



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 27/2017

The Russian Challenge: Its nature and the right response to it

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As a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, relations between Russia and the West are at their lowest since the end of the Cold War. It is important to understand the systemic, persistent and comprehensive nature of the current challenge posed by Russia. Russia's strategic goals in Europe are unacceptable for the West and aim at destroying the current European security and political order. This situation will not change as long as the current regime under Putin stays in power in Russia. Moscow believes it is at war with the West and uses various instruments – political, economic, social, informational or military – in this struggle. The response of the Atlantic community towards Russia should be commensurate with the challenge, which means equally systemic, persistent and comprehensive. It should involve various measures aimed at enhancing the resilience of the member states of the Western community and at supporting the resistance of the Eastern neighbour states to Russian aggressive pressure as well as their attempts to join the Western normative space. Finally, our response should aim at Russia itself and should include smart containment of aggressive Russian policy, efforts to maintain dialogue and engage more with Russian civil society both at home and abroad as well as waiting for the inevitable fall of Putin's regime, which may open up new prospects in Russian-Western relations.

Since the spring of 2014, after Russia's aggression against Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian-Western relations have hit their lowest point yet in the post-Cold War era. With reciprocal sanctions introduced and various aggressive Russian "active measures" against the West escalating, the Atlantic community itself as well as its resilience and cohesion have been seriously challenged by Moscow. Such a situation demands a carefully considered and concerted response. A policy that can provide long-term security for the Atlantic community needs to be developed for Europe and the U.S. as well as for their allies – a policy to defend our common interests and values. For that purpose it is essential to understand the nature of the Russian challenge and to define responses commensurate with the challenge.

The systemic character of the Russian Challenge

There are three features of the current Russian challenge: it is systemic, persistent and comprehensive. Various statements by Russia's political leadership (such as Putin's accusations against the West over the eastward enlargement of NATO, the alleged Western responsibility for the break-up of the Soviet Union and "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet area) clearly suggest that the Kremlin believes the current post-Cold War political and security order in Europe to be unjust and imposed on Russia by the West during periods of weakness. Russia has taken various steps to undermine this order, the most radical moves being two wars resulting in a *de facto* land grab: against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine since 2014.

In connection with that, the high level of consistency and continuity in Russia's European security policy should be noted. Numerous Russian diplomatic initiatives and policy actions after the break-up of the Soviet Union boiled down to four strategic goals:

1. to re-impose strategic control over the post-Soviet area (with the temporary exception of the three Baltic States), including by pushing the post-Soviet states into Russian-dominated political, economic and security structures as well as by exploiting their bilateral dependencies on Russia;
2. to create a *de facto* security buffer zone in Central Europe (including states formerly part of the Soviet Bloc), with legal and political constraints on deployment of “foreign” troops, serious limitations concerning armaments and the use of existing - and creation of new - military infrastructure. Holding on to the Cold War era “Nordic Balance” in Nordic countries may also be seen as an addition to that goal;
3. to minimize U.S. presence (especially military) and influence in Europe, including by fuelling tensions in Transatlantic relations, supporting Europe’s “independence” (from the U.S.) and pressuring U.S. troops to pull back from Europe;
4. to maximize Russia’s presence and influence in Europe, including by creating a “new European security architecture”, which would provide Moscow with the opportunity to participate in decision-making and with a *de facto* veto right on security issues, as well as through preferential bilateral cooperation deals with leading European powers (especially Germany).

If achieved, the above goals would profoundly change Europe’s security and political order.

