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The West and Russia: From Acute Conflict to Long-Term Crisis Management

Marie Mendras¹

Russia entered a period of acute crisis the day it occupied and annexed Crimea. In history textbooks, it will mark the beginning of the end of Putin's rule. It will also read as a turning point in European and transatlantic policies toward Russia's leadership. Much of the change in paradigm was triggered by Moscow's intrusive and subversive methods in the "in-between" states, the states that remained stuck between Europe and the Russian Federation after 1991.² Moscow's unswerving support of Assad's dictatorial military rule is, to a large extent, the consequence of Vladimir Putin's fear of "regime fall" and rule-of-law aspirations in several prominent east European and Mediterranean countries.

In 2014-2015, the pace of change was momentous. In 2016-2017, it might accelerate even further, as we see no sign of serious appeasement in Russian domestic and foreign conduct. At the same time, Western governments need to be ready for long-term crisis management, and not just urgent conflict containment, as tensions and confrontations with Moscow will continue on a regular basis. Even if Ukraine becomes a low-intensity conflict, European countries will be facing the challenge of long-term insecurity in their immediate vicinity.

Economic recession, authoritarian protectionism, and rising confrontation with most neighbors, west and south, are driving Russia onto a very uncertain path. Confrontational policies are bound to be less safe and less controllable than negotiation and conflict-resolution strategies. It is always much easier to fall into conflict and violence than to end war, and to put the lid back on the Pandora's box of nationalist, xenophobic hysterical war scares.

This paper makes three major observations pertaining to Russia and Vladimir Putin's future policies, and offers three prospective suggestions about how Western governments might want to tackle rising challenges.

I. Russia's Unreasonable Bets

1. The high costs of the Ukrainian adventure were unforeseen by the Kremlin

Since 2013 costs have been rising for Putin, for his regime, and for Russians. Economic costs are obvious: Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions burdened an already slipping economy. Diplomatic and military costs continue to rise: Moscow will not regain minimal trust from such key capitals as Washington, Berlin, Paris, London, or even Beijing. Putin's image as a potent and reliable partner is gone for good. The military now has the upper hand in decision-making and in revenue spending. This is never good news for a leadership that becomes hostage to its own military adventures.

It is important to follow the narrative of Russia's mistakes and miscalculations, rather than to see two years of blunders as a success story. Donbas is a failure for Russia and for Putin, even if it also is a failure

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²Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan.



for Ukraine. Putin had to get much more involved than he had planned. After the easy fall of Crimea, he was hoping for a second quick victory in Donbas. But Crimea always remained a Russia-controlled territory, even after 1991, with more Russian military than Ukrainian law enforcement forces, and with a largely Russian population. It was a much softer spot than the Donetsk and Lugansk regions.

The Russian leadership did not expect such a strong Western response, and was taken aback by the determination of Ukrainian society. They displayed arrogance about the “low status” of Ukrainians and Ukraine, and about the “weakness” of the EU. Hence, they had to go much further than they had originally thought to support “rebels,” and became directly involved in armed struggle and the all-out destabilization of eastern Ukraine. They made a number of mistakes that forced them to engage in full-scale military fighting, and they eventually had to stop denying direct Russian involvement.

The Russian president is making his country an outcast in regional and international affairs. Without Russia’s efforts to subvert Ukrainian domestic affairs, Ukrainians could have completed a peaceful and remarkably constitutional change of government in the winter of 2013-14. This point needs be restated at every stage of Ukraine’s bumpy road.

Paradoxically, Putin’s intrusive policies may bring the age of spheres of influence to an end. In desperately seeking to keep the “inherited sphere” under exclusive control, the Kremlin is losing not only capacity and power, but also networks and attractiveness. It no longer offers good deals to Ukrainian oligarchs, nor does it extend a helping hand to the population. Before the Maidan, Russia failed to retain influence; now it fails to exert *post-imperial control*, for nowhere in eastern Europe is Russia seen as a recipe for future prosperity.

2. Putin is putting Russia at risk

Russia has entered a new time of trouble. The economy is plunging into recession with a negative growth rate, double-digit inflation, slumping purchasing power, a crippling lack of investments, and no improvement in sight. The oil curse has struck a country of 140 million people that had grown accustomed to living off rising hydrocarbon exports revenues without reforming or working very hard.

