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[Russian foreign policy: To overcome structural inertia](#)



Relations between Russia and the West are at a dead end, and both parties feel quite comfortable with that. Neither of them is willing to suggest a long-term strategy; instead, they continue following a well-known and tested algorithm of confrontation. Russia seems to be moving along a familiar path in both domestic and foreign policy.

Gone with the flow

The current crisis is usually associated with Vladimir Putin. But without detracting from his skills at causing confrontation, the situation can hardly be attributed to a single person. Actually, there is already a precedent: The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s/early 1990s was almost exclusively due to Mikhail Gorbachev holding power in the USSR at the time, as Kjell Goldmann, a professor at the University of Stockholm, wrote. Of course, these are simple schemes that make for a clear image in the mass media. Too bad for political science.

Putin has ruled Russia for so long that many have forgotten how his assumption of power 18 years ago was enthusiastically received both in his country and abroad. Putin came to power as a pro-Western leader and reformer, who intended to continue Russia's transition to a society based on a market economy, democracy and integration in the world. His initial agenda included "equidistance of oligarchs" and "dictatorship of law." Combined with repairing the state's ability to function, this was perceived as a step forward. In this context, enhanced cooperation with the U.S., the EU and NATO seemed a necessary and realistic prospect for policy from "the German in the Kremlin."

Do not forget that the 1990s were not at all a rosy period in relations between post-Soviet Russia and its Euro-Atlantic partners. The very emergence of a sovereign Russia in the aftermath of the overnight collapse of the USSR was not in line with the interests of the U.S., which would have preferred the preservation of the second nuclear superpower's integrity. The brief honeymoon between Moscow and Washington was full of declarations and promises rather than deeds, which soon gave way to a slow chilling of relations. It became clear to many observers in the mid-1990s that structural changes in Russia were not bringing the desired results. The promise of democratization turned into a monarchical constitution, guarded by yet another decrepit tsar in the Kremlin. The model of privatization that was chosen engendered a class of oligarchs. Human capital suffered as a result of the failures of social policy and education system.

Long before Crimea

The West and Russia were not a threat to each other anymore: That was the leitmotif of the first decade after the Cold War ended. That euphoria obstructed the view of the structural prerequisites for a return to confrontation. Zbigniew Brzezinski identified the second half of 1993 as a time of a missed opportunity for cooperation, when President Boris Yeltsin acknowledged that Poland's intention to join NATO was not at odds with Russia's interests. In return, Washington could have struck a deal with Moscow and established special relations between Russia and NATO. However, the Clinton administration did not seize the moment, and just two years later, in late 1995, observers began to talk openly of a "Cold Peace," if not a new Cold War, against

the backdrop of scandals involving human rights violations during the first Chechen War, and the Russian government's demarches in reply. Formally, cooperation with NATO continued, but in parallel, Moscow started to question the alliance's expansion eastwards and U.S. plans to develop missile defense. For quite a long time this looked like insignificant populist statements "for internal consumption," but it paved the way for confrontation, antagonizing both ordinary people and the elite.

The conflict in the former Yugoslavia became a bone of contention: Guided by motives embedded in national romanticism, Russia in fact supported the Milosevic regime, while the Western allies sought his overthrow and trial before an international tribunal. As a result, there were two major demarches during Yeltsin's final year in power. The turnaround maneuver over the Atlantic Ocean during Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov's flight to Washington was a gesture of protest against the American bombing of Belgrade. In June 1999, when Primakov had already been fired, a Russian airborne battalion, part of the international peacekeeping force in the Balkans, occupied the Pristina airport to prevent the landing of NATO forces and deployment of a ground operation against Milosevic's Yugoslav army. Given the unequal forces, the Russian military's plans were top secret. The action was unexpected and sudden, and attracted immense media coverage. Thus, the special style of Russian power politics, which picked up steam in Crimea and Syria, dates back to the 1990s.