The persistent character of the Russian challenge

The challenge is connected to the authoritarian nature of Putin’s regime. Both president Putin and a group of his like-minded associates hold deeply-rooted views about the nature of international relations (as a scene of Hobbesian struggle of nations for survival, which a few Great Powers dominate, and a “natural right” to the spheres of influence). Those people also share paranoia over a Western (especially the U.S.) “regime change policy” with Russia as its central target. Since they understand their deficit of political legitimacy and believe that there is a Western anti-Russian conspiracy, they feel vulnerable as a result and try to “defend themselves” by pursuing an increasingly authoritarian internal policy and aggressive external policy. It creates a vicious circle, with no prospects for improvement. That is why Russia’s aggressive policy towards the West will continue as long as the current political system exists in Russia, that means as long as Putin and his closest associates who share his views and mentality stay in power. Consequently, there will be no change until a regime change (from within) takes place in Russia. Due to the ineffectiveness of the current political and economic system of Russia, the fall of this system is inevitable. However the system is resilient enough and society is patient enough that the downfall may be postponed, possibly even for many years if no unexpected shocks happen. But even after the fall, there is only a chance, not a guarantee, of a positive breakthrough in Russia’s relations with the West.

The comprehensive character of the Russian challenge

Various statements and especially the Russian policy actions of recent years suggest Kremlin perceives Russia to be at war with the West. This war is understood as a continuous struggle with the West in various areas: political, ideological, economic, social, informational, military. It does not exclude tactical cooperation with individual Western players (states, parties, companies or individuals) provided it brings some benefit to Russia, especially in advancing its above-mentioned strategic goals.

Russia uses various instruments in its war with the West. It uses numerous state-controlled media outlets (both at home and abroad) to spread propaganda, with the main goal of undermining the trust of Western societies in their own institutions and political elites. Moscow also uses various (both state and private) companies that advance not only Kremlin’s economic goals but also its geopolitical ones, including through shadow schemes and various types of corruption. Russia clearly tries to weaponise migration (especially refugee flows) and employ other techniques of political sabotage (supporting radical political groups, fuelling unrest). Moscow increasingly uses cyberwarfare (both directly, through its own secret services, and

indirectly, through supported hacker networks). Russia's aggressive anti-Western policies also involve military demonstrations and provocations (as large-scale and/or snap military exercises near its borders, with aggressive scenarios, simulated attacks on Western countries, harassment of Western combat planes and warships in international spaces etc.). Finally, Russia has also engaged in proxy wars against the West and especially against the United States. Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine since 2014 as well as the Russian military intervention in Syria since 2015 can be perceived as such (since Moscow believes it responds to Western involvement in those countries).

Moreover, there is a clear tendency towards escalation of these Russian activities. Russia uses methods against the West which in the past were used mostly against post-Soviet ("near abroad") or non-Western states. This is especially the case when it comes to aggressive cyberattacks combined with massive propaganda aimed at meddling in internal affairs and influencing political processes (such as the "Lisa affair" in Germany or the anti-Macron campaign in France). The killing of Alexander Litvinenko in the United Kingdom (followed by several suspicious deaths in that country) suggests political killings have returned as a Russian form of activity in the West. The participation of some EU citizens (for example of the Baltic States) in Russian-organized "patriotic youth camps" (which include brainwashing and elements of military training) are also cause for concern. Other Russian activities so far conducted only against post-Soviet states may also soon be used by Moscow against the West. Among them are terrorist attacks, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure or the use of fight clubs to organise and recruit guerrilla fighters (all of these methods have been employed by Russia against Ukraine).

The systemic response to the Russian challenge

If the response of the Atlantic community to the Russian challenge is to have a chance of being effective, it must be commensurate in a very direct sense. Therefore it should be systemic, persistent and comprehensive. The Kremlin cannot be allowed to achieve any of the above-mentioned policy goals (Russia's strategic control over post-Soviet area, a buffer zone in Central Europe, minimizing U.S. presence in Europe, maximizing Russia's influence in Europe), which are unacceptable for the West as a whole and especially for the countries potentially affected. No half-measures or "compromises" should be allowed (for example "half sovereignty" of Ukraine or partial "buffer zone" in Central Europe).