Elites and upper middle classes have much to lose, and Western sanctions are raising the stakes. The rest of society is struggling to save a way of life that brought them more comfort and prospects than at any previous time in Russian history. In the 2000s, Russians became consumers, enjoyed it, and thanked Vladimir Putin for that. Now, they are petrified and caught up in the Kremlin’s war scare and “fifth column” propaganda against Ukraine and the West. They are told that they had better get used to living in a besieged fortress.

3. Putin’s system is growing more precarious, due to incapacity to deliver

Notwithstanding blunt autocratic rule, there are reasons to believe that the Putin regime is less legitimate in the eyes of average Russians and of economic and scientific elites, because it is less effective, less predictable, and more prone to risk.

Russian society’s prospects look somber. Economic recession and social distress are on the rise, while insecurity shows no sign of abating, especially in the north Caucasus republics. The public mood echoes the dark and abrasive language of official television. As a result, people feel insecure and unsafe, and live in diffuse fear of the future and of the outside world. Maybe this sense that there is no end to the tunnel



generates a new fear, the fear that Putin is no longer capable of solving issues and ending armed conflicts. Undoubtedly, this is a major question. Western governments and experts should investigate in order to anticipate future developments. Is Putin really popular? Will a majority support his warmongering policies, no matter what negative consequences such policies may hold for them?

Putin needs to trap his population in debilitating xenophobic nationalism. Tightly controlled media propagate extremely negative emotions, served by blatant lies and a frightening coverage of news in Ukraine. Many Russians feel nervous and angry, and indulge in the narrative of “the Motherland threatened by enemies outside and traitors inside.” In such an atmosphere, polls no longer measure opinion, they measure emotion. People say they support Putin, but do so in a context in which they are deprived of an alternative. In the same polls, Russians respond they do not trust the government to fight corruption, which ranks high on their long list of complaints.³ Emotions are volatile and may backfire. Russians do not want to fight a war against Ukrainians.

Elites are preoccupied, as they see no easy way out of recession and uncertainty. Political, economic, scientific, cultural elites know that war and being a big power (*derzhavnost'*) cannot replace reform and growth. Many of them probably observe with concern an aging leader who lacks strategic vision for domestic development. However, if they wish to stay in Russia, they must accept compromises and contraction of their revenues and assets. Hundreds of thousands have made another choice, leaving their country and now working abroad. A significant number of them state openly that they are in temporary exile and prepare to return when the Putin group is out.

In a context of recession and rising political and security confrontation with the West, no one knows how sustainable the Putin system is. European and American sanctions did not deter Vladimir Putin from further destabilizing Ukraine, but they sent shockwaves through elite and business circles, which are so dependent on Moscow's good will and budgetary benevolence. Sanctions create anxiety, uncertainty, and probably muffled hostility to the Kremlin's confrontational strategy. Sanctions are also effective in delivering a message of Western solidarity for Ukraine, which dampens hopes of renewed business deals for Russian companies.

II. Urgent Tasks in Transatlantic Strategic Thinking

In the face of Moscow's intrusive armed policies in eastern Europe, the European Union did relatively well. Since the Maidan popular protest started in November 2013, and throughout the years 2014 and 2015, EU governments have acted consensually and with determination. They have worked in close consultation with the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey and Japan. Sanctions were agreed and imposed by most Western countries. This was an unexpected and promising moment of transatlantic and “like-minded” solidarity.

However, Ukraine is not pacified, and Moscow continues to support “separatists.” Given front-burner issues such as the Syria war, ISIS terrorism, and the refugee crisis, Ukraine no longer makes the headlines. But it remains a central disruptive issue in Europe.

In 2016, the challenge will be to reinforce Western solidarity and to sustain policies implemented by Western countries and Western multilateral institutions, first and foremost the EU and NATO. One

³ Levada Institute, www.levada.ru.

cannot overrate dissenting views inside European countries about what Putin can do, and cannot do, and what we should deal with him.

The Syrian tragedy confronts Western governments and multilateral organizations with huge challenges: how to respond adequately to mounting terrorism in Europe; how to contain Assad's troops and Islamists' power; how to save civilian lives in Syria and Iraq; and how to prepare a post-Assad, post-U.S.-occupied Iraq, without relying heavily on Russian political will and military capabilities. Our task is made even more difficult by the fact that the Kremlin does not seem to be pursuing clear aims in the Middle East.

