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/opinion/germany-russia-navalny.html>.

EU sanctions were then placed on six Russian individuals and one entity. A further set of sanctions was imposed on two Russian officials deemed responsible for a hacking attack on the German Bundestag in 2015. The murder of a Georgian citizen in a Berlin public park, in 2019, and the brutal repression of protests in Belarus contributed further to the severe alienation between Moscow and Berlin. Twenty-seven percent of surveyed Germans referred to Russia/Putin as one of the greatest challenges for German foreign policy, according to a survey conducted by Körber-Stiftung in 2020.<sup>40</sup>

The events of 2020 represented not a turning point in Germany's relations with Russia but rather the continuation of a long-term downward trend. German-Russian relations were marked by disillusionment even before the conflict in eastern Ukraine erupted in 2014. Following the widespread protests in the aftermath of the Duma elections, in 2011,

*The events of 2020 represented not a turning point in Germany's relations with Russia but rather the continuation of a long-term downward trend*

Germany's policy towards Russia became more value-oriented and increasingly critical of Russia's authoritarian development. The traditional *Ostpolitik* paradigm of 'change through rapprochement', poured into a new framework with the Partnership for Modernisation policy, was increasingly placed in doubt.<sup>41</sup> The annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine marked the low point of Germany's disillusionment with Moscow. Since then, Germany has constantly struggled to balance the necessity of dialogue with Russia on many international issues with the need to reassure eastern neighbours and

to draw red lines in sanctions policy and against Russian interference.<sup>42</sup>

Berlin's response to the Ukraine conflict was driven primarily by normative considerations, particularly Russia's violations of international law and European norms and principles.

*Berlin's response to the Ukraine conflict was driven primarily by normative considerations, particularly Russia's violations of international law and European norms and principles*

Germany has led Europe's approach towards Russia, including the imposition of economic sanctions, despite close German-Russian economic and energy relations. Sanctions on the European level are extended regularly, and Germany is working with France within the Normandy format for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, yet with only limited progress. The five guiding principles of EU policy towards Russia are supported by Germany.<sup>43</sup>

Russia ranked 13th among Germany's most important trading partners in terms of overall turnover (imports and exports) in 2019. Russia's most important exports to Germany are oil and natural gas. The completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would increase the Russian share of Germany's natural gas imports, which currently stands at about 40%, and has been therefore a topic of ardent debate in Germany, Brussels and other European capitals. Berlin's initial argument that Nord Stream 2 represents a purely economic and European, not a political or national project, has been met with significant criticism, given Ukraine's security needs as a transit country and the need to implement the EU's common energy policy. This led Berlin to acknowledge such concerns and, in 2018, demand guarantees from Moscow of continuing gas transit through Ukraine. The expectation is that the pipeline

<sup>40</sup> Julia Ganter, Melina Lorenz, and Joshua Webb (eds.), *The Berlin Pulse. German Foreign Policy in Perspective, 2020/21* (Hamburg: Körber Stiftung), <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/en/the-berlin-pulse>.

<sup>41</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, "From *Ostpolitik* to 'frostpolitik'? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy toward Russia," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 21-42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12505>.

<sup>42</sup> Stefan Meister, "The End of German *Ostpolitik*," *DGAP Policy Brief* 22 (September 2020), <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-german-ostpolitik>.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Russell, "The EU's Russia policy: Five guiding principles," European Parliament Think Tank, 8 February 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)614698](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2018)614698).

would be completed in 2021, despite the threat of further US sanctions.

In times of strained political relations with Moscow, Germany places a special emphasis on cooperation with and support for Russia's civil society. The bilateral German-Russian forum known as the 'Petersburg Dialogue' met once a year in pre-pandemic times, and regular joint German-Russian meetings take place regularly. The joint commemoration of the history of the Second World War and German-Russian historical ties play an important role in the relationship. However, the shrinking space for civil society in Russia has put a significant strain on cooperation in this area.<sup>44</sup>

After 2014, Germany reassured NATO members in the eastern flank with the readiness of the Very High Joint Readiness Task Force (VJTF) and a rotating multinational troop presence in Poland and the Baltic states (a German-led battalion-size battlegroup in Lithuania). Issues of security policy are also discussed in the German-Russian High Level Working Group on Security. In parallel to deterrence efforts within NATO, Germany continues dialogue with Russia on security issues of international concern, such as Russia's support for al-Assad's regime in Syria, the current situation in Libya and Russia's role in it, and most importantly, the question of how to uphold the 5+1 nuclear deal with Iran.

*Berlin is well aware of Russia's evolving relationship with China, with the two powers moving closer together in recent years – a potential axis of revisionists*

The aim of this engagement is not necessarily to change Russia's goals and policy but to manage diverging views and prevent potential conflict.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Berlin is well aware of Russia's evolving relationship with China,

<sup>44</sup> "Elections in Russia: An Unprecedented Level of Pressure and Electoral Fraud," EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, 16 September 2019, <https://eu-russia-csf.org/elections-in-russia-an-unprecedented-level-of-pressure-and-electoral-fraud/>.

<sup>45</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors," Carnegie Moscow Center, 6 June 2018, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Article\\_Trenin\\_RG\\_2018\\_Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Article_Trenin_RG_2018_Eng.pdf).

with the two powers moving closer together in recent years – a potential axis of revisionists.<sup>46</sup>

Another area of concern to Berlin is the state of the arms control architecture, particularly the demise of the INF Treaty. The extension of the New START treaty, recently agreed between President Biden and Putin, has been a key step urged on by German officials and diplomats. In addition to dialogue between German and Russian experts and policy-makers, Germany initiated, in 2016, a Structured Dialogue within the OSCE on current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area. This initiative was met with scepticism by the US side.<sup>47</sup>

*The election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the US presents an opportunity for renewed transatlantic cooperation on Russia*

The election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the US presents an opportunity for renewed transatlantic cooperation on Russia.<sup>48</sup> From a German perspective, the Trump administration's Russia policy was marked by inconsistency. President Trump's rhetoric on Russia was soft; he attempted to re-establish the G8 and denied that the Russians had interfered in US presidential elections. On the other hand, he ordered the expulsion of Russian diplomats and the closing down of missions, as well as the abandonment of arms control treaties. Moreover, the US Congress approved the continuous expansion of sanctions in order to prevent the completion of the Nord Stream 2 project, as well as extraterritorial sanctions that Germany considered illegal.<sup>49</sup> Berlin and Washington would have to find a compromise on these issues

<sup>46</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience. Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, October 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Christian Nünlist, "Under Pressure: The Uncertain Future of OSCE Structured Dialogue," *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, 29 November 2018, <https://www.shrmonitor.org/under-pressure-the-uncertain-future-of-the-osce-structured-dialogue/>.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen F. Szabo and Jason Bruder, "President Biden: Think Broader and Bigger with Berlin," *War on the Rocks*, 20 November 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/president-biden-think-bigger-and-broader-with-berlin/>.

<sup>49</sup> Christiane Hoffmann and Martin Knobbe, "Foreign Minister on the Future of Trans-Atlantic Relations: We Have Waited a Long Time for This," *Der Spiegel*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-s-foreign-minister-on-the-future-of-trans-atlantic-relations-a-68d28367-ae98-4785-bebf-6dbad3990b26>.

before further progress on a joint Russia agenda could be achieved. This goes hand in hand with the thorny issues of defence spending, nuclear sharing and the redeployment of US troops from Germany. In addition, there is the question of how French ambitions for European strategic autonomy can be reconciled with the transatlantic partnership.

*The German parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021 and the beginning of the post-Merkel era will represent a watershed moment not only for Germany's policy towards Russia but also for Europe's policy in general*

The German parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021 and the beginning of the post-Merkel era will represent a watershed moment not only for Germany's policy towards Russia but also for Europe's policy in general. Chancellor Merkel has assumed a leadership role in many European policy areas. For Moscow, she represented the most important European interlocutor, not only due to her longevity in power in Germany and on the world stage, but also due to her ability to gather Europeans behind a united EU position.<sup>50</sup> President Macron's initiative towards Russia, a joint 'agenda of trust and security' launched in August 2019, has thus far yielded few results and remains a solo French initiative that lacks significant European clout.<sup>51</sup>

Any successor of Angela Merkel in the Federal Chancellery will have to work hard to achieve the same leverage and standing in Moscow that she has, not least due to her profound knowledge of the policy areas in question, as well as her ability to speak the Russian language and understand the Russian mentality.

Two candidates from the CDU/CSU – Armin Laschet (party chairman of the CSU) and Markus Söder (party chairman of the CDU) – are potential candidates to succeed Merkel. Both have been criticised in the past for being too soft on Russia

<sup>50</sup> Niklas Helwig (ed.), *Europe's New Political Engine* (Helsinki: FIIA, January 2017), [https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiareport44\\_europes\\_new\\_political\\_engine.pdf](https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiareport44_europes_new_political_engine.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Liana Fix, "Fast Lane to Moscow," *Berlin Policy Journal*, 26 February 2020, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/fast-lane-to-moscow/>.

or for prioritizing economic relations, and there is a chance that both might want to try their own rapprochement with Russia, as President Macron did.<sup>52</sup> But regardless of who the next German chancellor is, a fundamental change of course in Germany's Russia policy after the parliamentary elections is unlikely, for three reasons. First, Germany's tougher approach – including, since 2014, supporting European sanctions on Russia – has become consensus-based and mainstream among its main political parties, with the exception of the left-wing 'Die Linke' and the extreme-right 'Alternative für Deutschland'. However, different historical traditions and emphases in policy among the main political parties remain. Within the

Social Democratic Party (SPD), the legacy of *Ostpolitik* and 'change through rapprochement' remains strong, especially among eastern German politicians. In the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), economic relations and business ties with Russia continue to be of high concern. Nevertheless, a future government coalition is likely to include the Greens ('Bündnis 90/Die Grünen'), who have led the way in advocating a values-based policy towards Russia.<sup>53</sup> This will limit the room for manoeuvre for pursuing a re-engagement with Russia by potential coalition partners. Lastly, the political situation in Russia itself is not likely to change in the short- to medium term. Positive signals from Moscow should not be expected. That gives little ground for a rapprochement.

*The departure of Chancellor Merkel will have an impact on how certain policy areas are handled*

Nevertheless, the departure of Chancellor Merkel will have an impact on how certain policy areas are handled. In particular, the continuation of conflict resolution efforts in eastern Ukraine and the Normandy format rely heavily on the engagement of Berlin and Chancellor Merkel personally. Until a

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Brössler, "Der Putin-Versteher [The Putin apologists]," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/laschet-aussenpolitik-putin-russland-1.5180476>.

<sup>53</sup> Amanda Sloat, *Germany's New Centrists?* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, October 2020), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FP\\_20201020\\_germanys\\_new\\_centrists\\_sloat.pdf.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FP_20201020_germanys_new_centrists_sloat.pdf.pdf).

new government takes office in Berlin, other partners in Europe, and especially France as a member of the Normandy format, will have to assume this role. And conversely, during the period of French presidential elections in 2022, Germany will have to return to the front seat in relations with Russia, ideally in close cooperation with Europeans. Only a united European – and ideally transatlantic – approach towards Russia can succeed in keeping the dialogue alive while also setting red lines for Russia whenever and wherever necessary.

### 2.3. LATVIA'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA: STAYING CONSISTENT IN THE FACE OF NEW CHALLENGES

ARTŪRS BIKOVŠ

To better understand Latvia's relations with Russia, it is necessary to describe its foreign policy goals. In 2020, Latvian foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, in a speech at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian parliament (the Saeima), outlined several policy priorities. These included strengthening Latvia's security and welfare by promoting stability, security and predictability in regions important to Europe; maintaining good relations with neighbouring countries; and increasing EU's security capacity.<sup>54</sup> An international order based on the rule of law and strong international organisations is crucial. Latvia is prepared for cooperation with countries with which it has major differences of opinion, because an open and honest dialogue based on mutual respect is the basis for building good relations. However, this does not mean compromising on matters of principle.

These goals are reflected in Latvia's approach towards Russia. For example, demanding compliance with international norms, Latvia respects the principles of territorial integrity of states and pursues a policy of non-recognition of Crimea's annexation. Hence, Latvia supports the common position of the European Union

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 23 January 2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 January 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/65341-speech-by-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-at-the-annual-foreign-policy-debate-in-the-latvian-parliament-saeima-23-january-2020>.

on this issue, and it also championed during the last six years of sanctions against Russia. In line with promoting security and stability in the region, Latvia expressed concerns about the concentration of Russian troops in the Kaliningrad Oblast and the Western Military District.

*Latvia is prepared for cooperation with countries with which it has major differences of opinion. However, this does not mean compromising on matters of principle*

In general, history became one of the key issues in relations between Latvia and Russia in 2020. Russia altered history through a biased representation of facts and used this as a political instrument. It especially distorted the facts about the origins of the Second World War. For instance, in February, the Saeima urged Russia to recognise the 1940–1991 occupation of Latvia and renounce the politically motivated revisionism and distortion of history.<sup>55</sup> Later that year, the Russian Embassy in Latvia published a post on Twitter in which it claimed that Latvia legitimately joined the USSR in 1940.<sup>56</sup> In response to this statement, Rinkēvičs said: 'We remind our colleagues at the embassy that the 'elections' took place in Soviet-occupied Latvia contrary to the Satversme [Latvian Constitution] and were a direct result of the criminal agreement between political twins – Hitler and Stalin.'<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Jānis Kincis, "Saeima aicina Krieviju atzīt Latvijas okupāciju [The Saeima calls on Russia to recognize the occupation of Latvia]," LSM, 16 January 2020, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/saeima-aicina-krieviju-atzit-latvijas-okupaciju.a344977/>.

<sup>56</sup> Posol'stvo RF v LR (@LV\_RUSEMBAS), "Saeimas ārkārtas vēlēšanas 1940. gada 14.-15. jūlijā kļuva par vienu no Latvijas vadības soļiem, lai leģitīmi iestātos PSRS sastāvā. Vēlēšanās piedalījās dažādi iedzīvotāju slāņi. Attēlā ir rinda uz pirmo vēlēšanu iecirkni Rīgā (Raiņa bulvāri, 8). #vēlēšanas #Rīga #Latvija #PSRS [The extraordinary parliamentary elections of July 14-15, 1940, became one step for the Latvian leadership to legally join the USSR. Various sections of the population took part in the elections. The picture shows a line in front of the first polling station in Riga (Raiņa street 8) #elections #Rīga #Latvia #USSR]," Twitter post, 14 July 2020, [https://twitter.com/LV\\_RUSEMBAS/status/1282930699524280320](https://twitter.com/LV_RUSEMBAS/status/1282930699524280320).

<sup>57</sup> Edgars Rinkēvičs, "Žēl, ka vēstures un vēlēšanu falsifikācijas tradīcijas ir dzīvas arī mūsdienā Krievijā. Atgādinām kolēģiem vēstniecībā, ka "vēlēšanas" notika padomju okupētā Latvijā pretēji Satversmei un bija tiešs politisko dvīņu- Hitlera un Staļina noziedzīgās vienošanās rezultāts [It is unfortunate that the traditions of history and electoral falsification are still alive in today's Russia. We remind colleagues of the embassy that the "elections" took place in Soviet-occupied Latvia unconstitutionally and were a direct result of a criminal agreement between the political twins Hitler and Stalin]," Twitter post, 14 July 2020, <https://twitter.com/edgarsrinkevics/status/1282960564147425280>.

The issue of human rights, particularly freedom of speech, was also at the forefront of relations between the two countries in 2020. For example, *Rosbalt* journalist Alexander Shvarev, accused in Russia of libel against billionaire Alisher Usmanov, who has close relations with Russian president Vladimir Putin, received political asylum in Latvia. Asylum was also granted to his family. On the other hand, at the end of 2020, the Latvian State Security Service (SSD) detained some publicists who collaborated with the media outlets Sputnik and Baltnews – parts of the Russian government’s media conglomerate – because of suspicion that economic resources were passed onto a person who was subject to European Union sanctions.<sup>58</sup> Demanding respect for human rights, Latvia also pointed to those who were guilty of these violations. Latvia urged EU member states to take firm action against Russia for using a Novichok nerve agent against opposition leader Alexei Navalny.<sup>59</sup> Subsequently, the EU imposed sanctions on six Russian officials, including Alexander Bortnikov, director of Russia’s Federal Security Service.

### *Combating Kremlin media disinformation and propaganda remains a relevant challenge for Latvia*

Combating Kremlin media disinformation and propaganda remains a relevant challenge for Latvia. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to efforts to disseminate such disinformation related to the disease. The European Commission also noted that media close to the Russian regime are spreading disinformation about the pandemic.<sup>60</sup> Initially, Russia sought to use the public health crisis to advance its

<sup>58</sup> Latvian State Security Service, “VDD performs procedural activities related to violation of international sanctions,” Press Release, 4 December 2020, <https://vdd.gov.lv/en/useful/publications/vdd-performs-procedural-activities-related-to-violation-of-international-sanctions.art198>.

<sup>59</sup> Edgars Rinkēvičs, “As @opcw has now confirmed Alexei @navalny was poisoned with #Novichok type nerve agent. #Russia bears full responsibility for the use of prohibited chemical weapon, #Latvia advocates for strong and united #EU’s action in the response of the violation of international law,” Twitter post, 6 October 2020, <https://twitter.com/edgarsrinkevics/status/1313508457643995137>.

<sup>60</sup> European Union. European Commission, “Coronavirus: EU strengthens action to tackle disinformation,” Press Release, 10 June 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1006](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1006).

geopolitical interests, challenging the credibility of the EU and its partners. At the end of 2020, however, the focus was on vaccines, praising Sputnik V, which was developed by Russia, and casting doubts on vaccines made in the West.<sup>61</sup>

Over the past year, Latvia’s aspiration to become a carbon-neutral economy only strengthened. The European Green Deal and the climate goals mark a new turning point in the fight against global warming. Thanks to financial support through the European Union’s Green Deal and the new recovery package, it will be possible to reduce dependence on Russia’s energy resources and promote a sustainable energy policy. In the context of energy security, Latvia’s priority is the synchronisation of the Baltic states’ energy networks with those of continental Europe by 2025. In addition, Latvia firmly supports putting the Nord Stream 2 project on hold.

Despite difficult political relations between Russia and Latvia, economic cooperation remains very important for both states. Although in Russia, the influence of politics on economic decisions will always be greater than in other countries, entrepreneurs look primarily at economic benefits when they make deals, according to Latvia’s ambassador to Russia, Maris Riekstiņš. In an interview in early 2020, Riekstiņš mentioned that trade between Russia and Latvia in 2019 increased over the previous year. Moreover, Russian tourism

### *Despite difficult political relations between Russia and Latvia, economic cooperation remains very important for both states*

to Latvia could help diminish the influence of propaganda on the Russian population. Moreover, the number of passengers traveling by air (between Russia and Latvia) increased by 18% in 2019. ‘Our airline Air Baltic has plans to expand the number of destinations – for now, of course, Moscow and St Petersburg,

<sup>61</sup> European Union External Action Service, “EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives And Disinformation Around The COVID-19 Pandemic (Update May - November),” Strategic Communications Task Forces and Information Analysis, 2 December 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-may-november/>.

but in the summer season – Kazan, Sochi, Kaliningrad’, said Riekstiņš. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these plans did not come to fruition. The pandemic also negatively influenced trade between Latvia and Russia.

### 2.3.1. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Latvia’s approach towards Russia could be described as both pragmatic and consistent, the near future may demand more from its foreign service. Latvia should pay more attention to Russia’s parliamentary elections (scheduled for 19 September 2021),

#### *Latvia should pay more attention to Russia’s parliamentary elections*

particularly to the potential of voting fraud and human rights violations. In such a case, it must call for Russia’s accountability and impose appropriate measures at the local and EU level, that is, implement personal sanctions against those responsible for the wrongdoings.

In addition, Latvia must be prepared for potential violent rallies and protests in Russia. As the mass rallies after Alexei Navalny’s arrest showed, Russian law enforcement agencies are detaining thousands of peaceful protesters, using force against some of them, and keeping them in inappropriate conditions. Hence Latvia should be ready to help Latvian citizens and non-citizens living in Russia, as well as the civil society and NGOs, which may suffer from the actions mentioned above. This may include, for example, supporting financial assistance from the EU to Russian civil society, following the example of aid to Belarusian civil society. In addition, Latvia should lobby for personal sanctions against those who violate human rights and maintain constant contact with the representatives of the opposition.

#### *Latvia also could become a haven for emigrants and asylum seekers if Russia’s economic situation and political repression worsens*

Latvia also could become a haven for emigrants and asylum seekers if Russia’s economic situation and political repression worsens. As in the case of Belarus, it will be an opportunity

to attract companies and specialists; thus the best possible conditions should be ensured. At the same time, such behaviour could provoke a backlash from the Kremlin. Consequently, Latvia must be prepared for potential disinformation campaigns, propaganda, cyber threats, the projection of force (such as the concentration of Russian troops or military exercises near its border), attempts to revise history, and other influence activities. To deal effectively with these potential problems, Latvia should work closely with the EU, NATO and other international organisations. Latvia should also help its partners when they face similar threats.

Despite these issues, Latvia is interested in good relations with Russia. But to achieve this, Russia should become a proper democracy with a stable domestic policy where human rights and civil liberties are guaranteed and international law and territorial integrity respected. Latvia’s national security interests also lie in a Russia that does not pursue an aggressive foreign policy and poses no threat to the sovereignty of neighbouring countries. Only with these preconditions is it possible to achieve productive and mutually advantageous economic cooperation between Latvia and Russia. If Moscow does not change its domestic and foreign policies, then a productive dialogue between the two states is unlikely, and current relations will only worsen.

### 2.4. DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA: A VIEW FROM POLAND

#### AGNIESZKA LEGUCKA

Poland, in its relations with Russia, subscribes to the concept of a dual approach on deterrence and dialogue. However, in the context of negotiations, Poland regards emphasising dialogue at the expense of deterrence as a long-term threat to European stability. Poland believes that it must talk to Russia from a position of strength – above all, through the combined power of the EU and NATO.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, *Poland’s approach to Russia: Radicalism without policy* (Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation, 2019), [http://archiwum.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Forum%20Idei/Polands%20approach%20to%20Russia\\_wersja\\_na\\_www.pdf](http://archiwum.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Forum%20Idei/Polands%20approach%20to%20Russia_wersja_na_www.pdf).