"Great Russia is rising from its knees" – these words uttered by Yeltsin during his 1991 inauguration address were interpreted by the new generation of Russian civil servants, who had replaced the *nomenklatura* of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in a peculiar way. They took to reviving the empire, framed in the mold of the era of post-modernity, where indirect control and economic and cultural ties are more important than military and administrative pressure, as noted by British researcher Bobo Lo in his book *Russia and the New World Disorder*. The new Russian ruling class found itself in a dubious situation in the aftermath of Ukraine's withdrawal from negotiations on the Union Treaty and the collapse of the USSR. On the one hand, they literally managed to wrest the Kremlin from the grasp of the union center, and took the opportunity to exercise power at their own discretion and get hold of the property of the most resourceful Soviet republic. On the other hand, a major part of the territory of the former Russian Empire, associated with historical Russia, was now abroad, both formally and factually. Unable to compete with developed world players on an equal footing, from the very beginning the Kremlin had to resort to ingenious tricks and plots in order to maintain at least the appearance of having influence within its lost imperial borders. Hence its support for unrecognized states, to weaken the Western-oriented governments of Moldova, Georgia and later Ukraine. The idea of a post-Soviet space acquired a special meaning for the Russian political class. Geopolitics became a tool to justify constraints on other, more powerful players – the U.S. and the EU first of all – which clearly failed to understand why they could not behave toward this territory the same way they did toward the rest of the world.

Not surprisingly, quite pessimistic forecasts appeared in the West and in Russia itself long before Crimea, the Donbas and the shooting down of MH-17. Samuel Huntington was one of the first to notice the growing civilizational gap: While a Western democrat could still conduct intellectual disputes with a Soviet Marxist on an equal footing, dialogue with a Russian Orthodox nationalist was hardly possible. Huntington predicted that relations between the West and Russia would range "from distant to conflictual," oscillating between the two extremes. Another important prediction was formulated by Nikolay Kosolapov, who wrote in 1995 that Russia was "at risk of turning into a center of social and political Reaction" at the beginning of the next century, which could once again "juxtapose it against the West and other regions and cultures."

Heading toward a disaster

Could Putin change the scenario of a new confrontation, which was already gaining momentum when he came to power? Perhaps historians will someday argue over whether he could have changed Russia by modernizing its political structure. As of today, we can only say that Putin excelled at carrying the postmodern feudal-imperial system to its apogee. To do so, this talented intelligence officer, the president of Russia, abandoned the idea of radical changes and chose to go with the flow.

Similarly to the entire new Russian elite, Putin perceives the West from two conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, the West, with its capital and technologies, is a source of development and enrichment. On the other hand, the Western liberal political system is a dangerous temptation that threatens the interests and stability of the Russian bureaucracy and oligarchy. In the end, the perception of democratic revolutions in neighboring

countries as rehearsals for a coup in Russia meant that fear replaced rational motives for cooperation, given the lack of structural reforms. In turn, despite the awaited wind of change, after the 2002 Nord-Ost siege, the Khodorkovsky case, the Beslan school siege and the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, public opinion in the West was losing its hope for a real transformation in Russia, which had been associated with the then young and apparently pro-European Russian leader. Today, a decade after the 2007 Munich speech, the parties have moved from the expectation of changes to a situation repeatedly labelled as “the new Cold War.”

One cannot but agree with Lo: Russian-Western relations have been far from normal for such a long time that a state of constant tension, if not open confrontation, has become the norm. The inertia effect is probably best seen in international policy: Russia has been involved in conflicts with the leading European nations for centuries, while Russian-American relations cannot but groan under the burden of the protracted confrontation following World War II. Balancing on the brink of open clashes, constant diplomatic demarches, support for the warring parties in regional conflicts, an arms race, sanctions and trade wars, propaganda and spy hysteria on both sides are all too familiar behavior patterns dating back to the first Crimean War, or even earlier, and painstakingly honed ever since then.

