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A Cold Peace? Western-Russian Relations in Light of the Ukraine Crisis

by Riccardo Alcaro



Center on the
**United States
and Europe**
at BROOKINGS

ABSTRACT

In light of Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Ukraine, West-Russia relations have so dramatically deteriorated that talk of a new Cold War has become routine. NATO's role in Europe is again in the spotlight, with experts and policymakers pondering whether the Alliance needs to go back to its historical roots and re-calibrate itself as an instrument of defence from and containment of Russia. At the same time, cooperation between Russia and the West has not collapsed altogether, with the two still able to coordinate on issues such as Iran's nuclear programme. Clearly, tensions over Ukraine are so strong that the risk of a breakdown in relations cannot be ruled out. Against this disturbing backdrop, the Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE) at the Brookings Institution in Washington and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) of Rome organized an international conference to discuss ways by which Russia and the West can contain tensions, manage competition, and keep cooperating on issues of mutual concern.

*Russia | Ukraine | NATO | European Union | United States |
Transatlantic relations*



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Report of the Transatlantic Security Symposium 2014

by Riccardo Alcaro*

Introduction

In light of Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Ukraine, West-Russia relations have so dramatically deteriorated that talk of a new Cold War has become routine. NATO's role in Europe is again in the spotlight, with experts and policymakers pondering whether the Alliance needs to go back to its historical roots and re-calibrate itself as an instrument of defence from and containment of Russia. At the same time, cooperation between Russia and the West has not collapsed altogether, with the two still able to coordinate on issues such as Iran's nuclear programme. Clearly, tensions over Ukraine are so strong that the risk of a breakdown in relations cannot be ruled out. Against this disturbing backdrop, the Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE) at the Brookings Institution in Washington and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) of Rome organized an international conference to discuss ways by which Russia and the West can contain tensions, manage competition, and keep cooperating on issues of mutual concern.

1. The conference

The event was generously supported by Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Rome Office) and Unicredit Bank. It took place in Rome on 20 October 2014 as the seventh edition of the IAI-launched Transatlantic Security Symposium series.

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· Report of the seventh edition of the Transatlantic Security Symposium entitled "A Cold Peace? Western-Russian Relations in Light of the Ukraine Crisis" and organized in Rome on 20 October 2014 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in cooperation with the Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE) at the Brookings Institution.

Over forty senior experts from think tanks and other institutions from a number of EU member states (France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Poland and Bulgaria), the US, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey and Russia took part. The debate was well-informed, lively and frank. Participants exchanged their ideas about four main topics, namely the nature of Russia's leadership, West-Russia competition in Eastern Europe (notably Ukraine), NATO's role and Russia's worldviews and position in the wider international context.



Nathalie Tocci (left), Ettore Greco (centre),
Riccardo Alcaro (right)

2. Russia's interests and Putin's power

The debate initially focused on the extent to which Russia's policies in Ukraine reflect geopolitical interests or are rooted in considerations of domestic expedience. Purely geopolitical interests were generally (though by no means unanimously) dismissed as the sole motivation behind Russia's Ukraine policies, but neither did the notion that President Vladimir Putin intervened in Ukraine out of purely domestic concerns enjoy total consensus. A more nuanced assessment emerged, according to which Putin and his inner circle engage in methods of doing political and economic business that are fundamentally different from Western practices, and Russian national interests become rooted in personal and vested interests and shaped by a culture of pragmatism that often verges on sheer cynicism. Putin's personal background in the Soviet intelligence services, as well as the political legacies of the Soviet (and Tsarist) era, have contributed to solidifying the idea in the Kremlin that Russian and Western interests may overlap occasionally but they are structurally in competition, especially in the former Soviet space.