### 2.4.1. POLISH POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA

Polish policy towards Russia is conditioned by its difficult history, including Russia's denial of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and by the Katyn massacre.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, there are clashing interests between Poland and Russia in their

*Poland believes that it must talk to Russia from a position of strength – above all, through the combined power of the EU and NATO*

neighbourhood, particularly in Ukraine and Belarus. Their relations are also influenced by Poland's dependence on Russian energy resources.<sup>64</sup>

Poland's goal is to increase its security in both military defence and the energy sector. An important priority for Poland is to remind international organisations of Russia's ongoing occupation of Crimea, its violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity, and its destructive activities in the wider neighbourhood. Poland's aim is to ensure the continuation of US and EU sanctions in order to force Russia to return to compliance with international law and to stabilise the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Another goal is to persuade Russia to return the wreckage of the Polish government

*Poland's goal is to increase its security in both military defence and the energy sector*

plane (a Tu-154M) that crashed near Smolensk in 2010, killing 96, including then President Lech Kaczyński.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> The Katyn massacre was the mass executions of nearly 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia carried out by the NKVD in April and May 1940.

<sup>64</sup> Andrzej Kupich, "De Doctrina Europea," In *Geopolityka rurociągów. Współzależność energetyczna a stosunki międzynarodowe na obszarze postsowieckim* [Pipeline geopolitics. Interdependence energy and international relations in the post-Soviet area], edited by Ernesta Wyciszkievicza (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2008), 201-6, [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=3385](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=3385); James Shotter, "Poland aims to break dependence on Russian gas," *Financial Times*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/d1b9d764-febd-11e8-aebf-99e208d3e521> /.

<sup>65</sup> "Rada Europy wzywa Rosję do zwrotu Polsce wraku samolotu Tu-154M [The Council of Europe calls on Russia to return to Poland the wreck of the Tu-154M airplane]," *Radiozet Wiadomości*, 12 October 2018, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Swiat/Rada-Europy-wzywa-Rosje-do-zwrotu-wraku-Tu-154M>.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's revisionist and assertive policy has adversely affected Poland's security. The Polish National Security Strategy of 2020 states that the neo-imperialist policy pursued by Russian authorities by military force, as well as 'activities below the threshold of war (of hybrid nature)', is the most serious threat to Poland.<sup>66</sup> The process of the re-militarisation of Kaliningrad Oblast resulted in the area's transformation into Russia's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) zone, which is seen in Poland as a threat to NATO's eastern flank.

At the same time, the Kremlin fosters cooperation with Russia's neighbours by creating a transport and logistics centre, planning to promote tourism (e.g. by introducing electronic visas) and engaging in

*Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's revisionist and assertive policy has adversely affected Poland's security*

dialogue at the local level and cross-border co-operation projects (sponsored by the EU).<sup>67</sup> However, the number of travellers to Poland (and Lithuania) and the volume of purchases in those countries has decreased in recent years. This is due to the depreciation of the rouble after 2014, as well as the 2016 suspension of a local border traffic agreement that made crossing the border with Poland easier and less expensive.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> National Security Bureau (Poland), *National Security Strategy of The Republic of Poland* (Warsaw, 12 May 2020), [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Poland\\_2020.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> OSW Team, *Fortress Kaliningrad Ever closer to Moscow* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, October 2019), [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Report\\_Fortress\\_Kaliningrad\\_net\\_0.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Report_Fortress_Kaliningrad_net_0.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem.

Polish foreign ministers, defence ministers and the president have spoken in a similar vein.<sup>69</sup> Jacek Czaputowicz, Polish foreign minister from 2018 to 2020, argued that Poland should pursue a pragmatic political dialogue with Russia that is based on respect for international law. He proposed to act within the framework of 'solidarity and consistent policy of NATO and the European Union, as well as of the member states, which are our strategic partners'.<sup>70</sup>

Thus Poland limited bilateral contacts with Russia to a minimum and decided that in talks with its eastern neighbour, it would use multilateral structures – the UN Security Council (where Poland was a non-permanent member from 2018 to 2020), NATO and the EU. At the UN, Poland raised security issues concerning Central and Eastern Europe, respect for international law and the prevention of armed conflict. The Polish UN delegation argued that the world organisation should

*A top priority of Poland is cooperation between NATO and the EU in the field of countering Russian disinformation*

closely monitor, among other matters, Russia's militarisation of Crimea and the Sea of Azov. Poland made efforts in NATO, supplemented by bilateral cooperation with the US, in order to strengthen the eastern flank of the Alliance. Political dialogue with Russia is carried out in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). In the NRC, Poland raised the situation in Ukraine, as well as the consequences of Russia's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty

<sup>69</sup> Jacek Czaputowicz, "Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2019 roku [Information by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Poland's foreign policy tasks in 2019]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 14 March 2019, <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-w-2019-roku>; "Błaszczak: Wzmacnianie polskiej armii jest reakcją na agresywną politykę Rosji [The strengthening of the Polish Armed Forces is in reaction to Russia's aggressive policy]," *Gazeta Prawna*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1418297,szef-mon-wzmacnianie-polskiej-armii-reakcja-na-agresywna-polityke-rosji.html>; "Andrzej Duda: Istnieje militarne zagrożenie ze strony Rosji [Real military threats by Russia]," *Rzeczpospolita*, 15 August 2018, <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/180819595-Andrzej-Duda-Istnieje-militarne-zagrozenie-ze-strony-Rosji.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Jacek Czaputowicz, "Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2018 roku [Information by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Poland's foreign policy tasks in 2018]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 21 March 2018, <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/expose-2018>.

(INF).<sup>71</sup> The Polish government preferred that the INF remain in force, but it showed understanding for the US withdrawal from the treaty, citing Russian violations.<sup>72</sup>

Poland has spoken out in the EU in favour of maintaining a firm approach towards Russia, including supporting the adoption of further restrictive measures and sanctions against Russian entities and individuals. A top priority of Poland is cooperation between NATO and the EU in the field of countering Russian disinformation. Poland is a sponsoring nation of the NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence (COE) and also participates in the Finnish COE on Countering Hybrid Threats.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Poland is one of the founding nations of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), a donor organisation supporting the democratisation and resilience of societies in the European neighbourhood, including counter-disinformation efforts.<sup>74</sup> Anna Fotyga, member of the ruling Law and Justice Party and Polish MEP, was a rapporteur on the EU's strategic communication, in October 2016, in counteracting propaganda against the Russian meddling in Western elections.<sup>75</sup>

Poland remains committed to reducing Russia's share in the EU's energy balance and is therefore opposed to the Nord Stream 2 project, which it regards as undermining energy security in the region.<sup>76</sup> However, Poland does

<sup>71</sup> Artur Kacprzyk, "NATO's Stance in the INF Treaty Crisis," *PISM Bulletin* no. 164 (1235) (6 December 2018), <https://pism.pl/file/d56057de-96bf-4fb2-a88b-4f7f0b90d3eb>.

<sup>72</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Poland, "Informacja dla Sejmu i Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej o udziale Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w pracach Unii Europejskiej w okresie lipiec-grudzień 2018 r. (przewodnictwo Austrii w Radzie Unii Europejskiej) [Information for the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland on the work of the Republic of Poland in the European Union in the period July-December 2018]," Paper no. 3145, 10 January 2019: 56, <https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki8ka.nsf/0/EDBE06AB352A761AC12583840044A422/%24File/3145.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> European Values Center for Security Policy, "Poland," December 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/poland/>.

<sup>74</sup> European Endowment for Democracy, "About EED," December 2020, <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/en/about/about-us.html>.

<sup>75</sup> European Union. European Parliament, *Report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties, 2016/2030(INI)*, 14 October 2016, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0290\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0290_EN.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Poland, *Monitorowanie bezpieczeństwa zaopatrzenia w rynku w paliwa* [Monitoring safety of supply in the fuel market] (Warsaw: Ministry of Energy, December 2017), 3, <https://www.gov.pl/web/aktywa-panstwowe/monitorowanie-sytuacji-na-rynku-paliw-w-polsce-2>.

not have much freedom in the near future to choose between energy suppliers, due to infrastructure limitations and international obligations.<sup>77</sup> According to the ‘take-or-pay’ clause imposed by Russia’s Gazprom in the ‘Yamal contract’, Poland must purchase at least 8.7 billion m<sup>3</sup> of natural gas annually until 2022.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the Polish authorities are looking for alternative energy suppliers and sources, including through the LNG terminal in Świnoujście and the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline (from Norway). These changes are intended to help ensure that Poland has a better position in negotiations on the terms of future natural gas supplies from Russia.<sup>79</sup>

Since 2010, a significant problem in Polish-Russian relations has been Russia’s retention of the presidential plane wreckage. Russian authorities maintain that the plane must remain on Russian territory until the end of their investigation, which has been extended many times despite the fact that the causes of the crash were made public by the Russian Interstate Aviation Committee (IAC) in January

2011.<sup>80</sup> Poland decided to internationalise the issue of the airplane wreck. Its position was confirmed in Resolution 2246 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 12 October 2018, which stated that

*Russian policy towards Poland is conditioned by collective historical memory, conflicting interests in the neighbourhood, Poland’s active role in NATO, and the military cooperation and presence of the US*

the prolonged detention of the Tu-154M wreck on the territory of Russia was an abuse of the law. However, Russia did not respond.

#### 2.4.2. RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS POLAND

Russian policy towards Poland is conditioned by collective historical memory, conflicting interests in the neighbourhood, Poland’s active role in NATO, and the military cooperation and presence of the US.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has launched a series of verbal attacks on Poland, including recently blaming it for the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>81</sup> In 2016, Poland passed a law requiring the demolition or removal of Soviet-era monuments commemorating Red Army soldiers, on the grounds that they promote communism and totalitarian systems. The law does not apply to war cemeteries, where such structures are protected by 1990s-era bilateral Polish-Russian agreements. Even so, Russia has strenuously objected to such liquidations and rejects the Polish position.<sup>82</sup>

Russia is committed to maintaining its own sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and believes that Poland, with the help of the EU

<sup>77</sup> “Porozumienie między Rządem Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej a Rządem Federacji Rosyjskiej o budowie systemu gazociągów dla tranzytu gazu rosyjskiego przez terytorium RP i dostaw gazu rosyjskiego do Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Russian Federation on the construction of a system of gas pipelines for the transit of Russian gas through the territory of the Republic of Poland and for supplying Russian gas to the Republic of Poland],” December 2020, [http://weglowodory.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Rurociag\\_Jamalski\\_Umowa\\_Polska\\_Rosja\\_1993r.pdf](http://weglowodory.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Rurociag_Jamalski_Umowa_Polska_Rosja_1993r.pdf); “Protokół dodatkowy do Porozumienia między Rządem Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej a Rządem Federacji Rosyjskiej o budowie systemu gazociągów dla tranzytu gazu rosyjskiego przez terytorium RP i dostawach gazu rosyjskiego do RP z 25 sierpnia 1993 [Protocol to the Agreement],” [http://weglowodory.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Rurociag\\_Jamalski\\_Umowa\\_Polska\\_Rosja\\_Protokol\\_dodatkowy\\_2003r.pdf](http://weglowodory.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Rurociag_Jamalski_Umowa_Polska_Rosja_Protokol_dodatkowy_2003r.pdf); Paweł Banaś and Krzysztof Szwedowski, *Informacja o wynikach kontroli zaopatrzenia w gaz ziemny* [Information on the control of winter gas supply] (Warsaw: NIK, July 2004), <https://www.cire.pl/pliki/2/2003083.pdf>; Najwyższa Izba Kontroli [Supreme Audit Office (Poland)], *Informacja o wynikach kontroli zawierania umów gazowych oraz realizacji inwestycji – terminal LNG w Świnoujściu* [Information on the control over concluding of gas contracts and investments in the LNG terminal in Świnoujście] (Warsaw: NIK, March 2013), <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id,17128,vp,19688.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> The current “Yamal” contract will end in 2022, but because the “gas year” runs from 1 October 2022 to 30 September 20 of the following year, it will end in 2023.

<sup>79</sup> Ministry of Energy Republic of Poland, *Polityka energetyczna Polski do 2040 roku* (Projekt w. 1.2 - 23.11.2018) [The Energy Policy of Poland until 2040, a draft version 1.2 - 23.11.2018] (Warsaw: Ministry of Energy, 2018), 25, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/ba2f1afa-3456-424d-b3bf-0de5a639849e>.

<sup>80</sup> Międzypaństwowy Komitet Lotniczy Komisja Badań Wypadków Lotniczych [Interstate Air Traffic Committee], *Raport Końcowy z Badania Zdarzenia Lotniczego* [Final Report on the air event], 10 January 2011, [https://doc.rmf.pl/rmf\\_fm/store/Tlumaczenie-finalne-projektu-raportu-koncowego.pdf](https://doc.rmf.pl/rmf_fm/store/Tlumaczenie-finalne-projektu-raportu-koncowego.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Anna M. Dwyer, “World War II in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *PISM Bulletin* no. 12 (1442) (28 January 2020), <https://pism.pl/file/7211939e-6470-4dc3-bd58-4aac74efe62f>.

<sup>82</sup> Anna Koszowy, Anna Wicka, and Tadeusz Krąstek, *Graves and Cemeteries of Russian and Soviet Soldiers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Poland. Selected Examples* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, University of Warsaw, 2016), [https://issuu.com/msz.gov.pl/docs/cmentarze\\_rosyjskie\\_gb](https://issuu.com/msz.gov.pl/docs/cmentarze_rosyjskie_gb).

and NATO, is trying to undermine its position, especially in Ukraine, Georgia and, more recently in Belarus. Therefore, Russia seeks to reduce the Polish voice in the eastern policy of EU and NATO. This includes opposing the EU's Eastern Partnership Programme, which Russia considers to be pure geopolitical rivalry.

*Russia is committed to maintaining its own sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and believes that Poland, with the help of the EU and NATO, is trying to undermine its position*

After the presidential election in Belarus on 9 August 2020, which triggered major protests and a political crisis, Alexander Lukashenko asked the Russian authorities for help against what he claimed was potential intervention by NATO countries (including Poland). This request weakened the Belarusian government's political position towards Russia and gave Russia the opportunity to push further for the integration of both countries, especially in the military sphere, under the pretext of an external threat. The first element in deepening Russia's military integration with Belarus was the Belarusian authorities' signing of the military doctrine of the Union State. Russia might intend to create a materiel network of logistic bases with heavy equipment, weapons, food rations and fuel supplies in order to move forces across the territory of Belarus quickly and achieve full combat readiness in a short period.<sup>83</sup>

Russia regards as key threats NATO's enlargement and the US military presence in the eastern flank of the Alliance. Russian policy affects the resilience of Western societies, including Poland, by using propaganda and disinformation to undermine trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law.

### 2.4.3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poland sees improving relations with Russia without preconditions as disingenuous, short-

sighted and dangerous.<sup>84</sup> Such a policy would also be naïve, because the Kremlin manipulates the Russian public with propaganda related to its confrontation with the West. This is done in order to justify Russia's difficult economic situation and maintain support for its assertive foreign policy. The power elite in Russia fears, above all, a 'colour revolution' and a rebellion by those who can change the existing political system.

Restarting relations with Russia is short-sighted because the Kremlin is counting on economic cooperation as leverage for terminating sanctions in the EU. An unconditional restart of cooperation with Russia is dangerous, because it will strengthen the Russian authorities' conviction that the annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in Europe bear no long-term consequences for them.<sup>85</sup>

Based on these conclusions, Poland recommends:<sup>86</sup>

- **Conditionality in lifting sanctions against Russia.** Weakening EU sanctions against Russia is possible once the reasons for their introduction, including the annexation of Crimea, no longer apply. In the case of the Donbas region, the immediate goal should be a full and permanent ceasefire and holding free, fair and monitored local elections. Further aggressive actions by Russia should be met by new EU sanctions.
- **Reducing EU dependence on Russian energy,** including suspending Nord Stream 2, in order to prevent Russian political pressure in the future. Cooperation on energy projects must not violate the law or principles of European policy, and it must not limit activities aimed at diversifying energy supply sources.

<sup>83</sup> Anna M. Dwyer, "Possible Scenarios of Russian-Belarusian Military Integration," PISM Bulletin no. 258 (1688) (17 December 2020), <https://pism.pl/file/5c83fa11-97a5-40b2-822b-be30e941570f>.

<sup>84</sup> Marek Menkiszak, "Gdy Europa choruje Rosja nie jest lekarstwem [There is no medicine against Europe getting sick of Russia]," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 72, no. 4 (2017): 41-57, <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2019.72.4.06>.

<sup>85</sup> Agnieszka Legucka, "The International Aspects of Vladimir Putin's Re-election Campaign," *PISM Bulletin* no. 117 (1057) (28 November 2017), <https://pism.pl/file/3283b23b-679d-407d-b63c-9f0f392ad904>.

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, "Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2017-2021," December 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/869184c0-bd6f-4a20-b8af-a5c8190350a1>.

- **Dialogue with Russia in the area of security should not violate the security interests of EU and NATO member states.** The negotiations with Russia about cyber threats or the fight against terrorism must not lead to the revelation of sensitive information that may be used by Russia for hostile activities. Cooperation with Russia in digital technologies and in the military sphere should not be permitted. The risk of Russia using shared technology to improve the tools it uses for aggressive policies is too high.
- **Support for civil society in Russia.** Political dialogue conducted only with Russian authorities, thus excluding Russia's civil society, legitimises the Kremlin's authoritarianism. The EU should also support pro-democratic and pro-European initiatives among the Russian diaspora in the West.
- **NATO should clearly communicate to Russia that military activities (the potential deployment of its forces in Belarus) will meet with a response from the Alliance.** This could consist, for example, of the further strengthening of the Eastern Flank and even the deployment of additional defensive weapons to member states in this area.

## 2.5. UK-RUSSIA POLICY AND DIALOGUE

KEIR GILES

### 2.5.1. SUMMARY

British policy towards Russia combines firm rhetoric with persistent attempts to offer Russia routes to improving the bilateral relationship, especially through dialogue. Among European states, the UK is among the most vocally critical of Moscow and is more willing than most to identify Russia as a destructive and destabilising power. Nevertheless, while the UK has, on occasion, robustly countered direct Russian attacks on British or allied interests or citizens, the UK foreign policy establishment's default mode has consistently been to seek cooperation with Moscow despite the conspicuous absence of

shared values or interests between the two states. It was not until the attempted murders of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in March 2018 that recognition of Russian hostility started to outweigh the presumption that relations could be improved through British actions alone. However, even after 2018, Russian financial and political influence in London has remained a serious challenge to coherent policy.

*British policy towards Russia combines firm rhetoric with persistent attempts to offer Russia routes to improving the bilateral relationship, especially through dialogue*

In December 2017 British foreign minister (now prime minister) Boris Johnson went to Moscow with the intention of improving bilateral relations. He told his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov that the UK and Russia had 'substantial interests in common'.<sup>87</sup> By mid-September 2018 he described this as 'the classic, classic mistake

*While the UK has, on occasion, robustly countered direct Russian attacks on British or allied interests or citizens, the UK foreign policy establishment's default mode has consistently been to seek cooperation with Moscow*

of thinking it was possible to have a "re-set" with Russia' and a 'fool's errand'. He added: 'I hold that regime in absolute contempt'.<sup>88</sup> At the leadership level, therefore, the relationship does have the benefit of clarity. Johnson has further stated: 'There will be no normalisation of our bilateral relationship until Russia ends the destabilising activity that threatens the UK and our allies and undermines the safety of our citizens and our collective security'.<sup>89</sup> Such a development is broadly considered to be unlikely.

<sup>87</sup> Rob Merrick, "Boris Johnson clashes with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow over attacks on Putin regime," *The Independent*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-russia-sergei-lavrov-moscow-visit-putin-foreign-minister-ukraine-uk-a8124021.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, "A conversation with Boris Johnson," American Enterprise Institute, 13 September 2018, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/a-conversation-with-boris-johnson/>.

<sup>89</sup> "No normalization in relations yet, UK PM Johnson tells Russia's Putin," *Reuters*, 19 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-security-russia-idUSKBN1Z10N9>.

Nevertheless, when considering the (unpublished) ‘cross-Whitehall Russia Strategy’, last updated in March 2019, Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) noted that its ‘overarching long-term “vision”’ is ‘A Russia that chooses to co-operate, rather than challenge or confront’. The ISC report continues: ‘It is... striking that two out of the five ‘pillars’ of the cross-Whitehall Russia Strategy are still focused on proactive engagement and relationship-building with Russia, beyond essential communication.’ Even so, the Committee goes on to note: ‘Whilst it is possible that an improved relationship between Russia and the UK may one day reduce the threat to the UK, it is unrealistic to think that that might happen under the current Russian leadership.’<sup>90</sup>

*The UK has adapted its approach to the relationship in the light of hostile action by Moscow*

### 2.5.2. TURNING POINTS

British policy toward Russia has developed under the influence of a series of pivotal events. At each such juncture, the UK has adapted its approach to the relationship in the light of hostile action by Moscow.

The 2006 murder by polonium of naturalised British citizen Aleksandr Litvinenko in London triggered a reappraisal of Russia’s attitude toward the UK, but not one that led to a corresponding change in core British policy. The then Labour government considered other interests, primarily economic ones, to outweigh the significance of the attack.<sup>91</sup> The subsequent Conservative government continued this approach: Prime Minister David Cameron stated that while the British position on the Litvinenko murder remained unchanged, ‘I do think it is right, at the same time, to try to build a better relationship with Russia across

<sup>90</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), “Russia,” 21 July 2020, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721\\_HC632\\_CCS001\\_CCS1019402408-001\\_ISC\\_Russia\\_Report\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (UK), *Global Security: Russia. Second Report of the Session 2007-08* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2007), 50, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmfa/51/51.pdf>.

a whole range of issues’.<sup>92</sup> Subsequent analysis of this period of British policy, while noting that it constituted a failure of deterrence with regard to Russia, indicated that it stemmed from an inability to recognise the fundamental differences in the UK and Russia’s respective world views and from an ongoing belief that Russia’s growing integration with the world economy would eventually tame it.<sup>93</sup>

The armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 similarly prompted a largely temporary interruption of standard British attitudes, but Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the start of offensive operations against eastern Ukraine led to a far more substantial adjustment in assumptions and the recognition of Russia as a substantial threat to European security (although without the increase in expenditure on conventional defence of the UK that might logically have been expected to result). Both the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, and the referendum on the UK’s departure from the European Union in 2016, triggered significant public debate on whether Russia had used subversion and information warfare to influence the result. In the case of the Brexit referendum, the effect of Russian interference is unquantifiable, because there has been no political will to investigate whether it was effective.<sup>94</sup>

As noted above, current British policy remains guided in large part by the 2018 Skripal incident, which then Prime Minister Theresa May described as ‘an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom’.<sup>95</sup> Recognition of Russian willingness to carry out attacks of this kind has led not only to a

<sup>92</sup> UK Parliament, “House of Commons Debates,” 14 September 2011, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110914/debtext/110914-0001.htm#11091475001464>.