The Cold War Trap

“Russia is weak, but a war with Russia will be inevitable ruin.” These words of Lord Palmerston, uttered almost 200 years ago, are extremely accurate when it comes to the Russian challenge today. Lack of strategy, cowardice and even venality are still the relevant attributes of European decision-makers, which allow Mr. Putin to win every seemingly hopeless game. “The Russian bear is certainly capable of anything, so long as he knows the other animals he has to deal with to be capable of nothing,” Marx wrote on the eve of the Crimean War. Still, at that time the European coalition managed to conduct quite a successful operation: It blocked the continental empire on the key sea routes, having defeated the Black Sea Fleet, seized Sevastopol and made Russians retreat from the Danube – all without getting involved in a fully-fledged war. The Russia of Tsar Nicholas I, which is a role model for today’s guardians of the nation, came to a disastrous end. The Great Reforms that followed opened a window of opportunity for the modernization of the country.

At the same time, Russia today does not face the threat of direct military intervention. Intervention similar to the first anti-Iraqi coalition is impossible with regard to the second largest nuclear superpower, as long as the Western allies do not decide on a retaliatory strike. However, the second half of the 20th century engendered yet another method of mutual deterrence and weakening, which was in demand 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

A Cold War is devilishly convenient and profitable, but dangerous. It is beneficial first of all to the bureaucracy and the military-industrial complex. Both parties acknowledge the existence of a threat for different reasons. Never fully materializing, this military threat plays a self-perpetuating role (in the 19th century, Europe fretted about whether the Russians would take over Constantinople, although they couldn’t make it past Bulgaria; it now worries about an invasion of the Baltic states even though in reality the threat does not extend beyond Mariupol). In the days of mass communication, the threat acquires new “smart” forms, whereby Moscow is afraid of “color revolutions” and the West fears Kremlin propaganda and hacker attacks. Recurrent bloody outbreaks of local conflicts fuel the military nature of the threat and generate demand for the military-industrial complex. More importantly, no structural changes are needed. It is clear how to allocate budgetary spending.

A Cold War doesn’t just force tightrope walking. It also means that state bureaucracy and the military are granted additional prerogatives and suppress their own citizens even more, having received extraordinary powers in the face of an external threat. Thus, the New Cold War is fraught with partial or full reinstatement of military communism, total nationalization of the economy and precedence of militaristic tasks over the civilian economy. From the West’s point of view, mobilization in the face of a new threat entails a situation whereby democratic forces have to yield to their own “hawks” and traditionalists.

In search of a bright future

The medium-term forecast promises nothing but outbreaks of regional conflicts, both old and new. Eastern Europe and the Middle East have already become the arena of this new confrontation, and the involvement of

other regions cannot be ruled out. Further restrictions on Russia's access to financial capital will be one of the most effective methods for the Western policy of sanctions. Moreover, the weaker Russia's ties with financial capital, the stronger the threat to its full autarchy. Most importantly, the Cold War is familiar, understandable and habitual. It justifies the existence of bureaucratic elites on both sides of the newly constructed Iron Curtain, as well as their foot-dragging on the necessary structural changes.

Putin has taught the world an important lesson: If you are the ruler of a superpower and you are doing so well that you can rest on your laurels, inertia will drag you back into your past, having ruthlessly devoured decades of wasted time. Putin's upcoming term of office, not necessarily his last, will show the extent of the "progressive regression". If an explanation of the developments cannot boil down to one person, only structural factors can interfere with the existing structural inertia. The main factor is that Russia is still part of the global economic system, against all odds, and cannot develop separately from it. The extent of the backsliding can be measured precisely in this dimension in the coming years.

However, let us not limit ourselves to economic determinism. The Russian economy has failed for obvious political reasons. In recent years, Russia's political structure has degraded and undermined the fundamentals of the contemporary world - the inviolability of private property, citizens' personal freedoms and rights, peaceful coexistence. The transition in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR has turned into archaization. The gauntlet was thrown down by contemporary Russia to the rest of the world on this toxic ground. To quote Hans Morgenthau, it is "untamed and barbaric force which finds its laws in nothing but its own strength, and its sole justification in its aggrandizement." Of course, the world will survive this, too. But the first thing that needs to be done following the catastrophe of the postmodernist empire is to change its "eternal" political structure based on autocracy, hypercentralization and lack of accountability. Peace can be achieved by inner transformation aimed at dismantling the dominant military-imperial structure, and the democratization and federalization of Russia.

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