With power and influence concentrated in and emanating from the very top of the Russian political system, the worldviews and leadership style of President Putin matter enormously in the definition of the Russian national interest and the ensuing policies. Putin is, of course, personally concerned about staying in power, but he also seems convinced that his rule – which became even more personal rather than institutionally-based after his return to the presidency in 2012 – is a brake against Russia sliding into domestic instability and international irrelevance. Almost all participants agreed that Putin's overall objective is to restore Russia's status as a global player, and exerting control or influence over Russia's neighbourhood is of the essence in this regard. Some participants contended that Russia's goals for control and influence are driven not only by foreign policy proximity, but also – and crucially – by the determination to make sure that political regimes in

Russia's neighbouring states are (or will) not be perceived by the Russian public as a viable alternative (and hence a legitimate challenge) to Putin's model of 'managed democracy' or 'patriotic' plebiscitary autocracy.

3. Putin's Russia vs. the West

For this reason, it was argued, the narrative used by Putin to describe events in Ukraine – and justify Russia's intervention there – has been framed not only in terms of geopolitical interests but also and especially in identity-related terms: Putin has declared that he has protected the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers (irrespective of whether Ukraine has discriminated against them or



Nathalie Tocci (left), Ettore Greco (right)

not). In doing so he has presented himself as the defender of Russia's identity as a conservative-minded proud nation that is ready to withstand political and economic pressure from the West. While several participants downgraded the importance of the ideational divide that Putin has declared between Russia and the West and claimed that it is more of a smokescreen concealing the vested interests of Putin's clique, others emphasized that Putin has now turned this ideational background into an instrument to invigorate support for his personal power and legitimacy. As such, they argued, the Russia-West civilizational clash that Putin has deliberately emphasized has acquired the potential to spur action of its own. Key domestic constituencies – the intelligence services, the military, the bureaucracy, the religious right as well as blue collar workers and large sections of the Russian youth – share the basic patriotic tenets and now expect the president to act upon them.

While Putin's narrative follows a binary, polarizing pattern of 'Us' (Russians and Russian-speakers) against 'Them' (the West, the fascists in Ukraine, and domestic opposition forces that present different views) as a rhetorical device to win public opinion and rein in internal dissent, his policies also attest to a highly flexible strategic mind. The Kremlin might not have planned to invade and annex Crimea years in advance – in fact, there was consensus among participants that the decision to invade was taken only after the situation in Kyiv was deemed to imperil Russia's interests. Several experts also argued that the choice to annex the peninsula followed and did not precede Russia's invasion of Crimea. But participants also concluded that Putin and his team certainly prepared for the contingency of a grave political crisis in Ukraine and for taking action in Crimea. Attesting to this is the sophisticated intelligence and military approach Moscow followed in Ukraine, which proved significantly more efficient than the conventional military



Riccardo Alcaro (left), Fiona Hill (right)

intervention against Georgia in August 2008 (which Russia won because of the sheer magnitude of its armed forces, but which also laid bare significant military shortcomings and came at proportionally high human costs).

Continuous contingency planning; recourse to practices aimed at confusing adversaries; keeping the option of plausible deniability always at hand; willingness and capacity to adapt to changed circumstances;

these are all basic components of Putin's efforts to make Russia more influential or at least more independent on the international stage.

4. Russia's place in the world

The issue of Russia's foreign policy independence was highlighted as bearing a special meaning for Putin and his team and also resonating broadly in Russian public opinion. Putin has presided over a gradual but eventually comprehensive rejection of Russia's initial co-authorship of Europe's post-Cold War order under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. This is now seen not only as a strategic mistake but also as a stain on the country's history. Putin has set aside even the concept of partial integration into Euro-Atlantic frameworks in favour of a kind of interaction with the West that is based on power and defined by a mix of pragmatic bargaining and competition. In these terms, some participants argued that the economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU in retaliation for Russia's Ukraine policies are actually serving Putin's purpose to have Russian economic elites reduce or cut off their independent business and other ties with Europe and become more dependent on the Russian state and government. While pursuing insulation from Western influence internally, Putin was also said to see the confrontation with the West over Ukraine as a further spur to diversify Russia's international relations, notably with the other BRICS countries and particularly China.