<sup>93</sup> Duncan Allan, *Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack* (London: Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-30-managed-confrontation-uk-russia-salisbury-allan-final.pdf>.

<sup>94</sup> David Walsh and AP, “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>95</sup> UK Parliament, “Salisbury Incident,” UK Parliament Hansard, Volume 637, 12 March 2018, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-03-12/debates/722E1DF5-68E2-41A0-8F3C-23B6480B93BF/SalisburyIncident>.

reassessment of the Litvinenko case 12 years earlier and its implications, but also renewed interest in the suspicious deaths in the UK of numerous other individuals from or connected with Russia.<sup>96</sup>

### *Current British policy remains guided in large part by the 2018 Skripal incident*

#### 2.5.3. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The UK's response to the Skripal incident clearly demonstrates how, in order to defend and promote its interests as effectively as possible when dealing with Russia, Britain seeks leverage from its alliances and its membership of multilateral organisations. Recognising that the UK alone can exert only limited leverage on Russia, the British government undertook a highly successful diplomatic effort to persuade allies and partners to join it in expelling Russian intelligence officers and diplomats. The release of information (albeit limited) on the Russian attackers, allowing media globally and within Russia itself to develop a detailed picture of Russian intelligence operations through their own research, caused further substantial damage to Russian capabilities. This is consistent with a pattern of activity from 2018 onwards, where the effect of international coordination has been enhanced by greater transparency and willingness to release operational details of Russian hostile activity.<sup>97</sup>

### *UK also seeks to offer practical security support to nations directly at risk from Russian hostile action*

Within the framework of international cooperation, the UK also seeks to offer practical security support to nations directly at risk from Russian hostile action. This includes support in conventional military terms, despite enduring concerns that Britain's willingness

<sup>96</sup> Heidi Blake et al., "From Russia with Blood," *BuzzFeed News*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/heidiblake/from-russia-with-blood-14-suspected-hits-on-british-soil>.

<sup>97</sup> Keir Giles and Kim Hartmann, "'Silent Battle' Goes Loud: Entering a New Era of State-Avowed Cyber Conflict," in *11th International Conference on Cyber Conflict: Silent Battle*, eds. Tomáš Minárik et al. (Tallinn: NATO CCD COE, 2019), 23-36, [https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2019/06/CyCon\\_2019\\_BOOK.pdf](https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2019/06/CyCon_2019_BOOK.pdf).

to take on security commitments outstrips its willingness to pay for the capabilities necessary to meet them.<sup>98</sup> The UK is a framework nation for NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) rotational deployment in Estonia, as well as contributing small additional forces to the US-led contingent in Poland. It is also the lead nation for the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a coalition of nine northern European states intended for crisis response, and it assists the Ukrainian armed forces with training and capacity building on a bilateral basis. Meanwhile, the UK has declared itself open for defence dialogue with Russia, but with limited response. Capacity for engagement is, in any case, limited, as successive cuts and expulsions have reduced the Defence Section of the British Embassy in Moscow to the vanishing point.

### *The UK is now in a position to pursue a firmer line in relations with Russia independently, because it no longer needs to coordinate policy with Brussels*

The effect of Brexit on international cooperation is mixed. The UK's defence and security arrangements remain largely unaffected, focused as they are on NATO rather than the EU. In addition, although Brexit is considered to have weakened European resistance to Russia overall by removing a prominent critic of Moscow from the EU, the UK is now in a position to pursue a firmer line in relations with Russia independently, because it no longer needs to coordinate policy with Brussels. In particular, the UK's desire for stronger sanctions is no longer frustrated by the need for alignment with less robust approaches across Europe.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of unilateral British action on Russian interests will remain limited, except in niche areas of strong UK capability such as cyber power.<sup>100</sup> Similarly,

<sup>98</sup> Jack Watling, *By Parity and Presence: Detering Russia with Conventional Land Forces* (London: RUSI, July 2020), [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/by\\_parity\\_and\\_presence\\_final\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/by_parity_and_presence_final_web_version.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> "Jeremy Hunt wants 'malign' Russia to face tougher sanctions," *BBC*, 21 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45250069>.

<sup>100</sup> Lizzy Buchan, "Theresa May warns Russia over election meddling and vows to protect UK," *The Independent*, 13 November 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-russia-election-meddling-warning-cyber-warfare-latest-uk-a8053161.html>.

UK threats to limit trade with Moscow do not pose a substantial risk to Russia, as the UK is not a significant trading partner. Importantly, however, financial services make up a disproportionate share of bilateral trade,<sup>101</sup> and this in itself distorts the relationship by providing the UK with both opportunities and vulnerabilities in its dealings with Moscow.

*London's traditional attractiveness as a destination for Russian money rests on a combination of a lax visa regime for major investors and a strong financial services industry with relatively light regulation*

#### 2.5.4 MONEY, INFLUENCE AND LAW

London's traditional attractiveness as a destination for Russian money rests on a combination of a lax visa regime for major investors and a strong financial services industry with relatively light regulation. The UK's overseas territories, which long followed their own, even more liberal rules on financial flows, have offered the additional benefit of secrecy in the form of anonymously owned companies. After an extended period in which few questions were asked about the provenance of inflowing Russian wealth, the ISC now describes concern over 'the extent to which Russian expatriates are using their access to UK businesses and politicians to exert influence in the UK'.<sup>102</sup>

Public alarm over this influence extends to both major political parties. Substantial donations by prominent Russians to politicians of the ruling Conservative Party raise questions over how precisely they influence, or are intended to influence, policy.<sup>103</sup> While there has been no direct public allegation that any British politician has taken action out of an obligation to Moscow,

members of Parliament from the opposition Labour Party, including its former leader Jeremy Corbyn, have publicly disseminated material from Russian hack-and-leak operations intended to influence elections or discredit opponents of Russia<sup>104</sup> – in some cases appearing on the RT news channel to do so.<sup>105</sup>

Markets as well as politics are distorted. A wide range of individuals employed by service industries, including bankers, real estate agents, lawyers, accountants, and public relations and reputation managers, benefit substantially from the influx of very large quantities of money that require managing, investing and, on occasion, concealing its origins. In addition, London is seen as a primary destination for 'legal tourism'. Disputes between Russian oligarchs have repeatedly been settled there, thanks to a distinctive perception that English courts can provide both a strong rule of law and the best justice Russian money can buy.

*English courts can provide both a strong rule of law and the best justice Russian money can buy*

The extent of vested interests in London in maintaining a good relationship with Russian money leads to incongruities in the relationship with Moscow. The day after Theresa May's uncompromising statement on the Skripal incident referred to above, Russia's state-owned gas company Gazprom launched a €750 million eurobond in London. The following day, Russia floated a US \$4 billion sovereign eurobond, with British investors making up almost half the buyers. The inevitable inference was that regardless of the firm rhetoric from the British government, London's business with Russia would continue as normal.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>101</sup> James Goddard, "UK trade with Russia," UK Parliament House of Lords Library, 20 July 2020, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-trade-with-russia/>.

<sup>102</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), "Russia," 21 July 2020, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721\\_HC632\\_CCS001\\_CCS1019402408-001\\_ISC\\_Russia\\_Report\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Adam Payne, "14 ministers in Boris Johnson's government received funding from donors linked to Russia," *Business Insider*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-report-donors-boris-johnson-conservative-party-2020-7>.

<sup>104</sup> Harry Yorke, "Russians 'played Jeremy Corbyn as a useful idiot' to publicise classified documents," *The Telegraph*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/07/16/russians-played-jeremy-corbyn-useful-idiot-publicise-classified/>.

<sup>105</sup> "Media not covering Integrity Initiative scandal because they might be 'involved' – Labour MP to RT," *Russia Today*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.rt.com/uk/448393-chris-williamson-integrity-initiative-rt/>.

<sup>106</sup> Duncan Allan, *Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack* (London: Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-30-managed-confrontation-uk-russia-salisbury-allan-final.pdf>.

‘Unexplained Wealth Orders’ (UWOs), introduced into UK law in 2017, reverse the normal burden of proof by obliging individuals to account for the provenance of their finances in the UK. Consequently, they have been presented as a means of countering malign influence exerted by means of Russian wealth

*The extent of vested interests in London in maintaining a good relationship with Russian money leads to incongruities in the relationship with Moscow*

– potentially extending to use as a way of directly targeting Russian leadership figures for punitive countermeasures.<sup>107</sup> But their implementation to date has been very limited, not least because the legal resources and budget available to the UK’s National Crime Agency may be surpassed by that available to the targets of its investigations.<sup>108</sup>

Thus in theory, the sizable amount of Russian-owned financial assets in London provides a potential lever for influencing Russian state behaviour. In practice, however, both the legal challenges of taking action against these assets and the influential interest groups that would oppose doing so mean that they present more of a vulnerability than an opportunity.<sup>109</sup>

In addition, legal challenges in countering Russian influence on policy are compounded by ongoing deficiencies in British legislation intended to provide safeguards against insider threats. Politicians in the (lower) House of Commons are obliged to declare their financial interests, leading to public knowledge of their relationships with Russian funders. However, members of the (upper) House of Lords are

<sup>107</sup> Richard Kerbaj and Tim Shipman, “The UK National Crime Agency ‘dirty money’ probe targets Russian oligarchs,” *The Times*, 3 June 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/national-crime-agency-dirty-money-probe-targets-russian-oligarchs-n09sp2b7w>.

<sup>108</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), “Russia,” 21 July 2020, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721\\_HC632\\_CCS001\\_CCS1019402408-001\\_ISC\\_Russia\\_Report\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Oliver Bullough, “Forget the pledges to act – London is still a haven for dirty Russian money,” *The Guardian*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/30/forget-pledges-to-act-london-still-haven-for-dirty-russian-money>.

under no such obligation, which allows them to have business interests linked to Russia or even work directly for major Russian companies linked to the Russian state. In addition to politics, agents of influence can also work on behalf of Russia in other fields such as business, the media and academia, whether overtly or covertly, with a similar lack of concern. Unlike many other countries (and Russia itself), the UK does not have a ‘Foreign Agents Registration Act’. In fact, as the ISC noted with a certain amount of incredulity, ‘it is not an offence in any sense to be a covert agent of the Russian Intelligence Services in the UK’ – the offence only arises if you acquire damaging secrets and successfully pass them to Russia.<sup>110</sup>

### 2.5.5. COMMENTARY

The search for ‘proactive engagement and relationship-building with Russia’ thus coexists with a clear and well-developed perception of Russia as an adversary, and the apparently contrary policy declared at prime

*The search for ‘proactive engagement and relationship-building with Russia’ thus coexists with a clear and well-developed perception of Russia as an adversary*

ministerial level, as noted above. Although British government officials state that policy coordination between ministries has improved, this tension can lead to apparent incoherence in implementation. Messaging directed at Russia from the prime minister and Ministry of Defence, for instance, is focused firmly on boundaries and unacceptable behaviour. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), meanwhile, sponsors projects focused on dialogue with Russian institutions, with criteria that appear to place an inherent value in dialogue as an end in itself rather than considering the critical issue of what is to be said and what message it sends to Russia. These projects may have benefits that are not publicly discernible, but the primary visible

<sup>110</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), “Russia,” 21 July 2020, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721\\_HC632\\_CCS001\\_CCS1019402408-001\\_ISC\\_Russia\\_Report\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf).

effect is to undermine the UK's overall firm and robust stance against hostile Russian policies, including by amplifying and legitimising Kremlin messages through the implicit endorsement of London think tanks.<sup>111</sup>

*Messaging directed at Russia from the prime minister and Ministry of Defence, for instance, is focused firmly on boundaries and unacceptable behaviour*

Neither of these approaches to dialogue, however, addresses the root causes of the UK's disagreement with Russia. Their deeply divergent world views mean that there are few points of contact between the two countries' objectives, interests or even values. In this context, the most encouraging public policy statement from the UK is Boris Johnson's explicit rejection of a reset without a change in Russian behaviour. This breaks the normal cycle of Russia's interlocutors seeking periodically to 'turn the page' and set past actions aside in search of a better relationship, thus inevitably convincing Russia it can disregard protests against its actions because any adverse consequences will be limited and temporary. Dialogue, where it occurs, should maintain this emphasis on recognising and addressing disagreements rather than seeking to discount or overlook them.

*American-Russian relations and Putin's foreign policy changed with each subsequent US president*

## 2.6. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

President Joe Biden is President Vladimir Putin's fifth American counterpart, following Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. American-Russian relations and Putin's foreign policy changed with each subsequent US president.

<sup>111</sup> Andrey Kortunov, "We Should Exempt Africa from the UK-Russia Geopolitical Confrontation," RUSI, 15 November 2019, <https://rusi.org/commentary/we-should-exempt-africa-uk-russia-geopolitical-confrontation>.

George W. Bush first met Vladimir Putin in Slovenia in June 2001. At the press conference after the summit, Bush said, 'I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy... I was able to get a sense of his soul.' He later argued that this perception was not wrong but simply that Putin thereafter 'changed to a certain extent'.<sup>112</sup> They met again in Bratislava in February 2005, where their 'cosy' relationship was on display. Bush and Putin discussed nuclear proliferation (specifically, the two remaining members of Bush's 'axis of evil', Iran and North Korea) but also had differences regarding the need for democratic reforms in Russia.<sup>113</sup> Their last meeting in Sochi, just after the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, produced no results. Russia's president reportedly told a stunned NATO audience in Bucharest that Ukraine 'is not a country' but just a 'mistake of history'.<sup>114</sup>

*Putin proposed a missile defence shield in Europe controlled jointly by the US, NATO and Russia, something that obviously was not feasible or acceptable in principle to the Allies*

Putin then proposed a missile defence shield in Europe controlled jointly by the US, NATO and Russia, something that obviously was not feasible or acceptable in principle to the Allies.<sup>115</sup> The dilemma that came into sharp relief during the Bush-Putin period remains unresolved and will continue to dominate Western-Russian relations – how to engage Russia without giving it veto power over European security issues.

<sup>112</sup> Jon Ward, "Bush explains his comment about Putin's soul, says Russian leader 'changed'," *Daily Caller*, 14 December 2010, <https://dailycaller.com/2010/12/14/bush-explains-his-comment-about-putins-soul-says-russian-leader-changed/>.

<sup>113</sup> Norah O'Donnell, "Bush and Putin's cosy relationship on display," *NBC News*, 25 February 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7016784>.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel Baer, "Ukraine's not a country, Putin told Bush. What'd he tell Trump about Montenegro?" *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/07/19/ukraines-not-a-country-putin-told-bush-whatd-he-tell-trump-about-montenegro/>.

<sup>115</sup> "President Bush and President Putin Review U.S.-Russian relations," *Voice of America*, 1 November 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/archive/president-bush-and-president-putin-review-us-russian-relations>.

New presidents took the helm in Russia and the US in May 2008 and January 2009, respectively. A reversed order of change might theoretically have been better, because Russia took advantage of the US's preoccupation with presidential elections in 2008 and launched a military aggression against Georgia.<sup>116</sup> In July 2009, President Barack Obama announced a 'reset' policy towards Russia (explained in more detail in Section 4.1), coupled with hopes that President Dmitri Medvedev was not like Putin (or rather by illusions that Putin, as prime minister, was not in control). No major agreements between the US and Russia were achieved during this period, apart from the New START Treaty. Vladimir Putin likely concluded that Obama's emphasised preference for diplomacy meant weakness, including in the Syrian and Ukrainian context.<sup>117</sup>

*The relationship between Joe Biden's administration and Vladimir Putin's regime will likely be tense*

significant concessions towards Russia but that he could be used/encouraged to further discredit and weaken his country and the entire West.

*Donald Trump was, of course, not a Russian creation but a gift that dropped into the Kremlin's lap*

Donald Trump was, of course, not a Russian creation but a gift that dropped into the Kremlin's lap. Trump is the only American president whose election (in November 2016) was welcomed with standing ovations in the Russian parliament.<sup>118</sup> Trump was heavily influenced both by the stigma that Russian support/interference probably helped him win the presidential elections and by his overt and pronounced sympathy for undemocratic strongmen/leaders. Trump and Putin met five times, but there are few if any records in the US about their discussions.<sup>119</sup> The Kremlin probably concluded that Trump would not be able to overcome domestic opposition to

The US presidential elections on 3 November 2020 were yet another watershed in American-Russian affairs. The relationship between Joe Biden's administration and Vladimir Putin's regime will likely be tense. Biden called Putin a week after his inauguration and gave him both good and bad news in what the Kremlin called a 'businesslike and frank' discussion. Biden's announcement that the US would extend the New START Treaty was a strategic signal that he does not seek a nuclear arms race or confrontation. The US president reportedly told Putin that Russia would have to pay a price for having meddled once again in America's presidential elections (in Trump's favour) and warned the Russian president against cyber-espionage and attacks.<sup>120</sup> The Kremlin stated: 'The normalisation of relations between Russia and the United States should meet the interests of both countries and – taking into account their special responsibility for maintaining security and stability in the world – of the entire international community'.<sup>121</sup>

President Biden delivered a foreign policy speech at the State Department on 'America's Place in the World' on 4 February 2021. He pledged to 'repair' US's alliances and 'meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy.' Biden added: 'By leading with diplomacy, we must also mean engaging our adversaries and our competitors diplomatically, where it's in our interest, and advance the security of the American people.' On Russia, Biden stated: 'I made it clear to President Putin, in a manner

<sup>116</sup> David Paul, "Russia-Georgia War in 2008 Told the West –and Putin- What Was Coming," *Huffpost*, 3 May 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/russia-georgia-war-in-2008\\_b\\_4891391](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/russia-georgia-war-in-2008_b_4891391).

<sup>117</sup> Bradford Richardson, "Ex-UN envoy: Putin taking advantage of Obama's 'weakness,'" *The Hill*, 17 October 2015, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/257246-ex-un-envoy-putin-taking-advantage-of-obamas-weakness>.

<sup>118</sup> Peter Walker, "Donald Trump wins: Russian parliament bursts into applause upon hearing result," *The Independent*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-wins-us-election-russia-putin-result-a7406866.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Conor Finnegan, "Trump says what happens in Putin meeting is 'none of your business,'" *ABC News*, 27 June 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-putin-meeting-business/story?id=63967271>.

<sup>120</sup> Barbara Plett-Usher, "Biden raises election meddling in first phone call," *BBC*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55819769>.

<sup>121</sup> "Telefonnyy razgovor s Prezidentom SShA Dzho Baydenom [Telephone conversation with US President Joe Biden]," The Kremlin, 26 January 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/245/events/64936>.

very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions – interfering with our elections, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens – are over. We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people. And we will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners. The politically motivated jailing of Alexei Navalny and the Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are a matter of deep concern to us and the international community.<sup>122</sup>

*President Trump's administration was useful to Russia in the sense of damaging the US's alliances, particularly with Europe but also with allies in East Asia and the Pacific, and – above all – by weakening America's democracy*

In mid-March, ABC News aired an interview with Biden in which he agreed (albeit with hesitation) when asked whether Russia's president was a 'killer'. The Kremlin reacted angrily and recalled its ambassador to Washington home for consultations. Putin challenged Biden to a live and direct discussion online; the White House turned that down.<sup>123</sup>

During the Trump administration, the US Congress imposed continuous sanctions on Russia related to the Magnitsky Act and the Global Magnitsky Act, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, election interference and other malicious cyber-enabled activities, use of a chemical weapon (Novichok), North Korea sanctions violations, interference in the Syria and Venezuela crises, energy export pipelines (Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream) and other issues.<sup>124</sup> On the other hand, President Trump's

administration was useful to Russia in the sense of damaging the US's alliances, particularly with Europe but also with allies in East Asia and the Pacific, and – above all – by weakening America's democracy (which also had a tangible impact in Europe) and leadership and prestige in the world.

The situation in American-Russian relations thus changed dramatically with the election of Joe Biden as US president. Russia clearly favoured Trump's re-election in November 2020, hoping that he would continue to sow political chaos in the US, in NATO and in America's relations with the European Union. Such Russian expectations are now off the table. Moscow therefore decided to appeal to Cold War-style strategic messaging by showing its military might. On 29 April 2021, the Russian Aerospace Forces demonstrated an 'unusual level of air activity' over the North Atlantic, the North Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea.<sup>125</sup> The Kremlin also started a

buildup of ground forces on Ukraine's borders and in Crimea in March 2021; this has caused concern that Russia might intend to undertake further aggression against its neighbour.<sup>126</sup> The US and Europe, including France and Germany, cautioned Russia against the use of force and escalating the situation. The Kremlin responded by claiming that Russia is not posing any threat and that it is Ukraine that is preparing to use force against the so-called 'separatists'. The Kremlin said, America's warnings are therefore 'devalued'.<sup>127</sup>

*Joe Biden made very clear the premises of the policy of his administration towards Russia*

Joe Biden made very clear the premises of the policy of his administration towards Russia, apart from how Russia would 'pay' for its

<sup>122</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-america-place-in-the-world/>.

<sup>123</sup> Anna Chernova, Zahra Ullah, and Rob Picheta, "Russia reacts angrily after Biden calls Putin a 'killer'," *CNN*, 18 March 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/18/europe/biden-putin-killer-comment-russia-reaction-intl/index.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Cory Welt, Kristin Archick, and Rebecca M. Nelson, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia*. Updated January 17, 2020 (Congressional Research Service, 2020), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45415.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> NATO, "NATO jets intercept Russian warplanes during unusual level of air activity," 29 March 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_182897.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_182897.htm).

<sup>126</sup> Jim Garamone, "Russia Needs to Answer Questions Relating Military Buildup Near Ukraine," US Department of Defense, 9 April 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2567812/russia-needs-to-answer-questions-regarding-military-buildup-near-ukraine/>.

<sup>127</sup> Lauri Laugen, "Kreml: USA ähvardused Venemaa aadressil devalveeruvad [Kremlin: USA threats against Russia become devalued]," *Delfi*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/93107899/kreml-usa-ahvardused-venemaa-aadressil-devalveeruvad>.

deeds against the US and the West. Biden stated specifically that he is open to diplomacy. Biden's 'killer' remark does not affect prospects of a physical or virtual US-Russia summit meeting, but it will undoubtedly be answered by Putin. The main issue continues to be what Russia has to offer/propose to advance the long list of its demands and aspirations. There is most probably no way back to the pre-2014 status quo ante, in the sense of Western countries relinquishing sanctions and limiting their reactions to condemnation of Russian actions. Russia's main – perhaps only – leverage vis-à-vis the West is to provoke and create rather than solve problems and crises.

