



UNISCI Discussion Papers

RUSSIA AND THE WEST: PROBLEMS AND OPORTUNITIES

AUTHOR:¹**BOBO LO****Royal Institute of International Affairs****DATE:****May 2005**

The past 12-18 months have been an especially difficult time in Russia's relations with the West. Lowlights have included the Kremlin's clumsy interference in the Ukrainian presidential elections, its anti-democratic 'management' of domestic politics, the Yukos affair, growing restrictions on the independent media, and ongoing disagreements over international issues ranging from NATO and EU enlargement to Russian nuclear assistance to Iran. At the same time, hopes for a qualitatively new partnership in areas such as the 'war on terror', the non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and international conflict resolution have remained largely unfulfilled. For all the talk about common security perceptions, real cooperation has fallen well short of expectations and potential.

The combination of multiple disagreements and missed opportunities has led many observers to speak of a profound crisis in the relationship. There is much to support this view. Overt anti-Westernism has become highly fashionable within the Russian establishment, where there is a renewed emphasis on Russia's 'pursuing its own path' rather than 'mechanically' transplanting Western principles of democracy, a free market economy and civil society. Buoyed by the consolidation of his political power and Russia's high economic growth rates, President Putin has become increasingly unapologetic about his domestic and foreign policies. Meanwhile, senior figures in the administration rail against outside 'interference' in the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the West's 'double standards', and the Russian Orthodox Church condemns the 'immoral' influence of imported popular culture.

The picture is similarly grim when one surveys Western attitudes towards Russia. It is symptomatic of the deterioration in Russia's relations with the West that two sentiments which had lain largely dormant have become revived over the past year. The first is the notion of a 'Russia threat', whereby Putin's authoritarianism in domestic affairs translates seamlessly into an aggressive foreign policy. The thesis advanced by democratic transitionists in the 1990s – that the establishment of (Western-style) democracy is a *sine qua non* of a cooperative Russia in international affairs – has been given considerable impetus by various instances of irresponsible behaviour from Moscow: direct intervention in the Ukrainian presidential elections; nuclear cooperation with Iran and arms sales to Syria; refusal to pay Russia's dues

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to the OSCE; and the Kremlin's tough approach to negotiations with Tbilisi over the withdrawal of Russian military bases in Georgia. These actions have not only aroused specific policy concerns, but they have also called into question Russia's overall foreign policy orientation. Themes such as Russia's 'imperialist mindset' and 'great-power' complex, which had seemed outmoded for much of Putin's first presidential term, have reemerged with a vengeance, as have calls for the West to get tough with Russia.

More than at any time since the Soviet demise there is a sense among influential circles in the US and Europe that Russia is 'doomed' forever to be authoritarian, backward and resentful. This reflects a general shift from a largely sanguine perception of Russia – different, yet a country with which the West can do business – to a new fatalism that sees it as an 'alien' entity whose values, and therefore interests, are fundamentally irreconcilable with the West's. Even those who are unwilling to give up on Russia believe effective cooperation with Moscow will only be possible when it subscribes fully to the Western normative agenda, in practice and not only in words.

Unfortunately, Putin's notion of engagement with the West is very different. It emphasizes the primacy of selected common interests in security and trade, while relegating normative issues to the margins. Unsurprisingly, the gulf between these radically different philosophies of cooperation, encapsulated by the expression 'values-gap', has aggravated already significant policy differences between Russia and major Western powers (principally the US) and organizations (such as the EU).

1. 'New thinking' in international relations

Such has been the rollercoaster ride of Russia's relations with the West over the past 20 years that it is hardly surprising that a sense of proportion and perspective has been notably lacking. Today, however, there is a real need to move beyond facile stereotyping, tendentious generalizations and messianic zeal to examine the real possibilities, and limits, of Russia's relations with the West. To adapt Gorbachev's famous slogan, the time has come for 'new thinking' from all sides.

The first step in this process is a reality check involving a more objective evaluation of the constraints on the development of relations. In the first instance, this means shedding any illusions about 'shared values'. As developments in Russia have shown – not only under Putin but also for much of the Yeltsin era – it is absurd to pretend that Russian and Western interpretations of pluralist democracy, a transparent economy and a civil society have much in common. To attempt to construct a viable long-term relationship on such a fragile basis is not only delusory but counter-productive. Recognizing this is in no way to subscribe to the 'wisdom' peddled by some that Russia and democracy are inherently incompatible. But, for the time being, there is no denying that a substantial values-gap exists between Russia and the West, one which is widening in many respects.