Several participants remarked that diversification of foreign relations is a sensible choice for any country and there is no reason to see Russia's attempt to improve its relations with non-Western countries as being overly determined by the current Western-Russian tensions. Besides, for a country such as Russia – defined by one participant as a transregional (i.e. Eurasian) power with elements of a global power – investing in a wider international portfolio is a matter of necessity rather than choice. Yet the suspicious, competitive and zero-sum mindset prevailing in Moscow today could also encourage Putin and Russia to play hardball on the global stage in ways that might not always promote Russian interests. Ideally, Putin wants

Russia to play a multiple balancing act between the West and China (and the other BRICS countries too). But long-term confrontation with the West, it was argued, will curtail his room for manoeuvre. Several participants pointed out that Russia is still engaged in a hedging strategy vis-à-vis China – for instance by providing Vietnam, an historic competitor to China in Southeast Asia, with military assistance. Yet they also acknowledged that China now has the upper hand because of the West-Russia confrontation over Ukraine. The prospect of Moscow becoming a junior partner in a relationship increasingly dominated by Beijing was highlighted as a plausible scenario.

5. A bipolar Europe

Putin's vision of a multipolar world is clearly reflected in his vision of a bipolar Europe. His actions in Ukraine have in fact imparted a bipolar turn to regional dynamics.

Before the annexation of Crimea, imposing and maintaining sanctions on Russia would have been a contentious topic in Europe. This was so notably because of the strong reluctance, motivated by trade interests but also by the desire to keep Europe stable, of countries such as Germany, France and Italy to contemplate any kind of deep or comprehensive economic sanctions as a viable option. Indeed, no sanctions were imposed by either the US or the EU in response to the 2008 Georgia war. But after Russia forcibly changed international borders in Crimea and fuelled a civil war in south-eastern Ukraine, and demonstrated utter contempt for the security assurances Moscow had given Kyiv as part of a 1994 political arrangement to remove nuclear weapons from Ukrainian soil, the picture changed significantly.



Isabel Facon (left), Alexey Gromyko (center),
Gulnur Aybet (right)

For a start, participants argued that Russia badly miscalculated Germany's reaction. Moscow, so the argument went, counted on the fact that Germany would not be willing to spoil its 25-years long investment in building up a multi-layered trade, cultural and political relationship with Russia. Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to side with the US and push for sanctions proved the Russians wrong. It was also contended that the Ukraine crisis was having the contrary effect on US-European relations to the one Russia had worked towards for years. While in the past Putin was able to play 'divide and rule' politics in the EU and between Europe and the US, the credibility of his repeated claim that the West has neglected Russia's legitimate security concerns now rings more hollow than before. The Ukraine crisis has not only brought EU member states and the US closer on Russia; it has also increased US influence in EU decision-making on dealing with Russia. With Germany more

in agreement with the US approach on responding to Russia's takeover of Crimea, Washington found it relatively easy to organize consensus in the EU over a highly controversial move such as the imposition of sanctions. All it took was for the Americans to find an agreement with the Germans (and a few others) in order to have EU-wide measures imposed.

The EU's authority to impose wide-ranging sanctions allows for greater transatlantic sharing of responsibility for the management of Europe's neighbourhood. Critically, sanctions are also a way to raise the costs of Russia's action while keeping the confrontation below the threshold of an open conflict underpinned by adversarial military postures. It was from this perspective that NATO's role was mostly debated in the conference.



Piotr Kościński (left), Christopher Chivvis (center),
Orysia Lutsevych (right)

6. NATO and Russia

It was argued that talk of a new Cold War is off the mark because of several reasons. Ideologically, Western-Russian competition is considerably less acute than it was during Soviet times. Strategically, the problem is the outline of Europe's order rather than a global contest for power. Geographically, the focus has shifted from central Europe to Russia's borders (meaning that there

is no competition whatsoever for the control of Europe as a whole). And militarily Russia, for all the improvements made after the 2008 Georgia war, is still not a real conventional match for NATO. However, several participants contended that Russia was evolving into a different kind of threat to NATO than the Soviet Union posed in the past. The risk is not so much a conventional military invasion. It is rather the forms of 'hybrid' warfare (akin to what Russia has been resorting to in south-eastern Ukraine) and other provocations aimed at testing and potentially eroding solidarity among NATO member states. Such measures may range from the use of agents provocateurs, to limited border breaches to organizing, financing and arming groups of rebels among Russian minorities in countries such as Estonia and Latvia.