## 2.7. RELATIONS BETWEEN FINLAND AND RUSSIA

The famous American diplomat George Kennan once remarked that in Russia's neighbourhood, there are either enemies or vassals.<sup>128</sup> Today's Finland is an exception. Historically, Finland was a vassal of the Russian Empire (as a largely autonomous grand duchy between 1809 and 1917) and, after the Second World War, of the Soviet Union. The latter period witnessed a process often called 'Finlandisation'. It meant that Finland had to strictly follow a policy of 'friendship' with the Kremlin and, in exchange, could keep its independence, democratic system and capitalist economy.

Finland's exception to Kennan's rule – which holds firmly even now – started to take shape in the late 1980s, and Helsinki's emancipation from Moscow materialised with Finland joining the EU in 1995 along with Sweden and Austria.<sup>129</sup> Finland experienced a serious economic recession from 1990 to 1993 due to the collapse of the Soviet economy and the system of trade between the two countries.<sup>130</sup> It had a unique window

<sup>128</sup> David Milne, "George Kennan's Love of Russia Inspired His Legendary "Containment" Strategy," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 30 September 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/george-kennans-love-russia-inspired-his-legendary-containment-strategy-180960642/>.

<sup>129</sup> Marjo Uutela, "The End of Finlandization. Finland's Foreign Policy in the Eyes of the Two German States 1985-1990," *The International History Review* 42, no. 2 (7 May 2019): 410-423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1577286>.

<sup>130</sup> Seppo Honkapohja et al., "The economic crisis of the 1900s in Finland," *Economic Policy* 14, no. 29 (1999): 401-402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344693>.

of opportunity to leave Moscow's sphere of influence and join the European Union's economy.

However, Finland continued to maintain friendly relations with Russia for political, security and economic reasons. Showing friendliness towards Russia obviously makes sense when the Kremlin responds positively, and that is the case with Finland and Russia, for three main reasons. First, Finland is, in Russia's historic perception, both close and apart/separate,

*Showing friendliness towards Russia obviously makes sense when the Kremlin responds positively, and that is the case with Finland and Russia*

and it had the opportunity and courage to successfully counter Stalin's aggression (the Winter War, November 1939–March 1940). There are very few examples of small neighbours who fought victoriously against Russia and safeguarded their independence (Estonia did so in 1919–1920, but it did not fight back in 1939–1940). Secondly, Russia has very few friends, especially among Western countries, which makes Finland a particularly valuable example, especially with regard to the Baltic and other Nordic states. Thirdly, Finland shares a very long border with Russia in a strategic neighbourhood but does not seek NATO membership, and the Kremlin would certainly like to keep it that way.

*Friendly relations with Russia, marked by very frequent meetings between heads of state, are undoubtedly beneficial to Finland economically*

Friendly relations with Russia, marked by very frequent meetings between heads of state, are undoubtedly beneficial to Finland economically. For example, Finland's national airline, Finnair, has flights to many cities in Russia but also uses Russia's airspace for its main strategic goal – offering numerous destinations in China and elsewhere in Asia.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>131</sup> David Casey, "Finnair strategy to focus on Asia megacities," *Routes Online*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.routesonline.com/news/29/breaking-news/287499/finnair-strategy-to-focus-on-asian-megacities-/>.

However, the perception/assumption that Russia is not or would not be a threat to Finland in case of a regional or larger conflict is pure political rhetoric and does not reflect reality.<sup>132</sup> Since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Finnish authorities and think tanks have stressed that Finland needs to strengthen its crisis readiness.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, Russia periodically warns Finland and Sweden not to join NATO.<sup>134</sup>

*The perception/assumption that Russia is not or would not be a threat to Finland in case of a regional or larger conflict is pure political rhetoric and does not reflect reality*

In fact, Finland and Sweden are apparently pursuing a policy of being in NATO *de facto* without being members *de jure*. Both non-NATO countries seek to strengthen their ties with the Alliance despite Russia's increasing nervousness over this issue (particularly concerning deployments of US troops for exercises).<sup>135</sup> As Enhanced Opportunity Partners of NATO, they are provided, *inter alia*, a coordinating role in joint exercises and supplementary possibilities to contribute to NATO's Response Force (NRF). Russia acted very injured by Finland's decision to buy precision guided munitions (missiles) and possibly also fifth generation fighter aircraft (F-35) from the US.<sup>136</sup>

The latest high-level Finnish-Russian contact, Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto's meeting with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov

in St Petersburg in mid-February 2021, took place only days after Russia humiliated EU High Representative Josep Borrell in Moscow. Lavrov took a far more conciliatory tone and announced that Russia was ready to improve relations with the EU, in spite of Haavisto's direct criticism of the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny and the expulsion of EU diplomats during Borrell's visit.<sup>137</sup> Haavisto strongly defended the EU's policy towards Russia – which Lavrov ridiculed – and stated clearly that it was also Finland's policy.

This episode is yet another example of Finland's skilful diplomacy and insight and comprehension of the Kremlin, but the middle ground could soon become very narrow. The Kremlin could start telling Finland to stop criticizing Russia, as it tries to tell all other Western countries (this is not a privilege restricted to Finland). However, Moscow also needs to be careful not to scare Finland (and Sweden) into NATO by seriously aggravating the situation in the Nordic-Baltic region.

*The Kremlin could start telling Finland to stop criticizing Russia, as it tries to tell all other Western countries*

In conclusion, Finland and Russia can be expected to continue a formally friendly relationship, although mutual perceptions have changed. Finland realises that Russia will not respect its sovereignty and non-alignment in the event of a crisis, and Russia understands that Finland (and Sweden) are gradually becoming *de facto* members of the North Atlantic Alliance. Neither Helsinki nor Moscow would like to rock the boat.

### 3. THE CHINA FACTOR

China is the elephant in the room in the context of Western-Russian relations. China's role undoubtedly deserves a separate in-depth analysis, but it is nevertheless worth considering also in this report. For China is an integral and increasingly dominant factor

<sup>132</sup> "No threat to Finland': Finnish defence minister on Russian missile deployment in Baltics," *Russia Today*, 24 November 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/368054-finland-nato-russia-threat/>.

<sup>133</sup> "Report: Russia now a greater threat to Finland," *YLE*, 31 August 2016, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/report\\_russia\\_now\\_a\\_greater\\_threat\\_to\\_finland/9130673](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/report_russia_now_a_greater_threat_to_finland/9130673).

<sup>134</sup> Jason Lemon, "Russian Defence Minister Threatens Response If Sweden and Finland Join NATO," *Newsweek*, 24 July 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-defense-minister-threatens-response-if-sweden-finland-join-nato-1040806>.

<sup>135</sup> Christopher Woody, "The Marines pulled tanks out of caves in Norway for games close to Russia's border for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year in a row," *Business Insider*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-army-marine-corps-tanks-join-finland-arrow-19-exercise-2019-6>.

<sup>136</sup> Mike Stone, "US approves possible sale of fighter jets, missiles to Finland," *Arctic Today*, 13 October 2020, [https://www.arctictoday.com/us-approves-possible-sale-of-fighter-jets-missiles-to-finland/?wallit\\_nosession=1](https://www.arctictoday.com/us-approves-possible-sale-of-fighter-jets-missiles-to-finland/?wallit_nosession=1).

<sup>137</sup> "Haavisto and Lavrov sharply disagree on Navalny, expulsions of EU diplomats," *YLE*, 15 February 2021, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/haavisto\\_and\\_lavrov\\_sharply\\_disagree\\_on\\_navalny\\_expulsions\\_of\\_eu\\_diplomats/11791058](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/haavisto_and_lavrov_sharply_disagree_on_navalny_expulsions_of_eu_diplomats/11791058).

in reshaping the existing world order, as well as the foreign and security policy of Western countries and Russia.

Analyst Lilia Shevtsova thinks that Russia's role in a future world order will be shaped by others, but she – like many others in Russia – does not believe in a new bipolar world order in which supporters and opponents of liberal democracy align behind the US or China.<sup>138</sup> Shevtsova recalls a RAND Corporation report with a striking title: 'Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue'.<sup>139</sup>

RAND concludes: 'Russia is not a peer or near-peer competitor but rather a well-armed rogue state that seeks to subvert an international order it can never hope to dominate. In contrast, China is a peer competitor that wants to shape an international order that it can aspire to dominate.' These conclusions are based on hard facts (China's per capita GDP approaches Russia's, its economic growth rate is three times higher, its population is almost 10 times bigger, and its military expenditures exceed Russia's) and realistic assumptions (the gap between China and Russia in terms of economic power and military spending is likely to grow, perhaps dramatically).

*Russia and China continue to play a game of 'strategic partnership' that is based on the repudiation of liberal democracy by both of them*

Russia and China continue to play a game of 'strategic partnership' that is based on the repudiation of liberal democracy by both of them. The two countries are willing to change the status quo, which – in both their views – is dominated by the West and does not satisfy their interests. They resort to force or even extreme brutality in dealing with domestic issues (Russia in Chechnya; China in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong) and seek territorial

<sup>138</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, "Kitay brosaet vyzov Zapadu. I chto nam do etogo? [China challenges the West. And was has that to do with us?]," *Ekho Moskvy*, 31 March 2021, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/shevtsova/2813876-echo/>.

<sup>139</sup> James Dobbins, Howard J. Schatz, and Ali Wynne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, October 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE310>.

expansion at the expense of neighbouring countries (Russia in former Soviet republics; China, for now, in the South China Sea). Moscow and Beijing are highly engaged in espionage against the West – Russia is interested mostly in military and security matters, but China prefers to gather valuable technological and economic information.<sup>140</sup>

The above would suggest a durable and close relationship between Russia and China that is based on their shared rejection of democracy and desire to increase substantially their influence in the world at the expense of the West (particularly the US). However, such an interpretation would be rather superficial. China's steady rise since 1979 to the rank of major world power did not happen because of Russia, but in spite of Beijing breaking and freezing relations with Moscow for 30 years,

*China and Russia are both competitors of the West, but their attitudes/behaviour and interests so far are rather different*

starting in 1960. China's tremendous economic growth (its GDP grew 20-fold, adjusted to the US dollar inflation rate, in about 40 years) is due to the country's openness to trade with the West, particularly with the United States.<sup>141</sup>

China and Russia are both competitors of the West, but their attitudes/behaviour and interests so far are rather different. China is aware of its growing strength, has sufficient economic power to pursue global projects (One Belt One Road) and does not need or wish to provoke and antagonise the West. On the contrary, Western investors and customers of Chinese products fuel China's economic growth, which, in turn, supports its rising political and military strength. China insists that it has only economic/trade interests and wants to do business with the West. It is far more potent and successful than Russia in projecting soft power, e.g. in Central and Eastern Europe

<sup>140</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (US), "The China Threat," 5 April 2021, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/the-china-threat>.

<sup>141</sup> James Early, "The Rise and Future of China as an Economic Power," *Investopedia*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/china-70-anniversary-future-4771950>.

(the '17+1 initiative'), although many countries in the group of 17 take a rather darker view, and the EU has started to refer to China as a 'systemic rival'.<sup>142</sup>

*The West is nevertheless nervous about closer ties between Russia and China, particularly in the military sphere*

The West is nevertheless nervous about closer ties between Russia and China, particularly in the military sphere.<sup>143</sup> The reason is likely that Russia, under President Putin, is a more immediate threat, and its perception of China's political support could embolden Moscow to launch further military adventures in its neighbourhood. In addition, China is a far greater long-term challenge, but it could provoke a sharp conflict with the US (most likely over Taiwan), if given Russian support, sooner than the timeframe of 2040–2050, when it envisages achieving military parity with America.<sup>144</sup>

Spoilers in Western-Russian and Western-Chinese relations are similar in many ways (including human rights issues and espionage), apart from trade disputes (given Russia's relative economic insignificance). Even so, Russia and China will probably never give up their suspicions about each other and become genuine allies.<sup>145</sup> Moscow and Beijing further closed ranks following new sanctions by Joe Biden's administration against both Russia and China and made joint declarations against perceived American 'hegemonic bullying' and unilateralism. However, China's foreign minister carefully pointed out that the bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation signed 20 years ago (by presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris

Yeltsin) is not directed against any third party. It would hardly be in China's interest to engage in a new Cold War, as the Kremlin appears to want. A relevant example of China's cautiousness and the importance that it attaches to economic ties with the West is Beijing's rather cool response to Russia's proposal to evade sanctions by using other currencies than the US dollar in managing their payments and trade, even though the de-dollarisation process continues in emerging non-Western economies.<sup>146</sup>

*It would hardly be in China's interest to engage in a new Cold War, as the Kremlin appears to want*

The strategic partnership between China and Russia works under present conditions, due to Russia's confrontation with the West and the Kremlin's desperate need for a powerful ally and economic alternative. However, China's continuous rise would make this partnership more unequal and uneasy. Clashing interests are likely to increase, for example in Central Asia, a region that Russia cannot afford to lose.<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, vast areas of Russia's Far East and Siberia belonged for many centuries to the Chinese Empire. Beijing probably did not overlook and would not forget Russia's main argument for justifying the occupation and

*Russia would profit from worsening Western-Chinese relations*

annexation of Crimea, that is, the historic right to territories owned by other countries. Russia may one day regret this argument, given that the demography in those regions could change dramatically in future decades.

The European Union and its member states and the UK, the US and Canada do not share a common approach and policy towards China. However, European countries (including Germany) are moving towards a tougher

<sup>142</sup> George N. Tzogopoulos, "China gives new boost to 17+1 Initiative," China.org.cn, 19 February 2021, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2021-02/19/content\\_77226645.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2021-02/19/content_77226645.htm).

<sup>143</sup> "West concerned by closer Russia-China ties, top NATO general says," Reuters, 3 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-china-military-idUSKBN2A32KK>.

<sup>144</sup> David Axe, "By 2050, China's Military Could Be Unstoppable," *The National Interest*, 25 July 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/2050-chinas-military-could-be-unstoppable-165451>.

<sup>145</sup> Frank Chen, "China, Russia draw closer but suspicions die hard," *Asia Times*, 23 March 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/china-russia-draw-closer-but-suspicious-die-hard/>.

<sup>146</sup> Alexey Lossan, "Why are Russia and China ditching the U.S. dollar?" *Russia Beyond*, 4 September 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/business/332673-russia-china-us-dollar-america>.

<sup>147</sup> Reid Standish, "China's Central Asian Plans are Unnerving Russia," *Foreign Policy*, 23 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/23/china-russia-central-asia-competition/>.

position.<sup>148</sup> Russia would profit from worsening Western-Chinese relations, but there are serious risks; its trade with China is growing quickly, but it could soon approach a level beyond which Russia would become vulnerable and overly dependent on Beijing. The same goes for China's acquisition of stakes in Russia's Arctic energy companies/projects.<sup>149</sup>

China is the invisible but omnipresent third party in relations between the West and Russia. Ideally, the West could promote better relations with either China or Russia in order to counter and contain the other. However, likely the best (and perhaps for now the only) option would be for the West to play on China's economic interests towards the West, notwithstanding the divergence on human rights and other issues. By doing so, the West could limit Russia's willingness and capacity for confrontation. There are specific areas in which the West (the US), China and Russia face tough issues and should seek solutions – for example, arms control following the termination of the INF Treaty (the US is interested in a new regime that would include both Russia and China) and the rights of countries (including non-regional ones) in the Arctic.

## 4. ASSESSMENT OF MAIN INTERESTS AND CONTENTIOUS ISSUES OF WESTERN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Major events since the end of the Cold War that are listed and discussed in the Annex A, as well as the first and second chapters, explain the evolving attitude of Russia and Western actors towards each other but also outline their main interests and contentious issues. Both sides' willingness to defend their (national) interests and opportunities for dialogue appear alongside (partly) overlapping interests and/or the necessity to deconflict (avoid unintended

incidents) and de-escalate critical situations. Contentious issues or spoilers – which may or may not be resolved in the foreseeable future – are major irritants and obstacles in relations between the West and Russia.

### 4.1. DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In 1975, the Soviet Union signed the Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE, thus undertaking a commitment to respect universal human rights, which are also enshrined in the UN Charter. Russia, the Soviet Union's legal successor state, took further responsibilities and commitments in this area due to its membership in the OSCE, the Council of Europe and other organisations. However, only President Yeltsin's decade (the 1990s) can be considered a relatively free and democratic period in Russia's history.

Western nations defend and advocate individual and collective (political and human) rights, free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law, political pluralism, effective checks and balances, free media, independence of the judiciary, protection of minority groups and national minorities, and other liberal democratic values. The West is, of course, not faultless, as there are also recent examples of EU/NATO countries turning away from democracy to a certain extent. However, Russia's 'guided/sovereign democracy' hardly fulfils any of the criteria of genuine democratic rule.

Needless to say, elections are conducted in Russia not in order to offer the people a chance to make choices and bring about changes but to demonstrate loyalty and give legitimacy to the existing regime. Russia's media is almost entirely under the Kremlin's control and is weaponised as a tool of propaganda and disinformation, the courts are evidently under the supervision of political authorities, and virtually all the political parties (especially those represented in the parliament) are penetrated by special services and subordinated to the Kremlin. Minority – especially LGBT – groups are harassed and criminalised. Even the most elementary right – the right to life – is not respected, as shown by the numerous murders of and assassination attempts against Kremlin critics, including politicians and journalists, and democracy and human rights activists.

<sup>148</sup> Annette Weisbach, "Germany sees a new tougher line on China and Russia as Merkel leaves the political stage," *CNBC*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/01/germany-sees-a-new-tougher-line-on-china-and-russia.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Malte Humpert, "China Acquires 20 Percent Stake in Novatek's Latest LNG Project," *High North News*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-acquires-20-percent-stake-novateks-latest-arctic-lng-project>.

The West rightly insists that democracy and human rights are not solely the internal issues of countries but are also transnational matters, as confirmed by the numerous documents and agreements that Russia has also signed. Every member of the OSCE and/or the Council of Europe has the right to point out and criticise serious breaches by other member states.

*The West rightly insists that democracy and human rights are not solely the internal issues of countries but are also transnational matters*

This is, however, a fundamental point of disagreement between Russia and the West that also came out eloquently in connection with Alexei Navalny's poisoning in August 2020. The Kremlin demands that the West not interfere in what it insists are its own purely domestic matters.

*Russia is both at odds with and afraid of liberal democracy*

Western countries made efforts in the 1990s and early 2000s to help Russia become a democratic country, because conventional wisdom holds that true democracies do not attack each other even if they have disagreements. However, Russia is both at odds with and afraid of liberal democracy – which takes a very long time to be established and effective; otherwise, it can lead to weakness and instability. Russia's history, culture and

*The West has practically given up any serious attempts to support democracy in Russia, aside from criticism*

geography hardly support Western liberal democracy, which is based on minority rights, not just majority rule (which, in Russia's case, is becoming indistinguishable from majoritarian dictatorship), and the de-politicised rule of law and the judiciary.

The West has practically given up any serious attempts to support democracy in Russia, aside from criticism. In Russia, anyone with the slightest connection to Western institutions and organisations promoting liberal democracy

is labelled a 'foreign agent'. Moreover, Moscow is deeply unsettled by the spectre of 'colour revolutions', which in 2016 the Chief of the Russian General Staff termed 'state coups organised from abroad'.

Putin's regime will certainly continue to fiercely reject Western criticism concerning Russia's lack of democracy and human rights and present it as unwillingness to conduct constructive dialogue. The Kremlin seeks, in fact, to exclude such dialogue. Western criticism and countermeasures (sanctions) remain, in Russia's view, a major spoiler of and obstacle in Western-Russian

relations. The Kremlin claims that the West's record on human rights is no better than its own, and therefore it is not entitled to lecture Russia. Moscow believes and fears that the 'contamination' of Russia and/or its closest allies and neighbours with Western liberal democracy would inevitably result in a 'colour revolution' and the demise of Putin's autocratic regime. This is actually considered by Russia's leadership to be the West's – especially America's – main political goal, and Putin's regime claims that Western liberal democracy is alien to Russia's values and traditions.

Democracy is and will remain crucial for the survival of Western coherence, unity and solidarity, but also an existential threat to Putin's regime. The West cannot simply remove issues related to democracy and human rights from the agenda of relations with Russia and refrain from demanding that Russia fulfil its commitments. It would signify a tremendous political victory for Moscow, demonstrate the West's weakness and encourage Russia to double down on its malign policy of undermining Western democracy.

## 4.2. INFLUENCE IN EACH OTHER'S NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND

Russia deeply resents the existence and enlargement of both NATO and the EU. Relations between the Alliance, the Union and Russia are dealt with in Chapter 2, but here we consider some aspects of Russia's perception and response to the West's interaction with

non-EU/NATO European countries on the territory of the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

During the Cold War, Moscow occupied militarily and/or controlled politically all the countries that later joined NATO and/or the EU (with the exception of Sweden, the ex-Yugoslav states, Albania and the Mediterranean island states of Cyprus and Malta). Finland was 'Finlandised', and Austria became formally neutral with the State Treaty of 1955. The Kremlin regards with suspicion and hostility the West's independent relationship (unmediated by Russia) with other countries that gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It displays aggressive jealousy whenever its CSTO and EAEU allies – such as Belarus and Armenia – occasionally flirt with the West.

### *Russia wants to secure a free hand in the other 11 countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union*

The Kremlin adopted the age-old approach that the best defence is offense (and expanding its own influence), both in Russia's neighbourhood and as far afield as Africa and Latin America. Russia wants to secure a free hand in the other 11 countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union (unlike the Baltic states, which restored their pre-war independence). Most of those countries – aside from Georgia, Armenia and the Uzbek khanates – had no historical experience of statehood until 1992. Moscow will continue to fiercely oppose Western soft power (i.e. political, economic and cultural influence) in these states.

In addition, from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, Russia gained significant financial resources (due to high oil prices on world markets), experience (e.g. lessons learned from its aggression against Georgia in 2008) and self-confidence (from the West's conciliatory and soft approach). The Kremlin prioritised and put enormous emphasis on rebuilding and strengthening Russia's armed forces and security structures. Consequently, it engaged in political and military adventures farther and farther away from Russia and the 'former

Soviet space'. Russia deployed forces in Syria in late September 2015, not just to defend Bashar al-Assad's dictatorial regime and gain a strong foothold in the eastern Mediterranean but also to demonstrate that Moscow is a major player that the West cannot ignore and should treat on an 'equal' basis (which means decision-making authority and the right of veto).

### *The West is losing constantly ground because of its very poor strategic communication compared to Russia's*

Russia is obviously focused on undemocratic regimes and forces that are anti-American in nature and/or suffer from civil war/strife, including Libya, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Venezuela, Cuba and Myanmar.