The next step towards a more pragmatic relationship is responding to these realities with a balanced approach. In the post-Soviet period the West has lurched between two extremes when dealing with Russia. The first is an excessive forbearance amounting at times to appeasement. The complexities of Russia's transition have served for some as a universal alibi for all manner of regime policy failures and regressive behaviour, first under Yeltsin and later under Putin. True, Russia has had to build democracy, a market economy and civil society



from the ruins of the Soviet command-administrative system, and setbacks and failures were to be expected along the way. But it is one thing to accept that the process of transition is necessarily long, hard and uneven; quite another to explain away the steady emasculation of the democratic process since the mid-1990s as the 'inevitable' casualty of transition or of the state needing to reestablish its authority in order to establish a solid foundation for 'proper' democracy. No amount of excuses can obscure the fact, for example, that under Putin Russian democracy has become less pluralistic, the economy less transparent and more statist, the media less diverse and free, or that the proliferation of NGOs reflects not the growth of civil society in Russia, but just the opposite – its bastardization via organizations financed and supported by the government.

At the other extreme, and just as culpable, are the Russophobes who are trapped in a time-warp of generalized criticisms and anachronistic stereotypes. Much of the current 'Russia fear' in the West is a relic of history rather than an accurate reflection of contemporary realities. It is rooted in assumptions that are at best unproven: Russia is 'by nature' doomed to be forever mad and bad, incorrigibly imperialistic, adversarial in international affairs and implacably opposed to Western values. The mentality here is one of deep pessimism, dismissing the prospect that Russia can ever evolve into a 'normal' nation-state and constructive player in global affairs. Against this highly coloured background, any negative action by Moscow automatically acquires a disproportionate significance. Putin's reforms of power are part of a headlong rush back to Soviet-style authoritarianism; the persecution of Yukos and its CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky foreshadows renationalization of the economy; Moscow's inept handling of Ukraine reveals a nakedly imperialist mindset; and opposition to NATO and EU enlargement signals an antagonistic foreign policy. More generally, we are told that Putin is committed to Russia's revival as a global great power – the Soviet Union in spirit if not in practice.

What links both apologists and fatalists is a basic unwillingness to consider the Putin administration's actions on their own merits (or demerits). Normative preconceptions have hijacked the policy agenda, with the result that Russia's relations with some Western states are arguably at their lowest ebb since Putin came to power on New Year's Eve 1999. This is certainly the case with the asymmetric 'strategic partnership' with Washington and it is reflected also in the poisonous atmosphere between Moscow and the Baltic states (heightened by the latter's ill-timed demands, on the eve of the 60th anniversary of VE-day, that Russia apologize for the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact).

Faced with the very real threat of continuing deterioration in Russia's relations with the West, there has never been a greater need for all sides to shed extraneous normative and historical baggage, and move instead to an issues-based rather than stereotypes-based approach to relations. The emphasis should be on concrete, achievable objectives, not abstract schemes and notions (such as Western 'encroachment' in Russia's 'sphere of vital interests' or developing Russia-EU relations on the basis of 'shared values'), or half-baked comparisons between Putin's Russia and the Soviet Union. (Putin, along with the vast majority of his compatriots, certainly regrets the demise of the Soviet Union, but he also understands that attempting to resurrect it would be an utterly futile enterprise.)



2. Engagement, not appeasement

The case for a new quality of engagement is compelling, but not because a marginalized and disgruntled Russia is a threat to regional and global security. During the Yeltsin years Moscow pursued an often erratic and resentful foreign policy, particularly in its so-called neighbourhood of Central and Eastern Europe. Yet the region enjoyed unparalleled growth during this time – as genuinely pluralist democracies, open market economies and developing civil societies. More recently, the Orange revolution in Ukraine proved that Russia's ability to make mischief, to undermine its neighbours, has been much exaggerated. The main casualties of inept and overbearing foreign policy-making in Moscow have been Russia's international reputation and influence.

On the other hand, neither is Russia so weak that it faces instability or even collapse, thereby obliging the West to behave 'responsibly'. The spectre of Russia's disintegration is more mythical than real, and is exploited by the Kremlin to justify its concentration of power. More than a decade ago, Yeltsin used the 'implosion' argument to blackmail the Clinton administration into backing him as the only person capable of protecting Russian democracy and preventing a return to Communism or widespread anarchy.

Yet, if the threat posed by a misanthropic Russia has been overestimated, then a well-disposed, cooperative Russia has so much more to offer to the West and to itself. In relation to the new security agenda, for example, Moscow can make an important contribution in countering WMD proliferation, in mediating in 'frozen conflicts' in the FSU, enhancing global counter-terrorism efforts and containing drugs trafficking and other forms of transnational crime. There is little disagreement between Russia and the West on many of the key assumptions underpinning the post 9/11 security agenda, such as the enormous threat posed by international terrorism and the Islamic radicalism that drives it. But the challenge is to translate in-principle consensus into active and specific cooperation.