Overall, there were few calls for NATO to adopt an aggressive military posture. It was recalled that the Alliance's summit in Newport, Wales, opted for a reactive-adaptive approach. NATO has taken steps to reassure its most exposed allies by raising its non-permanent military posture in Poland and the Baltic states and increasing its ability to deploy troops to face emergencies along its borders. There was a general feeling, however, that the Alliance should think more and faster about developing counter-measures to hybrid warfare. Besides, some participants said that the

military redeployment of NATO forces closer to Russia's borders could become an irritant within the Alliance, as some member states might prove unwilling or unable (or both) to support larger deployments.

In general, there was no objection to the notion that NATO should balance a renewed deterrence and defence effort with a policy of engagement toward Russia. Selective cooperation was possible during the Cold War and should therefore be possible now

(and Russia's continuous cooperative behaviour on Iran's nuclear issue provides evidence of this). It was underlined that selective cooperation by no means implies acceptance of Russia's vision of a bipolar Europe enshrined in some new version of the Yalta agreement or the Helsinki process. It was also argued that engagement should in theory go beyond selective cooperation and encompass issues on which Russia and the West are at loggerheads. The most critical one, but also the most intractable, was of course the future of Ukraine.



Brian Whitmore (left), Ivan Krastev (center),
Samuel Charap (right)

7. Ukraine's grim outlook

Several participants contended that Ukraine has never been farther from Russia. Some argued that this was almost entirely the consequence of Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the rebels, as cutting ties with Moscow was not in the mind of most Euro-Maidan protesters (barring a few ultra-nationalists). Ukraine was said to be in dire need of effective institutions, political accountability and strong rule of law, all things that Ukrainians tend to associate with the EU rather than Russia. Euro-Maidan – concluded one participant – was pro-EU rather than anti-Russia, at least initially. Participants agreed that Putin saw things quite differently, as he considered the prospect of Kyiv's closer ties with the EU to be incompatible with his plan for a Eurasian Union including Ukraine.

An overwhelming majority of Ukrainians have now become estranged from Russia, pro-EU forces are dominating the political process, and for the first time in Ukraine's history a majority is in favour of NATO membership. Ukrainians were also said to be in no mood for making concessions to the Russian-backed rebels in the Donbas region. They are opposed to the federalization of the state, fatalistic about the prospect of further Russian incursions into their territory, but also ready to fight. Participants agreed though that Ukraine's President and Prime Minister, Petro Poroshenko and Arsenij Yatseniuk, had no expectations concerning NATO membership (at least in the near future) and were more focused on carrying out political and economic reforms, securing Western assistance and managing the



Conference participants

crisis in the Donbas.

Some participants cautioned that Ukraine could not afford to keep on fighting a war with Russia and recalled that the economy faces certain collapse without prompt financial support from the West and the International Monetary Fund. The ability of the government to carry out political and economic reforms was also questioned by some (not least because Ukraine's oligarchs, generally considered to be

a source of corruption and no friends of reform, still wield considerable influence). Some participants argued that without the prospect, however distant, of EU membership the political and economic reform process will hardly be sustainable. This proposition did not meet with much support, as other participants hinted that the EU would hardly be doing itself any favours by incorporating such a large and problematic country as Ukraine. And in any case, the EU would have to figure out how to react to Russia's expected opposition to the move.