Nowadays Russia does not have the economic and ideological potential that the Soviet Union had during the Cold War. Even so, the Kremlin is rather skilful in promoting its image and achieving disproportionately successful results with rather limited resources. Russia would never be able to maintain and

strengthen its military and special services machinery if it had to assist poor countries financially and with humanitarian aid to the extent that Western countries do. Russia has means of destruction and has used them in Ukraine, Syria, Libya and elsewhere, but it does not have the willingness or resources to rebuild Aleppo, Donetsk or Tripoli. The West is losing constantly ground because of its very poor strategic communication compared to Russia's (it cannot, of course, replicate Russia's propaganda and disinformation, but it has to be far more active and effective, not only reactive to Russia's wrongdoings).<sup>150</sup> For example, the EU is actually the biggest donor of assistance (in soft areas) to Russia's ally/vassal Armenia, but the Armenian public does not know/acknowledge that, and local people believe that the country's main supporter is Russia.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Andrey Sushentsov, "Ball-Game": Strategic Communication During Russia-West Confrontation," Valdai Discussion Club, 3 April 2018, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/ball-game-strategic-communication/>.

<sup>151</sup> Kalev Stoicescu, *Russia's "Allies"* (Tallinn: ICDS, January 2018), 21, [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ICDS\\_Report\\_Russia\\_s\\_Allies\\_Kalev\\_Stoicescu\\_January\\_2018\\_web.pdf](https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ICDS_Report_Russia_s_Allies_Kalev_Stoicescu_January_2018_web.pdf).

In conclusion, Russia opposes the West, particularly the United States, wherever and whenever it has the opportunity, from Eastern Europe and the western Balkans through the Middle East and Africa to South America and the Caribbean. This trend is hardly likely to change in the foreseeable future, and the two sides are probably unable to hold constructive dialogue on any of these issues. Russia pretends to be a problem solver. However, unsolved crises are Russia's main leverage in countering the West and playing a prominent role in international affairs, and thus the Kremlin is not interested in their resolution.<sup>152</sup>

*Unsolved crises are Russia's main leverage in countering the West and playing a prominent role in international affairs, and thus the Kremlin is not interested in their resolution*

### 4.3. SECURITY AND INSECURITY

Hard security is probably the most serious concern of both Russia and the West, although European and North American allies have somewhat different perceptions of the threat posed by Russia due to many factors, including their size and military, political and economic capacity, as well as their geography, history and culture. During the Cold War, Soviet troops were deployed against NATO along the borders of Norway, West Germany and Turkey. Today, Moscow is about 600 kilometres and St Petersburg only 150 kilometres from the closest NATO borders (those of Latvia and Estonia).

NATO's enlargements in 1999 and 2004 were mainly political, as they were not followed by deployments of troops and command structures or other forms of allied presence in new member states, apart from the Baltic Air Policing mission, which was conducted solely from Lithuania. However, Moscow responded

<sup>152</sup> Ibrahim Fraihat and Leonid Issaev, "Russia Doesn't Solve Conflicts, It Silences Them," *Foreign Policy*, 12 June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/12/russia-doesnt-solve-conflicts-it-silences-them/>.

to NATO's enlargements by breaching or unilaterally stepping out of virtually all conventional and nuclear arms control regimes and agreements, except for the START Treaty (which was renegotiated and became New START in 2010). Russia has resorted to direct coercion against its neighbours through the use of force since 2008 and soon adopted the 'Gerasimov doctrine' of hybrid warfare.

Conventional forces and equipment previously limited by the (adapted) Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty – main battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other armoured combat vehicles, artillery pieces, attack helicopters and combat aircraft – are still very important, as demonstrated by Russia's amassing of forces around Ukraine since the end of March 2021. The (re)negotiation of a CFE-like treaty with strict limitations on the five categories of main equipment along the entire flank from the Arctic to the Black Sea and the Caucasus would be extremely difficult, assuming it is even possible. Russia would hardly accept low limits (and inspections) in its Western and Southern Military Districts. It has already demanded the pullout of Allied troops and infrastructure deployed from Estonia in the north to Romania in the south, which is unacceptable to NATO, as these are regarded as matters for agreement between Allies alone.

*A theoretical agreement between NATO and Russia on conventional forces would still not be nearly enough to create stability and strengthen security in Europe*

A theoretical agreement between NATO and Russia on conventional forces would still not be nearly enough to create stability and strengthen security in Europe. There are many new areas that could not have been covered by the CFE regime in its own time and are now completely unregulated. These include unmanned aerial, land and sea vehicles and an increasingly large variety of applications of robotics and artificial intelligence, not to speak of cyber security and defence.

A very important aspect concerning Europe's security is Russia's development

and deployment of mid-range (500- to 5500-kilometre) dual-capable ballistic and cruise missiles, in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed in 1987. The INF Treaty has ceased to be in force (both the US and Russia pulled out of the treaty). As a result, Russia has acquired nuclear-capable land-based missiles that serve as powerful blackmail weapons against all Europe, not just neighbouring countries (covered by short-range Iskander missile systems). In many ways, NATO faces the same dilemma as in the 1980s – whether to accept the Kremlin’s policy of intimidation or to undertake strong countermeasures, e.g. to deploy mid-range missiles in Europe that could hit armed forces, infrastructure and high-value targets, thereby obliging Russia to negotiate and agree that both sides would eliminate such weapons.

Consequently, the perception of insecurity and the possibility of tensions escalating could last indefinitely. Dialogue with Russia on hard security matters, including in the context of the NATO-Russia Council, should not be excluded, at least in terms of the formal exchange of views and information. But it would be unrealistic to expect such dialogue to produce meaningful, positive results in the foreseeable future. Russia will renew dialogue on military and hard security matters, and negotiate new arms control agreements, only when its own national interests demand it (i.e. when it feels that it cannot engage further – financially and

#### 4.4. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Russia is the EU’s fifth largest trading partner after China, the US, the UK and Switzerland.<sup>153</sup> Russia’s share in the EU’s imports of natural gas and oil is 40% and 27%, respectively. The EU’s exports to Russia dropped from 6.7% (of total exports) in 2012 to 4.1% in 2019. The EU is absolutely Russia’s largest destination of exports of goods (mainly hydrocarbons), but its share has declined from 50% of total exports in 2012 to 42% in 2019. Foreign direct investments (FDI) by EU countries (€276.6 billion in 2018) amount to 75% of Russia’s total, whereas Russia’s FDI make up only 1% of the EU’s total (€89.3 billion in 2018).<sup>154</sup>

The volume of trade (goods and services) between the US and Russia amounted to US \$34.9 billion in 2019 (US \$10.9 billion American and US \$24 billion Russian exports). Russia is the US’s 40th largest export market and 20th largest supplier. In 2019, the US’s FDI in Russia was US \$14.1 billion, and Russia’s FDI in the US was US \$4.4 billion.<sup>155</sup>

*The Kremlin’s only economic leverage vis-à-vis the West is the EU’s excessive reliance on imports of Russian oil and particularly natural gas, especially by Germany*

The figures above show Russia’s economic insignificance to the United States, and the European Union’s vital importance to Russia, particularly as a recipient of European FDI.

The Kremlin’s only economic leverage vis-à-vis the West is the EU’s excessive reliance on imports of Russian oil and particularly natural gas, especially by Germany.

China has risen as Moscow’s main trading partner, accounting for 17% of Russia’s overall trade volume. Beijing

*Russia will renew dialogue on military and hard security matters, and negotiate new arms control agreements, only when its own national interests demand it*

technologically – in an arms race with NATO), and not for the sake of European security as such.

<sup>153</sup> European Union, European Parliament, “The European Union and its trade partners,” Fact Sheet, October 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/160/the-european-union-and-its-trade-partners>.

<sup>154</sup> European Union, European Commission, “Countries and Regions. Russia,” 20 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>.

<sup>155</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “U.S.-Russia Trade Facts,” December 2020, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/russia-and-eurasia/russia>.

hopes that trade between the two countries will grow significantly in the next years.<sup>156</sup> However, Chinese FDI in Russia's economy is less than the Kremlin would like and is concentrated on Novatek (a company related to President Putin), Yamal and Arctic LNG projects from which China benefits directly.<sup>157</sup> It is difficult to say what level of bilateral trade and Chinese FDI would make Russia uncomfortably reliant on and ultimately subject to manipulation by Beijing.

#### 4.5. THE NEW RULES OF THE GAME – SANCTIONS AND COUNTERSANCTIONS

The West preferred to condemn but not to punish Russia for its aggression against Georgia in 2008. The EU, under France's presidency, was relieved when it achieved a six-point 'peace plan' that was actually a ceasefire agreement.<sup>158</sup> Russia stopped short of occupying all of Georgia, but it effectively annexed *de facto* the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), which the Kremlin recognised as 'independent' states. Moscow further strengthened its military presence in those areas, which are part of Georgia's internationally recognised territory, and continued land grabbing by pushing the delimitation line further into free Georgia, particularly in the Tskhinvali region.

The US and some other allies – most notably Poland and the Baltic states – condemned the Kremlin's illegal acts in the strongest terms and warned of possible future recurrences by Russia. The West's prevailing approach, particularly in France and Germany, was inclined at resuming business as usual with Moscow as soon as possible and avoiding the escalation of tensions. Russia's aggression was coined the 'Georgia-Russia conflict', based on

Russia's allegation that Georgia fired first and thus started the conflict.<sup>159</sup>

Russia's grab of Crimea and continued aggression against Ukraine left a vacuum that had to be filled with new rules. The new rules of the game became sanctions imposed since 2014 by the West against Russian individuals and entities that were identified as being responsible for various wrongdoings. The sanctions adopted in late summer 2014 imposed tight restrictions on Russia's access to international financial markets and severely limited its access to dual-purpose (civil and military) technology, which is critical to its energy and defence industry sectors.<sup>160</sup>

*The new rules of the game became sanctions imposed since 2014 by the West against Russian individuals and entities that were identified as being responsible for various wrongdoings*

There was likely hope in the West, at the start, that the sanctions would not last long, but Russia did absolutely nothing to make possible the termination or even the alleviation of sanctions. On the contrary, the Kremlin imposed its own countersanctions, such as banning the imports of Western food and other products.<sup>161</sup> Moscow pretended, as it still pretends, that it has done nothing wrong. It thus maintains that it does not need to change its policy and that Western sanctions are unfounded and unjust.

Seven years of Western sanctions – extended in packages and periodically supplemented by new punishments – have had a limited but nevertheless tangible impact on Russia's economic growth. According to some estimates, Russia's corporations have lost about US \$100 billion since 2014, described as an 'outsized

<sup>156</sup> Yin Yeping, "China, Russia expect a boost in bilateral trade volume in 2021," *Global Times*, 29 December 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202012/1211319.shtml>.

<sup>157</sup> Nicholas Trickett, "Russia's FDI Outlook Grim, with No Chinese Rescue in Sight," *Russia Matters*, 11 July 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russias-fdi-outlook-grim-no-chinese-rescue-sight>.

<sup>158</sup> "Background: Six-point peace plan for the Georgia-Russia conflict," OCHA ReliefWeb, 15 August 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/background-six-point-peace-plan-georgia-russia-conflict>.

<sup>159</sup> Ian Traynor, "Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili blamed for the starting the Russian war," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/30/georgia-attacks-unjustifiable-eu>.

<sup>160</sup> Maya Lester and Michael O'Kane, "Details of EU's 'tier 3' Russia sanctions published," EU Sanctions. Law, Practice and Guidance, 1 August 2014, <https://www.europeansanctions.com/2014/08/details-of-tier-3-eu-russia-sanctions-published/>.

<sup>161</sup> International Trade Administration (US), "Russia – Country Commercial Guide," 14 November 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/knowledge-product/russia-prohibited-restricted-imports>.

impact'. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin and his cronies (referred to as the 'collective Putin') still have a firm grip on power. (It is endangered, however, by the population's increasingly poor living standards, growing resentment and declining support for Putin.)<sup>162</sup>

Russia has particularly suffered from the West's prohibition of exports of dual (civil and military) use products and technologies. It was clear already in 2014 that Russia would face a severe handicap in technological development that neither China nor any other non-Western countries would be able (and willing) to compensate or supplement.<sup>163</sup> It is also clear that Russia's willingness to escalate tensions, as demonstrated in early 2021, could lead to even tougher Western sanctions that could potentially damage or even paralyse certain Russian economic sectors. Foreign Minister Lavrov warned the European Union in February 2021 that Russia was prepared to 'cut ties' if the Union adopted new sanctions (over the arrest of Alexei Navalny) that would 'create risks to (Russia's) economy', including in the 'most sensitive spheres'.<sup>164</sup> These sensitive spheres are likely linked to the production (including in new deposits) and export of oil and natural gas, which bring much needed revenues to the Kremlin's coffers.

*Russia's willingness to escalate tensions, as demonstrated in early 2021, could lead to even tougher Western sanctions that could potentially damage or even paralyse certain Russian economic sectors*

Russia is particularly frustrated by the EU's continued solidarity/consensus in extending and adopting new sanctions. The Kremlin has tried hard to convince at least one member state to stand against the Union's sanctions

<sup>162</sup> Todd Prince, "Western Sanctions Have Had 'Outsized Impact' On Russian Companies, Economist Says," *Radio Free Europa / Radio Liberty*, 8 December 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/western-sanctions-have-had-outsized-impact-on-russian-companies-economist-says/30989634.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Alexander Panin, "Sanctions on Technology Imports Leave Russia Playing Catch Up," *The Moscow Times*, 3 August 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/03/sanctions-on-technology-imports-leave-russia-playing-catch-up-a37946>.

<sup>164</sup> "Russia ready to cut ties with EU if hit with painful sanctions," *Al Jazeera*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/12/russia-ready-to-cut-eu-ties-if-sanctions-imposed-lavrov-says>.

policy. For example, Hungary, Greece and Italy have voiced doubts about the usefulness of sanctions, but these countries never attempted to prevent the adoption or extension of punitive measures against Russia.<sup>165</sup> The Kremlin likely realises that some Western countries may wish to be less critical or even please Russia for their own economic benefit (such as natural gas supplies or the construction of nuclear power plants), but there is no way to terminate Western sanctions unless Russia corrects its policy. That is, however, impossible due to the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy concerns and considerations. The game of sanctions will probably continue for years, and Russia should have no doubts that the West is ready to respond to Moscow's escalation by intensifying sanctions that include not only economic but also political and diplomatic measures.

## 5. 'RESET' À LA OBAMA OR 'ADAPTED RELATIONSHIP' ON A PURELY PRAGMATIC BASIS?

The West became worried about Russia's assertive and confrontational policy by the end of the 2000s. Russia's interim president, Dmitry Medvedev, took office in May 2008, three months before the Kremlin's aggression against Georgia. The former and future president Vladimir Putin continued to rule Russia from his official backseat as prime minister. Western countries were largely guided by wishful thinking that the Kremlin's blitzkrieg against Georgia was just a onetime outburst, and they engaged in a policy of appeasing Moscow.

France went as far as to make contracts, as early as December 2008, to sell to Russia two state of the art Mistral helicopter carriers, despite the alarmed reaction of NATO Allies. The commander of Russia's naval forces, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, remarked that

<sup>165</sup> Gabriela Baczynska 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>.

Russia could have accomplished certain operations (against Georgia) in just 40 minutes if it possessed the Mistral<sup>166</sup>. The two ships – which were ultimately sold to Egypt instead of Russia – then got the (temporary) names of Vladivostok and Sevastopol, a bad omen for what was to happen to Crimea about five years later. French President Nicholas Sarkozy,

*President Obama, as well as many other Western leaders, made three crucially erroneous assumptions*

who decided to reinstate French membership in NATO's military structures, argued that the West should support Russia's 'modernisation'. However, he failed to explain why such efforts should begin with the military sphere, instead of with Russia's civil society and economy.<sup>167</sup>

### 5.1. MEDVEDEV'S 'PLAN' AND OBAMA'S 'RESET'

Soon after taking office, President Barack Obama made his first visit to Moscow. There, on 7 July 2009, he announced a 'reset' in America's relations with Russia. Obama urged Russia to 'move on from the Cold War and stop interfering in the affairs of neighbouring states'.<sup>168</sup> However, President Obama, as well as many other Western leaders, made three crucially erroneous assumptions. First, he assumed that Medvedev was Western-minded (and thus not like Putin). Second, Obama assumed Medvedev was the decision-maker (in fact, that role had shifted to the prime minister's office). Third, Obama assumed that Putin might not come back, and that if he did, things would not get worse. The conclusions the Kremlin made after Russia's aggression against Georgia were likewise disastrous for Europe's security: Moscow got away with the aggression

and land grab without any significant negative consequences. On the contrary, the West rushed to appease Russia and even modernise its armed forces.

Obama's 'reset' plan, which sought 'win-win outcomes', contained an impressive range of initiatives. They included the New START Treaty signed on 8 April 2010 by Obama and Medvedev in Prague, and working together on the military denuclearisation of Iran (which led to the signing of the 5+1 agreement or JCPOA on 14 July 2015), as well as of North Korea (no results so far). They also included Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation (it became WTO's 156th member on 22 August 2012), long-term civil nuclear cooperation (the 123 Agreement), military-to-military cooperation, the creation of various presidential bilateral commissions (on nuclear cooperation, space, health, cultural and sports exchange, civil society etc.) and a dual track engagement in support of universal values (in order to advance democracy and human rights within Russia).<sup>169</sup>

*'Putin's plan' prioritised the survival of the virtually unchanged regime and pursued the path of marginalisation and confrontation with the West*

The choice to make Medvedev Russia's president was a key element in 'Putin's plan' to pursue a 'conservative modernisation' of the country that would attract support both domestically and from the West. The modernisation gamble meant that in order to modernise, Russia would need to effectively fight corruption and establish accountability and a free media. Instead, it prioritised the survival of the virtually unchanged regime and pursued the path of marginalisation and confrontation with the West.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>166</sup> Hugh Carnegie, "Spotlight on French military deal with Russia," *Financial Times*, 7 March 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/43279aba-a5f6-11e3-b9ed-00144feab7de>.

<sup>167</sup> Konstantin Rozhnov, "Russian economic forum to promote new reform policies," *BBC*, 17 June 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10330736>.

<sup>168</sup> Luke Harding and Matthew Weaver, "Barack Obama calls for 'reset' in US-Russia relations," *The Guardian*, 7 July 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/07/barack-obama-russia-moscow-speech>.

<sup>169</sup> The White House, "U.S.-Russia Relations: "Reset" Fact Sheet," The White House President Barack Obama, 24 June 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>.

<sup>170</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Putin-Medvedev Double Act is Prelude to Either Reform of Marginalisation," Carnegie Moscow Center, 31 December 2009, <https://carnegie.ru/2009/12/31/putin-medvedev-double-act-is-prelude-to-either-reform-or-marginalisation-pub-24418>.

The first ideas for a new European security architecture were presented by Medvedev in June 2008, but his 'plan' was, aside from the legitimization of 'spheres of privileged interests', largely devoid of substance, reiterated existing principles of OSCE's Helsinki Final Act (which Russia blatantly breached just two months later) and could not explain why the post-Cold War security setting was no longer suitable or could not be continuously respected. Russia's new 'plan' was, in fact, a reaction to Europe's disarray (at NATO's summit in Bucharest in April 2008) and to America's plan to establish missile defence sites in Europe (in Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania).<sup>171</sup>

*Russia was determined to reshape Europe's security and the rules of the game strictly according to its own interests, with or without Western consent and cooperation*

Western decision-makers and scholars failed to understand that Russia was determined to reshape Europe's security and the rules of the game strictly according to its own interests, with or without Western consent and cooperation. An American military scholar suggested that Russia should have been provided with a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP, which was not offered to Ukraine and Georgia in 2008), even if Russia's inclusion in NATO might fail, and argued that Russia should be provided with a voice but not a veto in developing a new European security system.<sup>172</sup>

President Obama decided to substitute the initial plan (originating under President Bush) to build up a missile defence shield in Europe in September 2009, a step that should have met Russia's concerns but nevertheless did not help improve American and

European-Russian relations.<sup>173</sup> Vladimir Putin and his cronies had probably already chosen to safeguard the old 'vertical regime', which became, upon Putin's return to the presidency, increasingly authoritarian and aggressive.

*Democracy is the nemesis of Putin's regime, and therefore the West is inevitably Russia's adversary*

The failure of Obama's 'reset' is particularly important. It proves that the nature of Western-Russian relations is ultimately determined not by the West's goodwill and cooperative initiatives and proposals, or by eventual mistakes made by the West (that Russia uses to justify its own actions), but by the Kremlin's own logic and choices for defending and strengthening Russia's ruling regime and influence in Russia's neighbourhood and beyond. Democracy is the nemesis of Putin's regime, and therefore the West is inevitably Russia's adversary (and China is its partner). The period between 2008 and 2012, when Russia was led by Dmitri Medvedev and the US by Barack Obama, was probably the best and last, but a decidedly limited, window of opportunity for avoiding the escalation of confrontation and promoting meaningful and fruitful dialogue. A new 'reset' à la Obama is therefore much less likely to work under the present conditions.

*The Kremlin is not interested in dialogue for dialogue's sake, and it rejects discussion of any issues related to human rights and democracy that it considers its own internal matters*

<sup>171</sup> Bobo Lo, "Medvedev and the new European security architecture," Centre for European Reform, July 2009, [https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/pbrief\\_medvedev\\_july09-741.pdf](https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/pbrief_medvedev_july09-741.pdf).

<sup>172</sup> Richard J. Krickus, *Medvedev's Plan: Giving Russia a Voice but not a Veto in a new European Security System* (Carlisle: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/ssi\\_krickus.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/ssi_krickus.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> Luke Harding and Ian Traynor, "Obama abandons nuclear missile defence shield in Europe," *The Guardian*, 17 September 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/17/missile-defence-shield-barack-obama>.

## 5.2. ADAPTING RELATIONS ON A PURELY PRAGMATIC BASIS

Relations between the West and Russia cannot simply be ‘reset’ as if they were a stuck WiFi router. Could the result of a theoretically successful ‘reset’ be satisfactory if it entails the restoration of a status quo ante rather than the creation of a new solid basis for stable, (as much as possible) non-adversarial and durable relations? Nor is it conceivable to continue the relationship by simply turning the page. The baggage of events and conflicts of interest in the past 30 years is much too heavy, and it inevitably serves as the starting point.

The mutual lack of confidence, coupled with almost no good will from Russia’s side (demonstrated, for example, during EU High Representative Josep Borrell’s visit to Moscow in February 2021), leaves very limited room for promoting dialogue. The Kremlin makes it very clear that:

- It is not interested in dialogue for dialogue’s sake, and it rejects discussion of any issues related to human rights and democracy that it considers its own internal matters.
- It will accept the resolution, with or without Western participation, of (frozen) conflicts in the ‘former Soviet space’ only on Russia’s unchallenged terms. These are that the West should not encourage or accept Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in NATO and/or the EU, but can, of course, continue to pour money into those countries.
- It demands to be taken seriously in major international security issues as an equal (with *de facto* veto rights): a great – not just a regional – power.
- It rejects Europe’s security architecture, built primarily on NATO and the EU, because such an architecture does not take Russia’s ‘legitimate’/special interests into account. Russia’s double approach of intimidating Europe with mid-range offensive weapons, cyber-attacks and the threat of further aggression, and the active undermining of Western democracy, stability and unity serve to demonstrate the basis of Moscow’s claim.