We will probably not act as effectively together in this next phase, a phase of lasting conflict, in some cases low-intensity conflict (Ukraine), in other cases still highly militarized battles (Middle East, ISIS, and terrorism). Russia cannot be dismissed as a power that counts, but cannot be treated as a partner.

Recommendations

1. Adjust the explanatory toolbox of why Putin does what he does

The exceptionally complex challenge for Western allies is to deal with sharpening risks in the very short term, but also to look beyond current crises and prepare for a post-Putin Russia that will be dysfunctional and divided. As long as Putin and his unchecked clans and *siloviki* (power structures) remain unchecked, economic lawlessness and political violence will grow inside Russia. In a few years, the country will be in dire conditions. By 2025, almost two generations will have been lost. Without even modest reforms, Vladimir Putin will be closing all chances of a rebound. This is the darkest, but most probable scenario in the event of no change of leadership and methods of rule.

Confrontation between Russia and the West has reached new heights and our policies need be reassessed. Now it is Russia alone versus the West, not the old East-West confrontation. The EU, the United States and other Western governments and multilateral organizations must consolidate a consensual discourse and coordinated policies toward the Kremlin.

Vladimir Putin is our one and only interlocutor. Only he has authority to negotiate with Kiev, with Western governments, and with the armed commandos in Donbas. The challenge for us is precisely that he is the lonely leader of an authoritarian, militarized and corrupt regime; he lives retrenched in an inner circle, probably "self-disinformed" about realities in Russia and outside, and has isolated his country on the continent and in the world more widely. Even China does not support the military occupation of Ukraine.

2. Prepare for the post-Putin reality

We also need to take a longer-term perspective, so as to better define the direction in which to make progress in coming months, and the desired results in a few years. There is no doubt that in a not-so-distant future, Russia will no longer be ruled by Vladimir Putin. We have no idea what kind of regime will succeed the Putin group, but there will be a post-Putin Russia. And we will want to have good and stable relations with our Russian neighbor and its 140 million inhabitants.

Western governments must develop channels of communication and relations with as many Russian individuals, organizations, companies as we can, and in the most vigorous manner. This has become very



difficult because of abundant repressive legislation and harsh crackdown on all forms of criticism and dissent. However, it must be done, so that we can convince Russian economic, political, intellectual, and even administrative elites of our determination to work in favor of Russia's peaceful and prosperous future, after the current leadership has left the scene.

3. Think Europe's continental security anew, including eastern countries

Whether they are engaged in a long process of joining the EU and NATO, or not, the six countries that are sandwiched between western Europe and Russia must get out of their "in-between" predicament.

Ukrainians demonstrated that they cannot be forever an "in-between country," stuck between Europe and NATO on one side, and an authoritarian revisionist Russia on the other. Ukraine cannot be a convenient "bridge" between Moscow and us. In recent years, our standby position, by which we let Ukraine be a misruled buffer state under Moscow's unwritten yoke, was a dangerous illusion. Ukrainians paid, and continue to pay, a high human price for this mistake. So let us not repeat this wrong message that Ukraine is "naturally" closer to Russian political culture and Russia's economic space than to the European space. There is no "third way" for Ukraine or Georgia, but a choice to make between democratization along with Europeanization, or unaccountable, weak government *à la russe*. Ukrainians expressed their will on the Maidan, and later with their ballots in May and October 2014.

Coordinating EU and NATO policies, and defining the division of labor between the two organizations, in order to restrain Russia's actions and negotiate from a position of strength, is an urgent matter. The EU cannot dismiss the security urgency, and must address it, in connection with NATO and the United States. We need to be prepared for a long standoff with Moscow. Therefore, we must better contain Russian actions that would trigger confrontation and raise risks. At the same time, we need to get ready for the post-conflict period with both current Russian rulers and alternative elites.

Western governments and organizations have one substantial advantage over the Kremlin: the capacity to engage in serious long-term planning, and to revise and adjust our policies when need be. And we have one unredeemable obligation: not to let Ukraine be again a large misruled country of eastern Europe. We simply and squarely can no longer afford it. The risks are too high, in political, economic, and security terms. Full support of the Ukrainian population, with effective accountability enforced on business and administration, in good intelligence with Ukrainian institutions, is the only reasonable *feuille de route*.