

(No New) Lessons Learned

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INTRODUCTION

The Ukraine Crisis in Context

The recent months have been dominated by a military and diplomatic crisis centred on fears about a Russian military attack on Ukraine and the Russian government's demands that diplomatic negotiations are required to address its long-standing grievances with regard to prevailing European security arrangements. Against this backdrop, the Russian Analytical Digest (RAD) invited a range of scholars and commentators to write short comments. The comments in this edition were completed on or before 14 February 2022, and thus reflect the authors' perspectives at this time. The views outlined in these comments are those of the named authors and not the RAD editorial board. The intention is that the comments cover a wide range of prevalent opinions, perspectives and thematic foci of relevance to the ongoing crisis. The next RAD issue, which is planned for next week, will present further comments.

COMMENTARY

(No New) Lessons Learned

By Irina Busygina (Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg)

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Russia's continuing military buildup on the border with Ukraine makes it clear that the stakes are much higher now than any time since 2014. As a result of the events of the last months, have we learned anything new about Russian foreign policy? The decision-making process in Russian foreign policy remains a "black box", we still do not know exactly which elite groups make certain decisions. So, analysts can only formulate informed guesses. I would say that, although we probably have not learned anything fundamentally new, the processes of recent months have allowed us to clarify some perceptions and possibly reaffirm certain guesses.

One of the most widespread conclusions (especially in the Western expert community) in recent years has been that Russian foreign policy is a tool of domestic politics, and moreover a mostly successful one in this regard. In other words, loud foreign policy statements and high-profile Russian foreign policy activism operate to maintain the incumbent president's popularity. This popularity is the main pillar for the stability of the political regime in Russia, and the guarantee of the political survival of its incumbent leader. So, it is not the West that is the addressee of the present "big ruckus", but rather the internal Russian audience. Indeed, this interpretation used to be a rather convincing argument.

However, the domestic demand for a "small victorious war" has evidently fallen in Russia. As recent polls by the Levada Center show, the majority of Russian citizens blame the West for the current escalation in ten-

sions, almost entirely absolving their political leadership from responsibility. At the same time, however, there is no mobilization of public opinion around the Russian leader, and the approval ratings of the president and the government have not been growing in recent months. The authorities cannot fail to understand and see this. Consequently, the argument about foreign policy as a continuation of domestic policy loses its cogency. I suggest that Russian foreign policy has indeed become "detached" from domestic politics.

Another conclusion that many experts have drawn from Russia's past foreign policy actions is that Russian President Putin likes to leave himself space to choose, and relies on the unpredictability of his external behavior. Indeed, if building a stable relationship of trust with the West is not the goal, then the unpredictable behavior may offer some advantages. However, these advantages are not strategic, but tactical. In other words, an approach that cannot be used in the long term. After 2014, Western countries no longer consider Russia to be predictable in any case, that is, in their calculations they *already* factor in Russia's unpredictability. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis is often described as a "game changer" for Russia's relations with the West. But this was also a "critical juncture"—a moment when Western policy towards Russia was radically changed, and new institutions—sanctions regimes—have emerged, and Russia's unpredictability became an indispensable premise on which Western expertise on Russia is framed.

Finally, the current crisis demonstrates how much importance Russia really (not declaratively) attaches to the different dimensions outlined in its foreign policy. In official declarations, the Russian leadership states that the post-Soviet space is an unconditional priority for Russian foreign policy. The current crisis shows, however, that it is not like this at all. By building up its military on the border to Ukraine, President Putin in fact sends the West a signal that he would like to see the fate of Ukraine discussed directly between Washington and Moscow, in a so called “Yalta 2.0”.

From this perspective, the current escalation is a part of Russia’s great power repertoire, based on the idea that major powers get together and decide the fate of smaller nations in Europe and elsewhere. However, Russia’s great power agenda is inconsistent with its regional agenda—the aim of playing the role of a regional leader for its post-Soviet neighbors. The attempts to build up the image of Russia as a “great power” provokes a reduc-

tion of its actual influence in the post-Soviet region. The more Russia acts as a “great power”, the less credible are Putin’s promises to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. In other words, Putin’s global ambitions principally hinder the integration of the post-Soviet space and significantly limits its scope. To put it simply: if Russia deliberately peddles its great power agenda, it gives up its ambitions to dominate and control in the post-Soviet space, because it will be impossible to reconcile these two agendas in a consistent manner.

Russian foreign policy is internally inconsistent, whether in its domestic purposes, its neighborhood, or in relation to the West. The crucial question that remains open is: Will such a foreign policy pay off for Russia? Based on the insights gained over the last few months, Russia’s foreign policies efforts seem to be misaligned with its aims to act as both a great power and the leader in the post-Soviet space.

About the Author

Irina Busygina is Professor at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg, and Director of the Center for Comparative Governance Studies. Her research interests include Russian Politics, Russian Foreign Policy, Post-Soviet Space, Russia–EU Relations.

Recent Publications

- Irina Busygina. 2021. Russia and Its Two “Shared Neighborhoods”, *PONARS Policy Memo* N 712, October.
- Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov. 2021. Trade-offs and inconsistencies of the Russian foreign policy: The case of Eurasia, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, First Published March 10, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998241>.
- Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov. 2020. Russia, Post-Soviet Integration, and the EAEU: The Balance between Domination and Cooperation, *Problems of Post-Communism*. Published online September 01. DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2020.1803755](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1803755).
- Irina Busygina. 2018. *Russia-EU Relations and the Common Neighborhood: Coercion Versus Authority*. UK: Routledge.

COMMENTARY

Russia’s Showdown over NATO Has Been a Long Time in the Making

By Ben Aris (BNE, Berlin)

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The talk is of war and an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, but this prospect hasn’t come out of the blue. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been complaining about NATO’s expansion for more than a decade, which he says threatens Russia’s security.

From the Kremlin’s point of view, Russia has been excluded from the current European security arrangements, which de facto defines it as “the enemy”. Indeed,

amongst the eight point list of demands that the Russian Foreign Ministry sent the west in December was one asking for an acknowledgement that “we are not enemies”, as well as the better known “no more NATO expansion eastwards and especially not for Ukraine” demand.

Some have argued that Putin has turned his guns on Ukraine as he abhors a democracy and sees a flourishing