- It stands ready to escalate political, military and economic tensions as if it has not much or nothing more to lose.
- It is betting on a strategic partnership with China (or rather aligns itself behind China’s back), and it considers that to be sufficient to counterbalance the West.

*Russia claims that the West is not Russia’s superior and therefore has no moral or legal right to lecture Russia or accuse it of misconduct and wrongdoing*

In addition, Russia claims that:

- The West is not Russia’s superior and therefore has no moral or legal right to lecture Russia or accuse it of misconduct and wrongdoing; Russia is doing ‘the same things’ as the West.
- The West imposed unjustified and illegal sanctions on Russia that should be unconditionally terminated.
- It therefore sees no reason to correct its policy and make even small/symbolic steps to meet Western demands.

It also probably assumes that:

- The West is increasingly vulnerable and weak.
- Russia will certainly find future opportunities to fill voids left by the West and even increase its influence in the NATO and/or EU countries that the Soviet Union dominated during the Cold War.
- The trend of the West’s decline and growing Russian and Chinese influence is irreversible over the next decades.

It is extremely difficult to imagine relations between the West and Russia improving during Putin’s regime, or even later, if the Putin regime’s premises and outlook remain. There are, however, certain aspects of Western attitudes and behaviour/actions – based on a clear understanding of Russia’s logic, expectations and reactions – that are of paramount importance.

Commenting on President Joe Biden's remark on whether he thinks that President Vladimir Putin is a killer, James Sherr, senior fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute at the ICDS, has said: 'The etiquette of confrontation matters, not least because disputes with a peer military (and nuclear) power are potentially dangerous. The discourse of confrontation can never be cordial, but it must always be correct. Russians regard friendliness by an antagonist as an insult. They demand respect and do not confer it lightly on others.'<sup>174</sup>

*The West, in order to succeed, must define and implement a solid common approach and strategy towards Russia and demonstrate unity and determination*

Keir Giles, senior consulting fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, presented at ICDS 10 principles for working with Russia that are described in his book *Moscow Rules*. Here are six of these principles. One: Do not confuse understanding Russia with excusing Russia (the typical stance of apologists/the so-called *Russland-Versteher*). Two: Do not ask Russia binary questions (because the Kremlin's answer will likely be both yes and no). Three: Do not be distracted by Russia's bluster, bravado and bluff (because Russia likes to make angry noises in order to test the West and improve its negotiation positions). Four: Do not hope for 'change' (it would be hard for things to get better in Russia, but it could be easy for things to get far worse). Five: Do not expect Russia to respect values and standards that were invented elsewhere, or assume that there must be common ground (the last 30 years, just like the Cold War, have demonstrated that Russia's understanding of problems, and its preferred solutions and methods, are almost always incompatible with Western political, moral and legal norms and values). Six: Do not think that the West can choose whether or not to be at war (either cold or hot) with Russia (hostility is Russia's historic norm vis-à-vis the West).<sup>175</sup>

<sup>174</sup> James Sherr, "The etiquette of confrontation. James Sherr on why the discourse of confrontation can never be cordial, but must always be correct," *The Insider*, 30 March 2021, [https://theins.ru/en/opinion/james-sherr/240503?fbclid=IwAR0Ooqolaosn-XSafOYrIVV4QSljrbPTRVq1LG\\_qu88QUKyAQ0qBLvJ3Xzc](https://theins.ru/en/opinion/james-sherr/240503?fbclid=IwAR0Ooqolaosn-XSafOYrIVV4QSljrbPTRVq1LG_qu88QUKyAQ0qBLvJ3Xzc).

<sup>175</sup> Keir Giles, "The "Moscow Rules": Ten Principles for Working with Russia," ICDS, 29 July 2019, <https://icds.ee/en/the-moscow-rules-ten-principles-for-working-with-russia/>.

First, the West, in order to succeed, must define and implement a solid common approach and strategy towards Russia and demonstrate unity and determination. This is easier said than done, given a wide spectrum of Western perceptions and interests towards Russia that are further differentiated and accentuated by the Kremlin. However, there is no better way to preserve a strong and coherent NATO and EU, and Europe's security.

The elements of a joint European and North American strategy in relations with Russia should be the following:

- Agree in both NATO and the EU, as well as between them, that Russian actions that significantly harm any member state will entail coordinated responses by the entire Alliance and/or Union (in full solidarity).
- That principle should also apply to Russia's actions in/against other countries – e.g. Ukraine and Syria – that adversely influence security in Europe and other regions/continents.
- Western responses should not be limited to political condemnation. Russia's actions need to be countered by appropriate and proportionate responses. Political declarations of condemnation are appropriate but, on their own, not proportionate or effective responses to the killing of civilians (through aerial bombardment) in Syria or of Ukrainian soldiers near the 'control line' in the Donbas region.
- Western responses have to be selected, calibrated and targeted so that Russia feels the consequences of its actions. For example, so far the Kremlin has not taken any positive steps with regard to Ukraine, because Western sanctions are considerably less than a proportionate response. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on 18 February 2021 that Russia would cut ties with the EU if the Union imposed new sanctions against Russia (because of the poisoning and unlawful imprisoning of Alexei Navalny). He added: 'We proceed from the fact that we're ready [for that]. In the event that we again see sanctions imposed in some sectors that create risks for

our economy, including in the most sensitive spheres'.<sup>176</sup> Lavrov bluntly threatened the EU against adopting appropriate and effective sanctions that would actually have a major impact on Russia.

- Not a single NATO and/or EU country, however large or small, should put its own interests/preferences towards Russia above Western solidarity, common policy and security interests of other Allies/member states. Achieving this key goal/ideal is particularly difficult due to Russia's persistent *divide et impera* policy and the political ambivalence of certain European countries (doing business with Moscow – e.g. Nord Stream 2, nuclear power plants – while, in parallel, voting for the extension/widening of sanctions).
- The West as a whole would undoubtedly support positive steps made by Russia with regard to solving existing conflicts and relieving tensions. It should be made clear to Russia that if it took a more constructive approach, it would quickly sense the benefits.
- On the other hand, Western strategic communication should work tirelessly and leave no doubt that further aggressive/subversive actions by Russia would bring about the West's prompt and forceful responses. Western strategic communication should be significantly improved and coordinated with concrete and visible steps.

Solidarity and coordination in NATO, in the EU and between NATO and the EU is more critical than ever before. Russia (and China) are individual countries ruled with an iron fist by authoritarian presidents, but the West is divided on many issues across the Atlantic and within Europe. Meetings, discussions and declarations by NATO's Secretary General and the President of the European Council

<sup>176</sup> Maria Kiselyova and Tom Balmforth, "Russia says it will cut ties with the EU if sanctioned over Navalny," *The Independent*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-eu-sergei-lavrov-alexei-navalny-b1801323.html>.

are certainly necessary and useful but not sufficient. The 36 members of NATO and the EU should first convene a joint meeting of their foreign ministers aimed at establishing an EU-NATO working group that would prepare common principles and building blocks of a

*Western strategic communication should work tirelessly and leave no doubt that further aggressive/subversive actions by Russia would bring about the West's prompt and forceful responses*

consolidated Western strategy and action plan on Russia (and China). The strategy and the action plan could be adopted at a summit meeting of heads of state and government. These steps should be taken soon.

Secondly, the West should expect realistic outcomes and agree on the best ways of conducting dialogue with Russia by building on the elements above.

*The West can hardly expect a breakthrough in relations with Russia. All that it can possibly achieve are small steps*

Unfortunately, the more realistic picture currently looks grim. The West can hardly expect a breakthrough in relations with Russia. All that it can possibly achieve are small steps. Like the big steps, these will only be agreed if they coincide with Russia's interests. For example, the renewal of the New START Treaty is obviously in Russia's interest in order

*The West should therefore thoroughly review its own interests and Russia's and identify the issues that matter most and that could be resolved in the short term*

to avoid an unbearably costly nuclear arms race, as opposed to the affordable production of mid-range missiles, breaching the INF Treaty, as useful tools for threatening and blackmailing Europe. As another example, Moscow (President Putin personally) agreed to exchange prisoners with Ukraine, following political efforts by the Western members of

the Normandy format, France and Germany, only when Kyiv agreed to hand over to Russia not just actual prisoners of war but members of Berkut (the special force that was involved in killing protesters on the Maidan [Independence Square] in 2014) and an officer suspected of shooting down the Malaysian Airlines airplane (flight MH-17) in 2015.

The West should therefore thoroughly review its own interests and Russia's and identify the issues that matter most and that could be resolved in the short term. Hard security should be the starting point, and pressure on the Kremlin could be exercised by different means, including, for example, freezing the Nord Stream 2 project. After all, it is also in the interest of Germany, and Europe as a whole, that Russia would come back to an INF-like regime and would verifiably destroy its land-based mid-range offensive missile systems. Russia should be induced to renounce secrecy, snap exercises and provocative steps and accept confidence-building measures based on restraint and mutual inspection and verification.

The second major subject for dialogue is the neighbourhood shared by Russia and the West. For example, further discussions and negotiations regarding the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine could be directed to a new 'Normandy' format that would include the EU, the US, Russia and Ukraine. The West could take more initiative and make specific proposals on how to solve 'frozen conflicts' in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in similar formats of discussion and negotiations.

Western strategic communication should emphasise consistently and clearly that Western countries and organisations do not wish to alienate, antagonise or punish Russia, even if the Kremlin does not care and pretends not to believe it. The West is interested in the normalisation of relations and solving problems and crises. However, the West cannot tolerate Russian excesses and breaches of jointly agreed rules and norms in the UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe or other frameworks. Western countries do not intend to tell Russian voters whom to elect as their president or representatives in their country's parliament or local governments. However, the West will

not remain silent if Russia's ruling regime does not respect its international commitments regarding democracy and human rights.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Relations between Russia and the West are often described as having reached their lowest point, but the worst and most dangerous point could yet be reached in the months and years ahead. The Kremlin firmly maintains that it has done nothing wrong, and therefore it does not need to correct its policy. It says Western measures/sanctions are wrong/unfounded, unjust and illegal. Moscow demonstrates its preparedness and willingness to escalate further tensions, judging by its behaviour, particularly in April 2021. Western diplomatic gestures can hardly prevent Russian escalation, and it is possible that they could encourage Moscow to go even further.

Therefore, the West should expect that it will likely be forced to react/respond to further escalation by Russia. It should not be misled by the Kremlin's rhetoric that Russia is showing goodwill and is ready to hold constructive dialogue, as there are no real indications of that. Russia needs to respond positively not only to the initiative by US president Joe Biden but also to the proposal by Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky to hold meetings with President Putin, whenever Russia is actually ready to take steps to release tensions and resolve crises.

The West's repeated attempts to 'reset' relations with Russia have failed on all counts. These relations cannot be 'reset' because Russia does not wish to restore a status quo ante. Nor should the West be interested in such a result, as relations even before 2014 were not satisfactory and would not be worth returning to. Overlooking the past would also be impossible, as the baggage of controversial events and provocations from the past 30 years is very heavy and cannot be simply taken off the table.

- The West should abandon the idea of a possible 'reset' in relations with Russia. A new concept could be developed that

would be aimed at creating a new basis in Western-Russian relations, satisfying Western (security) interests and bringing Russia to the negotiating table. It could be called the 'adaptation of relations' (to the new realities of an adversarial relationship).

Russia clearly profits from and attempts to exacerbate divergences between and within Western countries. The West needs to coordinate its policies and actions and avoid disunity and ambiguity in order to achieve better results.

- The 36 Western countries in NATO and the European Union could agree that the two organisations should work out a common and comprehensive long-term approach to Russia. NATO and the EU could agree to establish independent and joint high-level groups of experts in all relevant areas (policy, defence, economy and other matters), who would elaborate policy proposals and concrete steps concerning the most pressing issues. NATO and the EU should then adopt and start implementing their joint strategy. Acting according to a joint strategy has clear benefits – it strengthens the West, focuses its policy, improves the coherence of its strategic communication and offers probably the best chance to convince Russia to negotiate and de-escalate towards (a new) normality.

From the West's viewpoint, the rules of the game would be the same. No serious breach by Russia of its commitments under international law or agreements would remain unpunished. Such commitments include respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states, as well as respect for human rights and democratic principles. The West cannot back away from or ignore these principles.

- There is no need to draw subjective/arbitrary 'red lines' that Russia would be tempted to cross. It is sufficient to constantly remind the Kremlin that its obligations under the UN Charter, the OSCE documents and other legal and political instruments are in essence the 'red lines' that it should not cross (especially the non-use of force and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states). The West should always be prepared to adopt new sanctions,

and these must be proportionate to the malign effect of Russia's actions (the aspect of proportionality – which should always be clearly communicated and explained – is of paramount importance). The lessons from August 2008 should be kept in mind: an unpunished aggression inevitably leads to another aggression. The West should make very clear that it does not seek to influence the political choices of the Russian people/voters, but it cannot tolerate the infringement of their basic rights and liberties.

Security issues are at the forefront of Western-Russian relations. Russia claims that it is encircled and threatened by NATO, while it makes tremendous efforts toward the military domination of its western and southern rims, from the Arctic to the Caucasus. Moscow also seeks to intimidate Europe with weapons of blackmail (nuclear tactical weapons and dual-use mid-range missiles). Its immediate neighbours (such as the Baltic states and Poland) it intimidates with anti-access/area denial 'bubbles' and a concentration of forces in the Kaliningrad, Leningrad and Pskov Oblasts. NATO has had to return to its core task of deterrence and collective defence since 2014.

- The West should continue to strengthen its deterrence and defence in Europe, particularly in NATO's eastern flank. NATO's strategic communication (and that of individual member states), consisting of both political statements and military/defence actions (exercises, deployments, procurements etc.), should be better coordinated and calibrated. It should signal to Russia the following:
  - The Alliance harbours no aggressive intent against the Russian Federation.
  - It will do what is necessary to honour NATO treaty commitments and maintain deterrence and collective defence in Europe.
  - It will do what is required to maintain sovereignty over the airspace and territorial waters of the Allies.
  - The Allies will not accept intimidation against their aircraft and vessels in the Baltic and Black seas. These seas are international waterways under international law, and the Allies will not

be deterred from exercising their lawful rights.

- Russia’s cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, sudden and massive deployments of troops, closures of large sea and airspace areas (as in the Black Sea from April to October 2021) and similar aggressive actions are grave and destabilising acts that will be met with an appropriate response.
- It would be a grave error for Russia, under any circumstances, to test Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, including by launching attacks that are meant to fall below its threshold.
- The starting point in negotiating security issues with Russia is the reinstatement of the INF Treaty. The Allies must find a proper way to convince Russia to give up (i.e. verifiably destroy) land-based mid-range missiles, perhaps along the lines of the 1980s scenario (deploying missiles targeted at Russia’s European territory).

Moscow does not wish to develop lawful, cooperative relations in a joint neighbourhood in which countries are free to choose their own political orientation. This particularly concerns Ukraine, a country that the Kremlin regards as an arena of its ‘privileged interests’ and thus believes is entitled to only limited sovereignty.

- The West should put forward a new ‘Normandy format’ with the participation of the EU, the US, Ukraine and Russia (to support President Zelensky’s proposal). The EU’s positions and proposals should ideally be discussed and coordinated with non-EU NATO Allies, particularly the UK and Turkey. This model should be applied, as appropriate, to all other eastern neighbourhood countries. It is for the Western nations – not Moscow – to decide who represents the West in this context (and others).

Russia has intervened militarily in Syria, Libya, Venezuela, the Central African Republic and other countries using its armed forces, falsely designated ‘private military companies’ and various covert means. These actions have fuelled local conflicts and diminished the security of neighbours. In none of these cases has Russia adopted a cooperative approach

towards the West or pursued a solution that is acceptable to all sides. The autumn 2020 settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh situation is also not a good example, because the new status quo was achieved by war, not by negotiation, and it is clearly unsatisfactory to the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Astana process was not even meant to find a solution that addressed the interests of all main sides involved in the Syrian conflict, particularly the Kurds.

- The West should not create further vacuums that would be filled by Russia. Western countries should continue to strongly support democratic governments/forces and bring relevant issues to the UN Security Council and other relevant bodies. The mistakes made in Syria (the refusal to punish al-Assad’s regime in 2013) and Libya (abandoning the country after the toppling of the dictator Gaddafi in 2011) should not be repeated. The Middle East and North Africa (as well as the Sahel region) is not Russia’s neighbourhood. The West has to retake the initiative and help rebuild security and stability in these regions. Russia should be engaged in joint efforts only if Moscow wants to and is able to play a constructive role. The West should emphasise its economic and financial role and ask Russia to contribute economically as well, rather than with troops and means of destruction.

Russia can be expected to oppose Western sanctions through its own distinctive inventory of means. The West therefore requires an inventory of defences and countermeasures against these actions, many of them ‘hybrid’ and covert in nature.

- EU members should strive for as much solidarity as possible. The Kremlin will look for cracks in Western unity and exploit them. Sanctions are a key Western tool, in addition to defence and security measures, in dealing with Russia when Moscow flouts internationally agreed norms of behaviour. Abandoning sanctions in the absence of changes in Russia’s policy would have detrimental effects. A Western strategy (mentioned above) should aim for a coherent policy on sanctions by all 36 Western nations (and any other nations willing to join, such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan) and

reflect a vision of a newly emerging world order that is aimed at strategic stability and predictability.

The China factor is increasingly important in Western-Russian relations. China has tremendous economic interests in the West and would likely be more responsive than Russia in solving certain international problems. Russia is probably betting on the worsening of Western-Chinese relations and a stronger bond/alliance between Beijing and Moscow against the West.

- The West should be more willing and able to engage China (as well as other BRICS countries like India and Brazil) in jointly helping to rebuild failed countries (particularly in Africa and Latin America), whenever and wherever is possible, the more likely it is that the Kremlin will feel the need to improve relations with the West.

Finally, on 22 April 2021, Russia proposed to the US to 'exchange guarantees' of non-interference in each other's internal affairs, to 'reopen' high level channels for preventing cyber attacks and to 're-establish' Russian-American dialogue on cyber security.<sup>177</sup> On 25 September 2020, during the Trump administration, President Putin also proposed an 'election non-interference pact'.<sup>178</sup>

- The US and/or any other Western country should not accept such proposals. The practices concerned are already proscribed by basic instruments of international law and political documents. 'Reinforcing' these principles through bilateral agreements will qualify and diminish them. 'Non-interference pacts' never mean what they say. Parties with shared interests have no need for them; parties with divergent interests will use them to advance those interests.

<sup>177</sup> Lauri Laugen, "Venemaa pakkus USA-le garantiide vahetamist mittesekkumise kohta teineteise siseasjadesse [Russia proposed to the US to exchange guarantees of non-interference in each other's internal affairs]," *Delfi*, 23 April 2021, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/93219061/venemaa-pakkus-usa-le-garantiide-vahetamist-mittesekkumise-kohta-teineteise-siseasjadesse>.

<sup>178</sup> Jonathan Brown, "Putin Proposes Election Non-Interference Pact with U.S.," *The Moscow Times*, 25 September 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/25/putin-proposes-election-non-interference-pact-with-us-a71552>.

Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu announced on 22 April 2021 that the next day, Russia would start withdrawing the troops that it had amassed at Ukraine's borders in previous weeks, as the troops 'completed a combat readiness check'.<sup>179</sup>

Russia's show of force caused serious concern in Ukraine and the Western countries that offered Kyiv political and material support. The Kremlin's real aim remains unclear, as there were no other political or military actions, apart from Russia's declared blockade of Black Sea areas around Crimea until October 2021.

Dialogue between the West and Russia will remain extremely difficult and barely fruitful as long as the Kremlin believes that solving any conflicts will weaken Moscow's positions and that frequent and threatening demonstrations of military power are the only way Moscow will be taken seriously (and 'respected').

<sup>179</sup> "Russia announces withdrawal of troops from Ukraine's border," *Unian*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.unian.info/politics/kyiv-moscow-tensions-russia-announces-withdrawal-of-troops-from-ukraine-s-border-11397175.html>.

## ANNEX A – GENERAL BACKGROUND OF WESTERN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Relations between the West and Russia are continually influenced by the vast baggage created by the events of the last 30 years. These episodes help to explain not only mutual attitudes but also Russia's assertiveness and tendency to confront the West.

For the purpose of this report, the West includes NATO, the European Union (EU) and their member states – a total of 36 countries in Europe and North America, of which 21 are members of both NATO and the EU, nine are members only of NATO and six are members only of the EU. Occasionally, some other international bodies and frameworks could be included in this notion of the West, such as the G7 (although that includes Japan, in addition to six EU and/or NATO members).

Here is a collection of milestones and outstanding events – in chronological order – that have taken place since the end of the Cold War and seriously affected relations between the West and Russia:

### A.1. THE YELTSIN DECADE (1990S)

The end of the Cold War resulted in Germany's reunification (3 October 1990), the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1 July 1991), a failed coup d'état in Moscow (19–22 August 1991), the subsequent independence of the Baltic states, and the final collapse of the USSR (8 December 1991). The former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic became the Russian Federation and the only successor state of the USSR. It thus retained Moscow's seat in the UN Security Council and other international organisations.

Russia pulled out its (ex-Soviet) troops from former Warsaw Pact countries, including East Germany (GDR), as well as from the Baltic states, by the end of August 1994, by which time it had joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme (on 22 June 1994). All other former Soviet republics that became

independent states, as well as the Baltic states and other European countries (members or future members of NATO and/or the EU), also joined the PfP. Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the EU on 1 January 1995.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin faced a serious constitutional crisis in October 1993. He had to use military force against a coup orchestrated by hard-line rebel parliamentarians, which had the potential to start a civil war. Yeltsin needed Western, particularly American, political support and IMF (International Monetary Fund) financial support in order to be re-elected on 3 July 1996. The first Chechen war – which lasted from 11 December 1994 to 31 August 1996 – resulted in the Kremlin's defeat and Chechnya's *de facto* independence.

President Yeltsin could not sustain radical reforms to introduce Western-style democracy, rule of law and free market capitalism in Russia without decisive support from the elites and the general population. He had to bow to oligarchs who supported his re-election but who snatched up all the major lucrative industries and infrastructure and corrupted the entire state establishment. From 1996 to 1999, Russia was at its weakest. It depended heavily on Western aid, had an ill and alcoholic president, experienced a dramatic collapse of the economy in 1998 (aggravated by low oil prices), lost face in Chechnya, and had demoralised and degraded armed forces.

