

The Reasons for Russia's Proposals

Sharikov, Pavel

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had to accept that the contracts between Gazprom and Naftogaz fell under the jurisdiction of an independent arbitration institution in Stockholm. The Russian interest in stable commercial relations with the West was so strong that in 2016 the Kremlin agreed with the arbitration ruling in favor of Ukraine; it paid the associated fines in 2019.

Thus, a stable resolution of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia might be possible if it is connected to business opportunities for the biggest Russian companies. From this point of view, Germany has one of the most powerful levers for delivering peace to Donbas. Germany can not only determine the fate of Nord Stream 2, but also define how much Russian energy makes it to the European market. In other words, it would be reasonable to reward Russia for true de-escalation with access to the EU oil and gas markets or punish it with restrictions and a reduction of its share if it continues aggression.

About the Authors

Dr. *Olexiy Haran* was the Founding Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences (1991–1992) at National University Kyiv Mohyla Academy, where he is currently Professor of Comparative Politics and Head of the School of Political Analysis. He is also the Research Director of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation. His most recent book is *Vid Brezhneva do Zelenskoho: dylemy ukrainskoho politologa* (2021).

Petro Burkovskyy has been a Senior Fellow of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) since 2017. Between 2006 and 2020, he worked at the National Institute for Strategic Studies (Kyiv, Ukraine). He recently published “Russia Puts Transatlantic Unity and Security in Europe to the Test” (2022).

COMMENTARY

The Reasons for Russia’s Proposals

Pavel Sharikov (Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

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In December, Russia invited the United States to sign a treaty and European NATO member countries to commit to an agreement on “security guarantees.” While the contents of Russia’s suggestions were not surprising, the timing, the no-compromise approach, and the public form of the invitation raised a lot of questions.

Ever since Vladimir Putin’s historic speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the Russian government has consistently expressed concerns about trends in European security affairs, particularly NATO expansion and American involvement. Russia was somewhat pacified by former U.S. president Donald Trump’s isolationist foreign policy; once Joe Biden took office in

The third clue to be gleaned from Ukraine’s experience is that Russia cannot prevail if the opposite side is united. In 2014, despite weak defensive capacity and a disrupted economy, Ukraine withstood hybrid and open aggression because most political and civic forces put aside their differences and worked together. This saved Odesa and Kharkiv from hybrid occupation. Therefore, if the West wants to deter Russia, the EU and NATO member states must forget their disagreements and look for any opportunity to help near and distant neighbors. This is true across the political divides within the bigger alliances of the EU parliament and within the EU member states. It also applies to the European Social Democrats and other Left forces: after all, the background for the establishment of the 1st International in 1864 was solidarity with the Polish uprising against Russian tsarism.

early 2021, however, it became evident that restoring transatlantic solidarity was a top priority. The intensity of American foreign policy interactions with European partners triggered another wave of concern. The timing and the contents of Russia’s proposal in December 2021 relate to this change in American foreign policy position. Whereas the Trump administration appeared to be trying to undermine all the arms control treaties to which the US was a party, the Biden administration is taking a more constructive approach. The new administration has extended the START 3 treaty and expressed a willingness to negotiate arms control issues. Accordingly, Russia and the US launched a dialogue on strategic sta-

bility. Media reports following the meetings in summer 2021 suggest that they were somewhat successful.

Seizing this opportunity for talks and changes, Russia shared documents in December 2021 that lay out Russia's vision for the security architecture in Europe. Originally, this was not solely about Ukraine. But since the tone of the Russia's proposals suggested to the West that Russia was giving them an ultimatum, the Western policy community came to believe that Russia was threatening to engage in military aggression in Ukraine.

In reality, most of Russia's concerns are about American involvement in European security affairs. Russia considers this to be a national security threat and its actions can be understood as a reaction to this perceived threat. It seems that Russia wanted to put the US in a similar position with regard to European security as the one that it holds with respect to the Minsk Protocol on the Donbas conflict: a commitment to de-escalating the conflict, but without acknowledging itself as a party to it. Russian officials have repeatedly reiterated that the Minsk Protocol is the only possible way to de-escalate the conflict, thus implying that it has informal influence over the separatists. Russia sees the US role in European security operating in a similar fashion.

Russia's proposals aim to institutionalize American involvement in European affairs through contractual agreements. Such institutionalization would make the international environment intelligible to the Russian government. After all, most of Russia's current top decision-makers established themselves during a period of confrontation against the United States. It remains difficult for them to adapt to the new international environment, where economic performance defines international competitiveness.

The Trump administration would probably have avoided engaging in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in line with its principles of "America first" and "Europe should raise its own defense spending before Washington returns to its NATO commitments." The Biden administration, on the other hand, is clearly looking to enhance transatlantic cooperation and increase American influence in European security affairs. However, many things have changed in the 5 years since a Democrat was in the White House.

For the United States, it would be more comfortable to have a predictable and reasonable Russia. But of

course, it is not possible to change one's foreign policy to increase engagement in a region and at the same time hope for a stable reaction from one's counterpart. Furthermore, Russia actively plays the ambiguity card. No one, even pro-Kremlin experts, can articulate what Russia's strategic goal is, making it unclear whether the current moves are beneficial or damaging to Russia's strategic plans.

Russia has never attempted to persuade the West to lift sanctions, which are obviously damaging to the Russian economy. Indeed, Russia keeps making moves that provoke new sanctions. This behavior seems irrational to the West, exacerbating their view that Russian behavior is more and more unpredictable and the whole European security system unstable.

What seems unique about the current escalation of tensions is not only the ambiguity, but also the publicity.

The proposals which Russian Foreign Ministry presented as a form of "openness of Russia's policy" may suggest that the current stand-off is more an information operation than an expression of any actual intent to conduct military activities. Its primary aim is to be heard and perceived.

During the last few weeks of tensions, there have been an unprecedented number of leaks, fake news, and outrageous propaganda. All this passive-aggressive rhetoric is in line with Russian tactics based on the "threat to use force", but not any actual intention of using real force. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has stated that "only by threatening to use force did we succeed in making sure that our concerns were heard, and our Western partners have agreed to negotiate." The Russian proposals depict Russia as a victim of NATO expansion. The chairman of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, even went so far as to claim that "NATO plans to occupy Ukraine." In the eyes of Western societies, however, it is Russia who is the aggressor. It is also unclear to the West why keeping Ukraine out of NATO is in Russia's national interest.

Information warfare may explain, at least to some extent, why Russia has taken such an uncompromising position: its goal is not to reach a specific agreement, but to maintain tensions. It remains unclear what Putin's plan is, but such behavior in international affairs certainly raises his approval ratings at home.

About the Author

Pavel Sharikov is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute for International Studies at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), as well as an associate professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University.