Conflict management in the Donbas emerged as the one issue on which there was less agreement among participants. Some argued that, in spite of the largely pro-EU stance of Ukraine's political establishment and public opinion, Russia still has the upper hand in south-eastern Ukraine. Russia might not be able to control Ukraine, but it is capable of destabilizing it and thus severely hampering Kyiv's integration into Euro-Atlantic frameworks. The notion that Putin might be set on maintaining the status quo with Donbas as yet another frozen conflict in the former Soviet space was considered an entirely plausible scenario. One participant insisted that striking an agreement with the Kremlin (starting with a deal securing Russian gas supply to Ukraine) was a matter of necessity, not choice. Another argued that Putin is convinced that the West will blink first on Ukraine and seek an accommodation without Russia having to give up any of its gains.

Conclusions

The conference ended in a bleak mood. The Ukraine crisis, it was remarked, has resulted in the first land grab in Europe since 1945 and an unprovoked civil war in the Donbas; it has seriously damaged West-Russia relations; and has perhaps put an end (to Putin's delight) to a European post-Cold War order based on pooled sovereignty, multilevel governance, rule of law-based multilateral interactions and a continuous focus on dialogue and process. Europe's nascent political-security outline is likelier to be more in line with the wider world order, which is strongly shaped by power politics and interstate competition and conflict, and in which multilateralism is entirely state-determined and interest-driven.

Conference Programme

Rome, 20 October 2014, Hotel Ponte Sisto

Welcome Address and Conference Introduction

Welcome Address

Ettore Greco, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Introduction

Riccardo Alcaro, Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome and Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE), Brookings Institution, Washington

Introductory Session

Understanding Russia's Leadership: President Putin's Power Base and World Views

Chair **Nathalie Tocci**, Deputy Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Keynote speaker **Fiona Hill**, Director, Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE), Brookings Institution, Washington

Respondents **Andrei Kortunov**, Director General, Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow
James Sherr, Associate Fellow, Chatham House, London

Q&A

First Session

West-Russia Relations and the Emerging Global Order

Chair **Thomas De Waal**, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington

Paper-giver **Alexey Gromyko**, Director, Institute of Europe, Moscow

Discussants **Isabel Facon**, Senior Research Fellow, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), Paris

Margarete Klein, Senior Associate, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

Debate

Second Session

NATO and Russia: Enemies Again?

- Chair **Piotr Kościński**, Director of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe Programme, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Warsaw
- Paper-giver **Christopher Chivvis**, Senior Political Scientist, RAND, Arlington
- Discussants **Mikhail Troitskiy**, Deputy Director, MacArthur Foundation, Russia Office
Orysia Lutsevych, Research Fellow, Chatham House, London
Robert Pszczel, Director, NATO Information Office in Moscow
- Debate

Third Session

West-Russia Strategic Competition in Europe and the South Caucasus

- Chair **Brian Whitmore**, Senior Editor, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague
- Paper-giver **Ivan Krastev**, Board Member, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), London
- Discussants **Nona Mikhelidze**, Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
Oksana Antonenko, Senior Political Counsellor, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), London
Samuel Charap, Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Washington
- Debate

Final Remarks

Riccardo Alcaro, Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome and Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE), Brookings Institution, Washington

List of Participants

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Antonio Armellini	Ambassador
Gulnur Aybet	Head Department of International Relations, Özyeğin University Istanbul
Vincenzo Camporini	Vice President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
Claudio Catalano	Research Department, Finmeccanica SpA, Rome
Samuel Charap	Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Washington
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Giovanna De Maio	PhD candidate, L'Orientale University, Naples
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Isabel Facon	Senior Research Fellow, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), Paris
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Jana Puglierin	Program Officer, Future Forum, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (DGAP), Berlin
Ferdinando Salleo	Ambassador
Nicolò Sartori	Senior Fellow, Security and Defence Programme, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
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Stefano Silvestri	Scientific Advisor, Former President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
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Oleksandr Sushko	Research Director, Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Kiev
Paola Tessari	Research Fellow, Security and Defence Programme, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
Nathalie Tocci	Deputy Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
Mikhail Troitskiy	Deputy Director, MacArthur Foundation, Russia Office
Cory Welt	Associate Director, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, Washington
Brian Whitmore	Senior Editor, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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