NATO prepared to announce – on 8 July 1997 at the Madrid summit – the first wave of enlargement in the former Warsaw Pact, which included Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. On 27 May 1997, the Alliance concluded a 'Founding Act' with Russia in order to reassure Moscow that NATO was willing to cooperate and that the enlargement would not compromise Russia's security (there would be no deployments of significant Allied forces to new member states in the 'present' security conditions).<sup>180</sup>

In 1998, Russia was invited into and formally joined the G7, a prestigious group of the largest and most developed industrialised

<sup>180</sup> NATO, "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation," NATO, 5 November 2008, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25470.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25470.htm).

nations (made up of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US, joined by the European Union), which then became the G8. However, after Russia illegally occupied and annexed Crimea, it was kicked out of the group on 24 March 2014.<sup>181</sup> Moscow pretended that it was leaving the G8 on its own initiative.

The EU signed a Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia that came into force in 1997. It was established as a political framework for consultations on the basis of respect for democracy and human rights, political and economic freedom, and commitment to international peace and security, and it is still the legal basis for EU-Russia cooperation.<sup>182</sup>

The first major spoiler in Western-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War occurred in connection with the crisis in Kosovo, in the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). After many failed attempts at political resolution (including in the UN Security Council), NATO Allies decided to intervene militarily against the FRY's armed forces, under the command of the nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević, in order to stop what was perceived to be the genocide of Kosovar Albanians. (They feared disastrous consequences, similar to the Serbian massacre of Srebrenica Muslims in Bosnia in July 1995, given that Yugoslav forces displaced at least 300,000 Kosovars.) Milošević's actions were condemned in the UNSC on three occasions, and NATO's degree of consultation with Russia was brought to unprecedented levels in crisis management.

The Alliance finally decided to pursue a bombing campaign in the FRY, including the capital, Belgrade, from 24 March to 10 June 1999, in spite of Russia's vehement opposition and veto in the UN Security Council. In 2016, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called NATO's intervention an 'act of aggression' and 'the first

attack in Europe against a sovereign state since 1945'.<sup>183</sup>

Russia refused to participate in NATO's summit in Washington on 23–25 April 1999. Moscow did not wish to endorse what it regarded as NATO's unilateral action in defiance of international law against its historical ally and protégé. Just two days after NATO stopped bombing the FRY, a serious incident took place at the airport in Pristina, Kosovo: Russian troops attempted to take control of the airfield ahead of deployed NATO ground forces (KFOR). Russia provoked a standoff with British forces that could have resulted in armed conflict.<sup>184</sup> Russia believes these events were a turning point in its relations with the West, even if they occurred before Vladimir Putin's rise to power.<sup>185</sup> It rejected NATO's attempts to act together (coherently) in the former Yugoslavia. NATO and Russia would never again attempt to cooperate on the ground (with forces) in international peacekeeping operations.

## A.2. PUTIN'S FIRST TWO PRESIDENTIAL TERMS (2000–2008)

Yeltsin's sudden – albeit anticipated – departure and Putin's quick ascent to Russia's presidency, at the end of the last millennium, did not ring alarm bells in the West. Even though the Kremlin won a second devastating war in Chechnya (from 26 August 1999 to 31 May 2000), Russia was largely in crisis. The accidental sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* in the Barents Sea – on 12 August 2000 – emphasised the precarious state of Russia's armed forces. It was domestically a difficult political moment for Putin, but it likely gave him the impetus to make military modernisation Russia's top priority (Russia's defence spending rose significantly after 1993, but actual military modernisation only began after the 2008 Georgia war).

<sup>181</sup> Alison Smale and Michael D. Shaer, "Russia Is Ousted From Group of 8 by U.S. and Allies," *The New York Times*, 24 March 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/25/world/europe/obama-russia-crimea.html>.

<sup>182</sup> European Union External Action Service, "The European Union and the Russian Federation," Delegation of the European Union to Russia, 25 February 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia\\_en/35939/The%20European%20Union%20and%20the%20Russian%20Federation](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia_en/35939/The%20European%20Union%20and%20the%20Russian%20Federation).

<sup>183</sup> "NATO Bombings of Yugoslavia Aggression Against Sovereign State – Lavrov," *Sputnik*, 31 October 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201610311046907528-nato-russia-kosovo-yugoslavia/>.

<sup>184</sup> Patrick Wintour, Ian Traynor, and Tom Whitehouse, "British and Russian troops in tense Pristina stand-off," *The Guardian*, 13 June 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jun/13/balkans5>.

<sup>185</sup> Neil Clark, "In 1999, it was Yugoslavia in the crosshairs of the imperialists, now it's Venezuela," *Russia Today*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/455256-yugoslavia-nato-crosshairs-venezuela/>.

The terrorist attacks against the US on 11 September 2001 shocked the entire Western world. Putin, who at the time was not yet considered anti-Western, reportedly warned US President George W. Bush of an 'incipient terrorist campaign... coming out of Afghanistan'.<sup>186</sup> Following the attack, the Russian president immediately offered condolences and proposed a 'pool of international efforts against terrorism' given Russia's 'first-hand knowledge of terrorism'.<sup>187</sup>

The US/NATO and Russia cooperated in connection with Afghanistan, following the launch of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military mission on 20 December 2001, on the basis of Resolution 1386 of the UN (supported by Russia). Cooperation was clearly in Moscow's interest in order to prevent the spread of radical Islamic terrorism to Central Asia and to Russia itself.

Russia never contributed forces to the ISAF, as it would not place its troops under NATO command, but it allowed NATO and the US to use a Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that carried about 40% of ISAF's supplies through Russia's territory. The NDN brought financial profits to Russia, and it survived several political ups and downs, but the Kremlin finally closed it in December 2014, when ISAF ceased combat operations.<sup>188</sup> The US and France used the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan for ISAF purposes from 2001 until 11 July 2014, when they vacated the base upon a parliamentary decision of the host country, evidently under pressure from Russia.<sup>189</sup>

Compared to Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition force was a different story. Russia opposed and saw no legal grounds for an American/Western military intervention against the regime of Iraqi dictator Saddam

Hussein. The Kremlin also detected serious political cracks in the Alliance concerning Iraq, especially those pitting the US and the UK against France and Germany. The Russian military and political establishment was appalled by the very swift and devastating victory by the US-led coalition (in just 26 days of major combat operations, starting on 19 March 2003) against the sizable Iraqi armed forces that had been trained and equipped over several decades by the Soviet Union/Russia.<sup>190</sup> This was the second shock that convinced Putin to pursue the modernisation of Russia's military.

Iraq may well have been the turning point of the 'collective Putin's' increasingly anti-Western mentality and behaviour.<sup>191</sup> It was coupled with the imprisonment and expropriation (robbing) of the prominent oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovski in October 2003, as well as Western criticism of Putin's attempts to consolidate his power (the legislative elections on 7 December 2003 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ruling party 'United Russia' and the marginalisation of the Western-minded/friendly opposition). This turning point was most likely inevitable. It would have occurred sooner or later because the Kremlin, under Putin, did not accept cooperation on Western terms (i.e. the post-Cold War order shaped by the US/West) or anything less than treatment as an 'equal' power.

The EU and NATO enlarged significantly in 2004, embracing many Central and Eastern European nations from Estonia to Slovenia and Bulgaria. These events were anticipated, as invitations to candidate countries were issued back in 2002, followed by accession negotiations and preparations. Even so, Russia deeply resented the enlargement of these Western organizations. Moscow could not prevent it or even delay it, though it tried in some candidate countries. Estonia, for example, was not able to sign a border treaty with Russia until 2005,

<sup>186</sup> Aishwaria Sonavane, "Putin Warned Then President Bush Before 9/11: Former CIA Analyst," *Republic*, 7 September 2019, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/us-news/putin-warned-then-us-president-bush-before-9-11-former-cia-analyst.html>.

<sup>187</sup> "President Vladimir Putin made a statement on terrorist attacks in the United States," The Kremlin, 11 September 2001, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/40081>.

<sup>188</sup> "NATO's once vital supply link to Afghanistan through Russia closes," *Stars and Stripes*, 20 May 2015, <https://www.stripes.com/news/nato-s-once-vital-supply-link-to-afghanistan-via-russia-closes-1.347249>.

<sup>189</sup> Olga Dzyubenko, "U.S. vacates base in Central Asia as Russia's clout rises," *Reuters*, 3 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-manas-idUSKBN0EE1LH20140603>.

<sup>190</sup> Fred Weir, "Iraqi defeat jolts Russian military," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 April 2003, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0416/p06s01-woiq.html>.

<sup>191</sup> "Collective Putin" means, in the context of this report, President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle of old friends and trustees (mainly from Saint Petersburg and with a KGB background) who act in Russia's power structures (the *siloviki*) and state-owned or "private" (actually state/Kremlin controlled) companies, banks etc.

but this did not help the Kremlin to weaken Estonia's chances to join NATO and the EU.

The first Ukrainian Maidan (the 'Orange Revolution' from 22 November 2004 to 23 January 2005) resulted in Putin's perceived humiliation. The candidate he publicly favoured in the Ukrainian presidential elections, incumbent Viktor Yanukovich, had to step down (despite elections rigged in his favour) and give way to 'America's candidate', Viktor Yushchenko, who had been poisoned during the election campaign but survived.

The events in Ukraine were preceded by a 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia (from 3 to 23 November 2003) that resulted in the replacement of the Soviet-era leader Eduard Shevardnadze by Mikheil Saakashvili. The personal antipathy between Putin and Saakashvili, in addition to the collision of their political courses, would bear severe consequences in August 2008.<sup>192</sup>

The West was soon astonished by Putin's statements (his annual address to the Federal Assembly, on 10 May 2006, and his speech at the Munich Security Conference, on 10 February 2007). Yet it failed to detect and properly evaluate his sharply rising anti-Western mood.<sup>193</sup> In November 2006, a former FSB (Russian security forces) operative and British citizen, Alexander Litvinenko, was killed in London by poisoning with radioactive polonium-210. (This was just a month after the assassination of another prominent critic of Putin, journalist Anna Politkovskaya.) Yet even this shocking murder did not impair overall Western relations with Russia, only the UK's.<sup>194</sup>

Russia 'suspended' its implementation of the (Adapted) Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty on 12 December 2007. This move presaged Russia's aggression against Georgia in August 2008. NATO countries were reluctant to

ratify the adapted treaty of 1999 unless Russia fulfilled treaty commitments. (Russia met the treaty's limits on its own territory but was obligated by the treaty to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Moldova.)<sup>195</sup> The demise of Europe's conventional arms control regime could make Russia more reliant on tactical nuclear arms.

Kosovo's declaration of independence, on 17 February 2008, was strongly supported by France and Germany and quickly recognised by most other Western countries (with certain exceptions, like Spain and Greece) but was fiercely rejected by Serbia and Russia. It would later be used by Russia as a pretext and justification for the 'self-determination' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the occupation and annexation of Crimea.<sup>196</sup>

### A.3. MEDVEDEV'S INTERMEZZO

The switch from President Putin to President Dmitri Medvedev, on 7 May 2008, a mere imitation of democracy orchestrated by the 'collective Putin', seemed to comfort the West and relieve fears of an emerging/escalating confrontation with Russia, although Putin obviously retained strategic control in Russia's main domestic and foreign policy spheres.<sup>197</sup> The succession also prolonged the West's faith that the Kremlin would respect the provisions of Russia's constitution.

President Medvedev immediately came out with the idea of a new 'European Security Treaty'. The proposal was largely acclaimed, for example by France, but could not materialise because the proponent could not explain plainly and convincingly the aim of the treaty and why it was actually needed to supplement or replace numerous existing agreements, e.g. in the OSCE framework. When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, he decided to push Russia's own Eurasian Union, an organisation that

<sup>192</sup> Clifford J. Levy, "The Georgian and Putin: A Hate Story," *The New York Times*, 18 August 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/weekinreview/19levy.html>.

<sup>193</sup> President of Russia, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly," The Kremlin, 10 May 2006, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23577>; President of Russia, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," The Kremlin, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>194</sup> Bridget Kendall, "What Alexander Litvinenko report means for UK-Russia relations," *BBC*, 22 January 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35378633>.

<sup>195</sup> Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif, "The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and the Adapted CFE Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, August 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/cfe>.

<sup>196</sup> David L. Phillips, "Crimea Is Not Kosovo," *HuffPost*, 10 May 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crimea-is-not-kosovo\\_b\\_4936365](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crimea-is-not-kosovo_b_4936365).

<sup>197</sup> Chloe Arnold, "Russia: Putin Hands Reins To Medvedev, But Remains In Control," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 6 May 2008, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1117420.html>.

would have the opposite effect of Medvedev's proposal.<sup>198</sup> Putin's regime asserted great power prerogatives over small states in 'zones of security', in contrast to the Western approach of a Europe 'whole and free'.

Medvedev's presidency started with a shock as well. Moscow openly launched an attack on another country, Georgia, for the first time since 1979 (the invasion of Afghanistan). NATO's summit meeting in Bucharest (2–4 April 2008), right before Medvedev's inauguration, did not result in consensus among the Allies regarding Ukraine's and Georgia's future chances of joining the Alliance, particularly due to France's and Germany's opposition (Russia's future partners in the 'Normandy format' on eastern Ukraine/Donbas).

Nevertheless, Russia decided, shortly before the Olympic Games in Beijing, to launch a blitzkrieg against Georgia (1–12 August 2008). The question of who fired the first shot is irrelevant, given that Russia thoroughly prepared the aggression (the Kavkaz military exercise lasted from 15 July to 2 August 2008), and its troops advanced through the Roki tunnel into Georgia (in the Tshinvali region) before combat started.

France, which then held the presidency of the European Union, under President Nicolas Sarkozy, rushed to Moscow and thereafter to Tbilisi with a six-point peace plan. The war ended, and Georgia survived as an independent country, but its territory was severely truncated. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were placed directly under Russian control (*de facto* annexed by Russia). The West – apart from countries like Poland and the Baltic states – sighed in relief. Business as usual with Russia was able to continue. France was even eager to sell Russia two Mistral-class helicopter carriers, but the deal later failed due to pressure from the Allies.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Richard Weitz, *The Rise and Fall of Medvedev's European Security Treaty* (Washington: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2019), 1, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/rise-and-fall-medvedev%E2%80%99s-european-security-treaty>.

<sup>199</sup> Kim Willsher, "France looking for warship buyers after cancelling Mistral deal with Russia," *The Guardian*, 6 August 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/06/france-russia-mistral-warships-deal-cancelled>.

An official Polish aircraft carrying the country's President, Lech Kaczyński, and many high officials and military commanders, 96 people in all, including the crew, crashed near Smolensk, Russia, on 10 April 2010. Moscow continues to refuse to repatriate the wreckage of the airplane, and the crash remains a contentious issue between the two countries.<sup>200</sup>

The 'Arab Spring' started in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread to most of the Arab world. The West took military action only in Libya (airstrikes from 19 March to 31 October 2011) in order to help rebel forces oust from power the longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Russia (and China) abstained from, rather than vetoing, UN Security Council Resolution 1973. This resolution was intended to stop Gaddafi regime's attacks against civilian populations (as strongly demanded by France) and to impose a no-fly zone over all of Libya (as requested by the Arab League).

However, Russia claimed, as in the case of the FRY/Kosovo (1999), that NATO did not have a legal mandate to intervene militarily in Libya. Russia claimed that NATO did so in an excessive manner, in spite of Gaddafi's refusal to cease fire and respect Resolution 1973. Russia demanded a 'political solution', and China backed the Kremlin's line – the first notable political rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.<sup>201</sup> Putin was reportedly horrified by the lynching of Gaddafi on 20 October 2011 but also irritated by the West 'abusing' Russia's 'constructiveness' in the UN. A public dispute took place between then President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin on the UN resolution and their evaluation of the Western military intervention.<sup>202</sup> Putin, preparing to return to Russia's presidency in 2012, probably decided to never repeat such 'mistakes' and instead resumed a tough line vis-à-vis the West.

<sup>200</sup> Marcin Gocłowski and Wojciech Zurawski, "Poland critical of Russia 10 years after Smolensk air crash," *Reuters*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-politics-smolensk-idUSKCN21S16E>.

<sup>201</sup> Kenneth Rapoza, "Russia and China Team Up Against NATO Libya Campaign," *Forbes*, 17 June 2011, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2011/06/17/russia-and-china-team-up-against-nato-libya-campaign/?sh=2e0b38b06ff1>.

<sup>202</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia on the military intervention in Libya," OSW, 23 March 2011, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2011-03-23/russia-military-intervention-libya>.

## A.4. PUTIN'S COMEBACK TO PRESIDENCY FOR LIFE

Vladimir Putin was elected for the third time as Russia's president on 7 May 2012. Russia's military was in a process of massive reform and modernisation that started after its rather poor performance against Georgia in 2008.<sup>203</sup> The Kremlin's coffers were replenished by high oil prices on the world market and the commissioning of the Nord Stream gas pipelines to Germany (in 2011 and 2012). In February 2013, Russia's Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, enunciated what would later be called 'Gerasimov's Doctrine' of hybrid (or non-linear) warfare.<sup>204</sup> Russia denies that such a doctrine/approach ever existed.<sup>205</sup>

In parallel, the civil war in Syria – which started in March 2011 – intensified, and the West became seriously concerned about the use of chemical weapons by armed forces defending Bashar al-Assad's regime against civilian populations, unprotected by the UN. However, the then US President Barack Obama failed to intervene and punish al-Assad's regime militarily, despite having drawn a 'red line' on the issue. A year earlier, Obama announced America's 'Pivot to Asia', which seemed to signal the US's fading interest, activity and presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as in Europe.

Russia probably felt that the time had come to sharply raise its political and military profile. The UN-brokered agreement to destroy Syria's chemical arsenal but keep al-Assad in power was Russia's first remarkable achievement in a series of future developments.<sup>206</sup>

On the other hand, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced on 8 April 2013 the formation

of the so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS/Daesh). ISIS was not perceived as a major threat until it gained control over vast areas in Iraq and Syria and started conducting terrorist attacks worldwide.<sup>207</sup> A 'distribution of labour' took ground according to which a US-led Western coalition struggled to defeat and eradicate ISIS, while Russia (and its allies Iran and Hezbollah) primarily strived to protect al-Assad's regime and expand the territory under its control. They were both ultimately successful. Turkey joined in later by securing a 'safety zone' along its border within Syria.

In 2013, Russia twisted Ukraine's arm not to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, as it accused the EU of 'harsh pressure' on Kyiv's authorities.<sup>208</sup> A second uprising ensued in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), starting in late November 2013. By February 2014, President Yanukovich had fled the country.

The flame of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi was barely extinguished on 23 February 2014 when Ukraine went up in flames. The country was very vulnerable, both politically and militarily. Putin, who felt humiliated in 2004, decided to take full advantage of the situation and try to solve the 'Ukrainian question' by force. Russia saw, once again, Western attempts to destabilise its 'near abroad' (area of exclusive Russian interests and rights).<sup>209</sup>

The Kremlin decided to destabilise and take control of eastern Ukraine, from Kharkiv to Odessa, and from there try gradually to subdue the whole country. In parallel, from 27 February 2014, Russia began the occupation of Crimea, initially using 'little green men' (in unmarked uniforms). This resulted in Crimea's annexation on 18 March, after a hasty 'referendum' and declaration of 'independence' by the pro-Russian local authorities.

<sup>203</sup> Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/577>.

<sup>204</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, "Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy," Congressional Research Service, 20 August 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11625>.

<sup>205</sup> Brian MacDonald, "The problem with the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' is that it does not exist," *Russia Today*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/403821-gerasimov-doctrine-military-war-hybrid/>.

<sup>206</sup> United Nations, "Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria's Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013)," 27 September 2013, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11135.doc.htm>.

<sup>207</sup> Martin Chulov, "The rise and fall of the Isis 'caliphate'," *The Guardian*, 24 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/23/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-isis-caliphate>.

<sup>208</sup> "Russia denounces EU over 'harsh pressure' on Ukraine," *Russia Today*, 28 November 2013, <https://www.rt.com/russia/russia-ukraine-europe-pressure-440/>.

<sup>209</sup> Andrew Higgins and Peter Baker, "Russia Claims U.S. Is Meddling Over Ukraine," *The New York Times*, 6 February 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/07/world/europe/ukraine.html>.

However, Ukraine resisted, and Russia decided to occupy the only other fully controllable portion of Ukraine's territory, the eastern areas of Donetsk and Lugansk Oblasts, including the administrative centres. The Kremlin did not formally annex these territories but preferred to cast them as 'independent' 'people's republics' (although it never officially recognised their independence, as it did with Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Its aim was to create a semi-hot, semi-frozen conflict area within Ukraine in order to impede the country's Western orientation and manipulate Kyiv.

The West reacted to the aggression against Ukraine by imposing political and economic sanctions against specific Russian entities and individuals. NATO Allies decided that the Alliance's eastern flank from Estonia to Romania had to be far better protected and that Russia needed to be effectively deterred. Western-Russian relations entered into a new phase that some labelled Cold War 2.0.<sup>210</sup>

The 'Normandy format' was created at the D-Day ceremony in 2014 between the heads of state/government of Ukraine, Germany, France and Russia. This arrangement still attempts to ensure the implementation of the Minsk accords (agreed in September 2014 and February 2015) but with very little success. Moscow is not interested in a resolution of the conflict that does not satisfy its own terms and interests. Above all, it wants a guarantee that Ukraine will not be allowed to join the West and leave Russia's claimed sphere of influence.<sup>211</sup>

At the height of fighting in Donbas, a Boeing 777, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, was shot down by 'separatists'/Russian-led forces with a Buk surface-to-air missile. Moscow continues to deny any connection to the incident, which led to the EU widening sanctions against Russia.<sup>212</sup> There is a historical parallel with the downing of a Boeing 747 (Korean Air Lines Flight 007) by the Soviets at the height of the Cold War,

in September 1983. The Malaysian airplane was likely not shot down on purpose; it was probably mistaken for a Ukrainian military aircraft.

Russia officially launched the political-economic Eurasian Union, also including Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, on 1 January 2015. It is supposed to demonstrate to Europe/Brussels that Moscow has its own union and that Russia expects Ukraine and other former vassals to adhere to it. Russia also created the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in October 2002, with the same countries and Tajikistan, on the basis of a May 1992 collective security treaty. However, these organisations, created and led by the Kremlin, do not mirror EU and NATO but are instead updated copies of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact and reflect Russia's Cold War mentality.