They would be both unfeasible and ineffective as they would be rejected by the potentially affected states and would incite Russia to escalate its demands. Aggressive Russian policy actions must be proven to have failed, and we must not reward them by agreeing to any concessions which could be understood in Moscow as (at least partial) success and thus provoke further aggressive moves. It would be counterproductive, for example, to impose an informal arms embargo on Ukraine or deny it the right to apply for NATO membership, or to recall (without any major concessions from Moscow) sanctions against Russia or withdraw additional NATO troops from the countries on NATO's Eastern flank.

It is important not to actively support Putin's regime through business deals or by providing it with additional political legitimacy. For example, instead of expanding business ties with major Russian state-controlled companies (such as Gazprom or Rosneft), which are part of the informal power system in Russia and sources of income for the members of the Russian ruling elite, cooperation with them should be limited as much as possible. Moscow's attempts to compartmentalise relations by neglecting certain areas of conflict must not be accepted. We must also avoid providing Russian leadership with full political recognition and PR successes, which boost its legitimacy at home. Instead we should confidently promote our own policy agenda and make it clear and transparent to Moscow.

Persistent response

We should not succumb to the belief (or create the impression) that the current conflict with Russia is temporary and that a return to some form of business as usual is possible in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, we have to get used to this situation of conflict with Russia. In our own policies, we should not count on any quick fixes or magic bullets either but should aim for long-term strategies and policies instead. For our long-term prospects, it is important that we reaffirm actions already taken in response to Russia's aggressive policies, such as the non-recognition policy regarding occupied Crimea and the Donbass (with practical consequences in regularly adjusted sanctions), economic (sectoral) and individual sanctions against Russia (unless the reasons why they were introduced are resolved), military deployments on NATO's Eastern flank (which should reflect a substantial change in NATO's thinking, planning and operating) as well as other investments in resilience and defence (an increase in defence spending, changes in command structures, composition of forces, training routines).

Comprehensive response

Consistency is important when it comes to the following three types of players, using (as Russia does) various policy instruments. When it comes to ourselves, we should build comprehensive resilience and defence capabilities, for example by increasing military preparedness and military interoperability, developing cyber defensive and offensive capabilities, improving counter-intelligence capabilities and cooperation, raising social awareness (including regarding hostile propaganda), improving business transparency and the fight against corruption and, above all, by addressing real political, social, economic and security problems that undermine internal and transnational cohesion of our states and institutions.

When it comes to our Eastern neighbours threatened by Russia, we should focus on the strategic goal of expanding the Western normative space and on providing systemic long-term comprehensive support (political, social, economic, military) to those countries, provided they are ready and able to undertake the necessary reforms and other steps to bring them in line with our values and norms. Because of its size, its location and its role as well as its potential long-term influence on Russia, Ukraine should be seen as a priority target of our policies. We should develop those policies on a basis of reasonable conditionality, so that they can provide substantial support (not only financial but also legal and technical) while also depending on jointly agreed actions having measurable effects. When it comes to Russia, we should maintain political dialogue, mainly to clearly communicate our policies and to increase our understanding and awareness of Moscow's policies. We may, if circumstances permit, engage in tactical and conditional cooperation with Russia in third areas if real common interests emerge (as may be the case on issues such as transport safety, environment protection, fighting piracy at sea or dealing with some regional conflicts, for example over North Korea). On the other hand, however, we should counteract aggressive Russian activities (for example by developing the necessary military preparedness or conducting cyber counterstrikes against Russia).

Increased engagement with Russian civil society both in Russia and abroad (including among Russian-speaking diasporas), for example by supporting independent initiatives in media, political debate, social activity etc., must be an important element of our policies towards Russia. Such actions, while avoiding direct attempts to foster a regime change in Russia, could in the long term contribute to the development of alternative political elites in Russia. Even if such an activity is increasingly difficult due to Kremlin's crack-down on Russia's political opposition, civil society, NGOs and independent media, we should try to overcome it with creative technical and legal solutions, such as grants, networking, satellite TV, social media, internet portals and bypassing VPN blocks.

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