This will obviously be a long and difficult process. There is considerable strategic 'history' between Russia and the West dating from the Cold War era, and the uncertainties and shocks of the post-Soviet period have further hindered the emergence of a new strategic and political culture. Despite claims to the contrary, geopolitics remains very much alive and kicking. Moscow is convinced the West is pursuing a consistent policy of strategic encroachment in Russia's natural 'spheres of influence' – not only the FSU (Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine), but also Central and Eastern Europe via NATO and EU enlargement. For their part, many Western policy-makers are dismayed by what they see as the Kremlin's crude attempts to reassert Russian strategic influence in the FSU, whether through bilateral pressure or pseudo-multilateral mechanisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Single Economic Space.

3. Cause for modest optimism

But amidst all the doom and gloom, there are some rays of hope. Although Putin opposed the American-led military intervention in Iraq in 2003, he has nevertheless committed Russia to supporting Washington's efforts in post-conflict settlement and reconstruction. Despite wanting to proceed with construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Moscow has become more responsive to Western concerns about a possible Iranian nuclear weapon and is working with the EU, in particular, to find a satisfactory compromise. The Kremlin is scarcely a neutral



party in ‘frozen conflicts’ in areas such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but there has been some modest progress on related issues such as the withdrawal of military bases from Georgia. More generally, too, there are indications that Moscow is slowly moving towards a more cooperative, less antagonistic approach in the FSU, as evidenced by recent positive summits between Putin and Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, and Russia’s restrained response to the overthrow of Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan. None of these developments represent ‘breakthroughs’, but they are something for Russia and the West to build upon.

The opportunities for enhanced cooperation are even better in the international economy, where Russia is one of the world’s leading producers and exporters of oil and gas. It is already a major supplier to the European market and its share here is likely to increase substantially over the next few years. Importantly, too, Russia is unlikely to abuse its position as a strategic energy producer. Much as Europe needs Russian oil and gas, Russia depends far more on Europe, where nearly all its important customers are located. Energy exports account for more than 60 percent of Russia’s total export earnings, 30 percent of federal budget revenue, and have been the main driver of economic growth under Putin. Moscow will also need European investment to develop its energy infrastructure and ensure security of demand over the longer term. In terms of overall trade, it is significant that the EU-25 accounts for around 50-60 percent of Russia’s total turnover, while Russia takes only 3-5 percent of EU imports and exports.

These are all compelling realities that will ensure Moscow retains a predominantly Westerncentric world-view. Notwithstanding the intemperateness of current anti-Western rhetoric, the Putin administration (and the political elite more broadly) continues to view the West – the US and Europe – as the main strategic reference point for Russian foreign policy. Fearful that Russia may become marginalized and the object of growing international indifference (‘Russia-fatigue’), the Kremlin looks to position Russia in the European and Western mainstream, at the epicentre of international decision-making.

4. A ‘modern’ great power?

Putin is committed to the idea of Russia as a great power, but his vision is one that bears little resemblance to the Soviet model his critics accuse him of wanting to re-create. His conception of Russia is as a multidimensional, ‘modern’ great power – with considerable political stature, effective military capabilities and a prosperous economy, but which is also technologically advanced, culturally influential and normatively respected. Realization of such a vast and ambitious project is contingent on a major improvement in relations with the West. And this would depend, in the long run, on the Kremlin making good its promise to establish genuine democracy and the rule of law. Only then would Russia be seen as a reliable, long-term and ‘strategic’ partner.

For their part, Western states and organizations have a large stake in the emergence of a ‘normal’ and predictable Russia, one at ease with itself and with the international community. Such a Russia may not – most probably will not – be a democracy, at least in the Western meaning of the term. However, that does not mean it cannot be engaged on the basis of common political, security and economic interests. We should not buy into the dubious Clintonian premise that only liberal democracies can have ‘reasonable’, cooperative foreign policies. Besides, for the time being the West has no choice except to deal with Russia as it is, not as it might like it to be. And that means treating it as a generally rational state-actor, with



interests that may sometimes differ substantially from those of the West, but which nevertheless have their own logic. The challenge of constructing a positive relationship with Russia out of the wreckage of recent years is undoubtedly immense, but the prize will certainly be worth the effort: a Russia better disposed, and able, to contribute to a more stable and prosperous world.