On 30 September 2015, with little warning, Russia deployed air and other forces to Syria. Thus Russia took a very high profile in the Syrian conflict and the Middle East in general. Incidents involving NATO members followed: on 24 November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that briefly intruded into Turkish airspace, after which relations between Moscow and Ankara were tense for months, and US forces destroyed a Russian/Syrian contingent in Deir ez-Zor in early February 2018, killing about 200 Russian Wagner PMC fighters. Nevertheless, conflict between the US-led coalition and Russia was deflected.<sup>213</sup>

China, France, Germany, Russia, UK, US, the EU and Iran signed a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or 5+1 Agreement) for Iran's military denuclearisation on 18 October 2015. President Donald Trump withdrew the US from this major agreement on 8 May 2018, a step that created a clash of interests with European Allies. President Joe Biden's administration is willing to return to the nuclear deal but expects Iran to take the first steps.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Patrick Wintour, Luke Harding, and Julian Borger, "Cold war 2.0: how Russia and the west reheated a historic struggle," *The Guardian*, 24 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/24/cold-war-20-how-russia-and-the-west-reheated-a-historic-struggle>.

<sup>211</sup> "US, Europe accuse Russia of blocking Ukraine war solutions," *Euractiv*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/us-europe-accuse-russia-of-blocking-ukraine-war-solutions/>.

<sup>212</sup> "MH 17 plane crash: EU to widen Russia sanctions," *BBC*, 22 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28415248>.

<sup>213</sup> Anna Varfolomeeva, "UPDATED: More than 200 Russians may have been killed in Coalition strikes against 'pro-regime' forces in Syria," *The Defence Post*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/02/10/russians-killed-coalition-strikes-deir-ezzor-syria/>.

<sup>214</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, "Biden administration takes first steps to return to Iran nuclear deal," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-02-18/biden-administration-takes-first-steps-to-return-to-iran-nuclear-deal>.

According to considerable circumstantial evidence, Russia most likely interfered in both UK's Brexit referendum, held on 23 June 2016, and the US presidential election campaigns that culminated in Trump's election on 8 November 2016. The Kremlin persistently denies meddling in these processes, which Russia most likely hoped would weaken the US, the UK, NATO and the EU.<sup>215</sup>

To Moscow's surprise, US president Trump decided to punish al-Assad's regime in Syria – protected by Russia – with a cruise missile attack for using chemical weapons again on 6 April 2017.<sup>216</sup> At that time, Trump was hosting Chinese president Xi Jinping. The US president launched new missile attacks against Syrian military installations on 13 April 2018, after al-Assad's troops committed chemical atrocities against civilians in the outskirts of Damascus and elsewhere.<sup>217</sup>

President Putin announced on 30 July 2017 that Russia would expel 755 US diplomats and staff in response to US sanctions. This was Moscow's largest single expulsion of American diplomats ever, including during the Cold War.<sup>218</sup>

Suspected Russian GRU agents attempted to murder former KGB operative Sergei Skripal, and also harmed his daughter, by poisoning them with a Novichok nerve agent on 4 March 2018, in Salisbury, UK, just two weeks before Vladimir Putin's re-election as Russia's president for a fourth term. The incident produced outrage in the UK and the entire West. About 100 Russian diplomats suspected of spying were expelled from more than 20 NATO and/or EU countries.<sup>219</sup>

<sup>215</sup> Shaun Walker, "Read my lips – no': Putin denies Russian meddling in US presidential election," *The Guardian*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/30/vladimir-putin-denies-us-election-interference-trump>.

<sup>216</sup> "US fires cruise missiles on Syria – live update," *Deutsche Welle*, 7 April 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-fires-cruise-missiles-on-syria-live-updates/a-38332725>.

<sup>217</sup> Dave Boyer and Dan Boylan, "U.S., allies launch missile attack on Syria in retaliation for using chemical weapons on civilians," *The Washington Times*, 13 April 2013, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/apr/13/us-allies-launch-missile-attack-syria/>.

<sup>218</sup> "Putin expels 755 diplomats in response to US sanctions," *Fox News*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-expels-755-diplomats-in-response-to-us-sanctions>.

<sup>219</sup> "Germany, other countries expel Russian diplomats over Skripal poisoning," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 March 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-other-countries-expel-russian-diplomats-over-skripal-poisoning/a-43138074>.

The US announced on 1 February 2019 that it was withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which had been one of the cornerstones of European security since June 1988. The US said it was withdrawing because over the years, Russia had developed and deployed new missiles (9M729 systems) prohibited by the agreement. The treaty ceased to be in force on 2 August 2019, and experts predicted an arms race that Russia cannot possibly win.<sup>220</sup> NATO Allies declared that Russia bears sole responsibility for the termination of the treaty and called for the verifiable destruction of all Russia's 9M729 systems, which are offensive weapons that threaten all of Europe.<sup>221</sup>

Russia decided to interfere in Venezuela's domestic political crisis in early 2019 by deploying troops in support of the country's contested leader, Nicolás Maduro. Maduro was accused by the domestic opposition, led by President Juan Guaido, and Western countries of rigging the 2018 presidential elections and usurping power.<sup>222</sup>

On 17 May 2019, 47 foreign ministers voted in the Council of Europe to restore Russia's voting right, which had been taken away after the annexation of Crimea five years earlier. It was an easy political victory for the Kremlin, with no concessions made by Russia. Supporters argued that the move would empower Russian citizens to go against their country/government in the European Court of Human Rights. However, Russia is obliged to respect the European Convention on Human Rights (and decisions by the Court), as long as it has not withdrawn from it, irrespective of its right to vote in the Council.<sup>223</sup>

The situation in Libya deteriorated significantly in December 2019 due to a forceful offensive

<sup>220</sup> Chris Miller, "The INF Treaty Is Dead, and Russia Is the Biggest Loser," *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/02/the-inf-treaty-is-dead-and-russia-is-the-biggest-loser/>.

<sup>221</sup> NATO, "NATO and the INF Treaty," Fact Sheet, 2 August 2019, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2019\\_06/20190617\\_190617-factsheet-INF-Treaty\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190617_190617-factsheet-INF-Treaty_en.pdf).

<sup>222</sup> Tom O'Connor, "Russia Defends Military Presence in Venezuela, Says U.S. 'Nervous' Because Its Plans 'Failed'," *Newsweek*, 30 March 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-defends-military-venezuela-us-nervous-1380901>.

<sup>223</sup> Zia Weise, "Council of Europe restores Russia voting rights," *Politico*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/council-of-europe-restores-russias-voting-rights/>.

by the rebel government forces, led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and supported by Russian mercenaries (the Wagner Group) and regular (air) forces. These forces threatened to take over the capital, Tripoli, and overthrow the internationally recognised government supported by the West. Turkey intervened militarily by deploying forces to Libya and saved the country's legitimate government. Libya, in addition to Syria, became the second theatre of clashing interests between NATO member Turkey and Russia.<sup>224</sup>

In Russia, Vladimir Putin amended the constitution to be able to rule until 2036. Belarus, however, witnessed popular protests that started in April and culminated in August 2020, after dictator Alexander Lukashenko blatantly rigged the results of presidential elections. Lukashenko, supported openly by Russia, used brutal force on peaceful protesters for several months and accused NATO and the West of planning to invade Belarus.<sup>225</sup>

On 20 August 2020, the most prominent domestic critic of the Kremlin, Alexei Navalny, was poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent but released to Germany for medical treatment. The new poisoning produced outrage, particularly in Germany, where critics suggested – as a real and effective punishment against Russia – halting the almost completed Nord Stream 2 project. The arrest and sentencing of Navalny upon his return to Russia, based on fabricated allegations, reinforced such positions.<sup>226</sup>

On 27 September 2020, Azeri military forces, with Turkish support, launched an all-out offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh – an Armenian-held enclave within Azerbaijan's territory. This occurred right after the end of Kavkaz 2020, a major Russian military exercise that was conducted partly around Azerbaijan, in Armenia and the Caspian Sea. The short

war resulted in Azerbaijan's victory and the capture of most of the territory it had lost. The cost, however, was that Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the country for the first time (to mark Russia's zone of influence versus Turkey).<sup>227</sup> The Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh, co-chaired by France, Russia and the US, has become practically obsolete and irrelevant.

On 22 November 2020, the US also withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, signed in the OSCE framework in 1992 and put into effect in 2002. The US accused Russia of non-compliance with the treaty's obligations, as it had imposed restrictions on flying over Moscow, Kaliningrad, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and other areas.<sup>228</sup>

President Putin preferred to wait, given Trump's numerous attempts to reverse the result of the 3 November 2020 presidential elections. Putin was one of the last leaders of major countries to congratulate Joe Biden for his election victory, doing so (coolly) on 15 December 2020. Members of Russia's lower house, the State Duma, did not repeat the standing ovations of November 2016.<sup>229</sup>

In early February 2021, the US extended the only remaining major arms control agreement, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), signed and enforced in 2011 between Russia and America.<sup>230</sup> Russia followed suit, as the agreement satisfies its interests politically (in terms of status) and militarily (in terms of parity).

President Joe Biden gave a speech on 'America's Place in the World' at the US Department of State headquarters on 4 February 2021. He emphasised that the United States would

<sup>224</sup> Jalel Harchaoui, *Why Turkey Intervened in Libya* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2020), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya.pdf>.

<sup>225</sup> Andrei Makhovsky and Andrew Osborn, "Protesters pack Belarus capital, Russia says military help available," *Reuters*, 16 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/specialEvents6/idINKNC25C08G?edition-redirect=in>.

<sup>226</sup> "MEPs: Sanction Oligarchs, Stop Nord Stream 2 After Navalny Detention," *The Moscow Times*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/01/21/meps-sanction-oligarchs-stop-nord-stream-2-after-navalny-detention-a72688>.

<sup>227</sup> "Russia deploys peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-deploys-peacekeepers-to-nagorno-karabakh/a-55559305>.

<sup>228</sup> Mark Moore, "US withdraws from Open Skies treaty with Russia: Mike Pompeo," *New York Post*, 22 November 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/11/22/us-withdraws-from-open-skies-treaty-with-russia-pompeo/>.

<sup>229</sup> Peter Walker, "Donald Trump wins: Russian parliament bursts into applause upon hearing result," *The Independent*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-wins-us-election-russia-putin-result-a7406866.html>.

<sup>230</sup> Shaun Tandon, "US Extends New START Nuclear Treaty With Russia as Rifts Rise," *The Moscow Times*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/03/us-extends-new-start-nuclear-treaty-with-russia-as-rifts-rise-a72822>.

engage with its adversaries and competitors diplomatically. He cited the example of the extension of New START, which ‘preserves the only remaining treaty between [US and Russia] safeguarding nuclear stability’. Biden added that he made clear to President Vladimir Putin ‘in a manner very different from [President Trump]’ that ‘the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions – interfering with [US] elections, cyber-attacks, poisoning its citizens – are over’. Biden said America would not hesitate ‘to raise the cost on Russia’ and would ‘work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners’.<sup>231</sup>

The EU’s High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, arrived in Moscow also on 4 February 2021. His trip sought to revive dialogue with Russia, but he was also carrying a ‘clear message’ on human rights, particularly concerning Alexei Navalny, who appeared in a Moscow court the next day.<sup>232</sup> The visit turned into a fiasco, as Russia humiliated the EU, including by expelling three European diplomats (from Germany, Sweden and Poland) the same day. EU-Russia relations may not even have bottomed out, as Russia is ready to escalate and the EU to respond by adopting new sanctions.<sup>233</sup>

Finland is an exception among Russia’s neighbours – it is neither the Kremlin’s declared foe nor its ally/vassal. Finland’s foreign minister, Pekka Haavisto, met Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in St Petersburg on 15 February 2021. They strongly disagreed on Navalny and the expulsion from Russia of EU diplomats. Still, Lavrov did not attempt to humiliate Finland, both because of Haavisto’s far better performance (than Borrell’s) and Russia’s different attitude to the EU.<sup>234</sup>

<sup>231</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-america-place-in-the-world/>.

<sup>232</sup> “Josep Borrell arrives in Moscow with human rights on the agenda,” *Prime Time Zone*, 4 February 2020, <https://primetimezone.com/world/josep-borrell-arrives-in-moscow-with-human-rights-on-the-agenda/>.

<sup>233</sup> Josep Borrell, “My visit to Moscow and the future of EU-Russia relations,” EEAS, 7 February 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/92722/](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/92722/).

<sup>234</sup> “Haavisto and Lavrov sharply disagree on Navalny, expulsions of EU diplomats,” *YLE*, 15 February 2021, [https://yle.fi/utiset/osasto/news/haavisto\\_and\\_lavrov\\_sharply\\_disagree\\_on\\_navalny\\_expulsions\\_of\\_eu\\_diplomats/11791058](https://yle.fi/utiset/osasto/news/haavisto_and_lavrov_sharply_disagree_on_navalny_expulsions_of_eu_diplomats/11791058).

The ABC television network aired an interview with President Biden on 16 March 2021, in which he was asked whether he thought Putin was a killer. He replied: ‘I do’. Putin responded quickly by challenging Biden to an online public debate rather than a private conversation.<sup>235</sup>

## A.5. MOST RECENT EVENTS

Russia started to deploy thousands of troops to Ukraine’s borders and in occupied Crimea in late March 2021; by April 20, their numbers exceeded 100,000.<sup>236</sup> The deployment is already larger than that in 2014, but it continues to grow, with troops moving to the region from as far away as Siberia. Moscow claims that this is a response to NATO, and an exercise that would take about two weeks.<sup>237</sup>

On 13 April 2021, in a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, US President Biden proposed to meet in a third country in order to discuss Ukraine and other critical issues and de-escalate tensions.<sup>238</sup> The Czech Republic and Finland each offered to host the meeting, but Russia’s president did not accept the invitation.

On 15 April 2021, the US imposed on Russia new hard sanctions that President Biden described as ‘proportionate’. The sanctions were based on Washington’s accusations that Russia had interfered in the 2020 US presidential elections and compromised the Solar Winds software supply chain (using Russia’s foreign intelligence agency, the SVR), as well as engaging in other malign actions. For example, on 26 January 2021, Biden discussed with Putin by telephone the reports of Russia placing bounties on US

<sup>235</sup> Patrick Reeve, “Putin challenges Biden to debate after president calls him a ‘killer,’” *ABC News*, 18 March 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/putin-challenges-biden-debate-president-calls-killer/story?id=76539031>.

<sup>236</sup> “OFFICIAL Russian military build-up near Ukraine numbers more than 100,000 troops, EU says,” *Reuters*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-numbers-more-than-150000-troops-eu-2021-04-19/>.

<sup>237</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia Says Troop Buildup Near Ukraine Is a Response to NATO,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-04-13/russia-says-troop-buildup-near-ukraine-is-a-response-to-nato>.

<sup>238</sup> Maegan Vasquez, “Biden proposes meeting with Putin amid rising Ukraine tensions,” *CNN*, 13 April 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/13/politics/joe-biden-vladimir-putin-meeting-proposal/index.html>.

soldiers in Afghanistan.<sup>239</sup> In a letter addressed to the US Congress, on 15 April 2015, Biden stated that these acts by Russia constituted an ‘unusual and extraordinary threat to national security’ and a ‘national emergency’.<sup>240</sup>

The US placed sanctions on 32 individuals and entities for carrying out the Kremlin-ordered interference in the US presidential elections. It also expelled 10 Russian diplomats (intelligence operatives) and prohibited American banks from purchasing newly issued Russian government bonds. Russia expelled the same number of American diplomats from Moscow, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov even suggested that US ambassador John Sullivan return home ‘for consultations’ (which he reluctantly did a few days later).<sup>241</sup> Russia recalled its ambassador from Washington, Anatoly Antonov, immediately after the ‘killer’ media incident.

Poland, as an act of solidarity with the US, expelled three Russian diplomats.<sup>242</sup> Two days later, on 17 April 2021, the Czech Republic expelled 18 Russian diplomats suspected of involvement in an ammunition depot explosion in September 2014. (The Czechs also linked to the blast the two GRU officers connected to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK.) Russia responded by expelling five Polish and 20 Czech diplomats.

President Putin gave his annual speech in front of the Russian Federal Assembly on 21 April 2021. He accused the ‘so-called collective West’ (possibly hinting ironically at the term ‘collective Putin’ that is used both in the West and in Russia) of having plotted a ‘blockade’ of Minsk in 2020 (by preparing cyber attacks and cutting the city’s electricity), a coup d’état in

Belarus (that, ‘thank God, did not take place, otherwise there could have been immense losses’) and even the murder of Alexander Lukashenko and his children. Putin also alleged that Viktor Yanukovich also ‘barely escaped’ assassination during the ‘armed coup’ in Kyiv in February 2014. Russia’s president spoke of Western ‘political murders’, obviously having in mind Joe Biden’s affirmative answer to the question of whether Putin was a ‘killer’.

President Putin said that if Russia’s goodwill were taken for weakness, Russia would answer foreign ‘provocations’ asymmetrically, swiftly and decisively. He lamented what he called the West’s ‘unfounded and unfriendly anti-Russian behaviour’.<sup>243</sup> Finally, Putin stressed that Russia has common sense and patience but that no one is entitled to draw red lines vis-à-vis Russia, as that can be done only by Russia itself. (This was a reference to a comment three days earlier by French president Emmanuel Macron. During a visit by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to Paris, Macron said that Western nations should ‘define red lines’ with Russia).<sup>244</sup>

On the same day, Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky released a video address proposing to meet Putin in a place (to be determined) in the conflict zone in Donbas.<sup>245</sup> Putin rejected Zelensky’s proposal, as accepting it would be a tacit recognition that the ongoing conflict in Donbas is not a Ukrainian civil war but a Russian war against Ukraine.

Furthermore, Russia announced, on 16 April 2021, that it prepares to close almost a fourth of the Black Sea around Crimea to all foreign ships from 24 April to 31 October, effectively blockading the Sea of Azov in blatant violation of the Montreux Convention of 1937 and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.<sup>246</sup>

<sup>239</sup> David E. Sanger and Andrew E. Kramer, “U.S. Imposes Stiff Sanctions on Russia, Blaming It for Major Hacking Operation,” *The New York Times*, 15 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/world/europe/us-russia-sanctions.html>.

<sup>240</sup> Tyler Olson and Alex Pappas, “Biden declares Russia threat ‘national emergency’, lobs sanctions; 10 diplomats booted over election meddling,” *Fox News*, 15 April 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-russia-threat-national-emergency-sanctions>.

<sup>241</sup> Veronica Stracqualursi, Kylie Atwood, and Michael Conte, “US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan returning to US this week,” *CNN*, 20 April 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/20/politics/us-ambassador-russia-returning-home/index.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Artem Rovniy, “Poland expels 3 Russian diplomats out of solidarity with the USA,” *Russia Daily News*, 15 April 2021, <https://russiadaily.news/world/europe/3257-poland-expels-3-russian-diplomats-out-of-solidarity-with-the-usa>.

<sup>243</sup> “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu [Address by the President to the Federal Assembly],” *The Kremlin*, 21 April 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>.

<sup>244</sup> “Macron says nations must ‘define red lines’ with Russia,” *ABC News*, 18 April 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/macron-nations-define-red-lines-russia-77150927>.

<sup>245</sup> Lauri Laugen, “Zelenskõi tegi Putinile ettepaneku kohtuda Donbassi sõjapiirkonnas [Zelensky made to Putin a proposal to meet in the conflict zone in Donbas],” *Delfi*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/93193369/zelenskoi-tegi-putinile-ettepaneku-kohtuda-donbassi-sojapiirkonnas>.

<sup>246</sup> Martin Hurt and James Sherr, “Some Initial Lessons Identified for the West from Russia’s Action against Ukraine,” *ICDS*, 21 April 2021, <https://icds.ee/en/some-initial-lessons-identified-for-the-west-from-russias-action-against-ukraine/>.

This move could be complemented in the coming months by further Russian conquest of Ukrainian territory, such as a land strip connecting Russia to Crimea, that would secure Russia's total and unchallenged control of the Sea of Azov (and its status, in Moscow's view, of internal maritime space, as in Soviet times). Ukraine would lose the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk, a severe economic blow, and retain control over only a fraction of its previous Black Sea coast. In addition, Russia could invade the Kherson Oblast in order to take control of the canal from the Dnepr River to Crimea and secure Crimea's water supply.<sup>247</sup>

However, on 22 April 2021, Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, ordered the withdrawal (back to 'permanent bases') of some of the troops deployed at Ukraine's border, (partially) de-escalating a situation that Russia itself escalated.<sup>248</sup> Sweden's defence minister argued that the withdrawal is a 'smoke screen', as most of the equipment deployed to Ukraine's border areas was left behind, and it is ready for use by speedily redeployed personnel.<sup>249</sup>

The Kremlin announced on 25 April 2021 that presidents Biden and Putin may meet in June 2021, at Biden's initiative, possibly in Helsinki (a venue likely convenient to Russia).<sup>250</sup>

Russia released a list of what it considered 'unfriendly countries', headed by the US and including the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The obvious aim was to further split the Western camp, but the only practical measure Russia has taken so far is to ban Russian citizens

from working for the diplomatic missions of these countries in Russia.<sup>251</sup>

This section of the Annex illustrates the speed of the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, as well as the Kremlin's preparedness to escalate and use force against Ukraine (and perhaps other neighbours). There are certain factors that speak against the use of force – increasingly strong, but still somewhat ambivalent Western (particularly American) responses, and the lack of support of Russia's population for war before the State Duma elections in September. Still, the boldness and readiness to take risks by the 'collective Putin' should not be underestimated. Proposals by the presidents of the US and Ukraine to meet and relieve tensions have not yet been answered by the Kremlin. Russia's logic could be that present conditions are not proper (useful) for dialogue and that more suitable circumstances would appear through continued escalation rather than de-escalation.

<sup>247</sup> Michael Kofman, "Russia's Military Buildup Near Ukraine Is an Intimidation Tactic," *The Moscow Times*, 3 April 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/03/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-is-an-intimidation-tactic-a73461>.

<sup>248</sup> Ann M. Simmons and Georgi Kantchev, "Russia Orders Some Troops to Withdraw From Ukraine Border," *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-orders-troops-to-withdraw-from-ukraine-border-11619103140>.

<sup>249</sup> Matti Aivar Lind, "Rootsi kaitseminister Vene vägede lahkumisest Ukraina piiridelt: õppuste lõpetamine on pelgalt suitsukate [Sweden's defence minister about the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine's border: the termination of the exercise is just a smoke screen]," *Delfi*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/93242939/rootsi-kaitseminister-vene-vagede-lahkumisest-ukraina-piiridelt-oppuste-lopetamine-on-pelgalt-suitsukate>.

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