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Beyond Russia's 'Versailles Syndrome'

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Russia alleges that at the end of the Cold War it underwent a soft version of a Versailles Treaty, pushing it into the periphery of global politics and cutting it out of European decision-making. The crisis in Ukraine is about the survival of Putin's regime and the dismantling of the post-Cold War settlement. We should not accept the fallacious narrative of victimhood propagated by the Kremlin's Versailles syndrome. Even so, it is time to explore practical ways of coexisting with Russia. The Helsinki Process and the disarmament and arms control agreements of the Cold War could serve as a model for a mutually acceptable security architecture.

DON'T MENTION THE COLD WAR

Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity calls into question the foundations of the post-Cold War order.

The NATO summit in Wales formalised this new phase in relations with Russia. It is, however, not yet clear whether this represents a fundamental shift or a less drastic adjustment towards a new balance in Europe.

The EU and NATO are ill-prepared to adapt to this threat: the EU's lack of a coherent strategy for Eastern Europe has been exposed, and NATO forced to change its military posture.

Until recently, the West considered Russia a partner that did not threaten European security. Now, Russia has adopted a complex, non-linear form of struggle. The West is being flooded with disinformation implying that the events in Ukraine are a legitimate response to slights Russia suffered after the Soviet Union imploded.

In order to understand Moscow's underlying motives and to refute the fallacious narrative Russia is disseminating, one has to enter Russia's troubled psyche.

THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

The war in Georgia was not a breaking point in relations between Russia and the West; it only took a couple of months to reset relations. The crisis in Ukraine, by contrast, is here to stay, because it concerns the future of Putin's regime and the post-Cold War settlement.

Firstly, the ousting of a leader supported by Russia and the establishment of democracy in

Kyiv constitutes an existential threat to Putin's regime. A real democracy in Ukraine, which shares so many historical and cultural ties with Russia, would set a dangerous precedent. It would demonstrate that a truly democratic system is possible in a country that inherited much of its political culture from the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, despite the conventional wisdom that such a country cannot be governed without a firm, autocratic hand. In this sense, the conflict over Ukraine has become a struggle for Russia.

Secondly, the occupation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine call into question the post-Cold War settlement. Russia's goal in the war in Georgia in 2008 was to end any further NATO enlargement into the former Soviet space.

The EU reacted in 2009 with the Eastern Partnership initiative, which enabled six former Soviet republics to move towards the EU while avoiding the issue of EU membership. Georgia and Moldova signed up at the Vilnius Summit in November 2013. Ukraine had to wait until March 2014, when Yanukovich had been ousted.

In 2010, the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan formed the Eurasian Customs Union. In 2015, it will become the Eurasian Economic Union, with the addition of Armenia. However, without Ukraine, the Eurasian Union cannot achieve sufficient critical mass to form a separate Russian-led geopolitical entity, a precondition for Putin's dream of a leading role for Russia in a multipolar world.

Putin's single-minded energy, which contrasts so sharply with Western foot-dragging, does not seem to have paid off for the time being. Ukraine has become the top prize in a zero-sum game between the West and Russia. Moscow's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine have alienated Ukraine from Russia,

forging Ukrainian nationhood. The Kremlin has had to scale back its hopes of incorporating the whole of Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, instead annexing Crimea and creating a frozen conflict in the Ukrainian Donbas. Ukraine has resolutely opted for a Western orientation, even though it will probably pay dearly, and joining the EU remains a far-off dream.

DISENGAGEMENT

The crisis in Ukraine in November 2013 terminated the long process of disengagement from the West that started at the end of Putin's first presidential term. The events in Ukraine should make it clear, even to the most optimistic or credulous, that the West's relationship with Russia has become adversarial.

During the first decade following the implosion of the Soviet Union, hopes were high for the integration of Russia into the West. Reforms would transform Russia into a democratic market economy. Russia did indeed become a member of most Western institutions. Most importantly, the Russia–NATO Council gave Russia special status, and served as a forum where Russia could directly discuss security problems, as an equal, with NATO members.

Although warnings about repeating the historical mistakes of the settlements after the First World War were rife, the West was not inclined to integrate Russia fully into European structures. It also ignored Russian concerns in the Former Yugoslavia.

Putin tried to make a deal with the United States after 9/11. He immediately offered Russian support, most importantly 'allowing' the United States to use Central Asia to take the fight to Afghanistan. This signalled that he was prepared to accept America's global leadership for the time being. On the other hand, he expected Russia to be treated as a

major ally with its own sphere of influence in the former Soviet space.¹ America, however, had no intention of accepting Russian hegemony in the CIS.

Disappointed by this rebuff, Russia sought rapprochement with Germany and France, joining them in opposing the war in Iraq in 2003. This did not lead to a lasting convergence of interests with the EU. On the contrary, a second round of NATO enlargement in 2004 brought the Alliance to Russia's doorstep.

Shortly afterwards, the Revolution of Roses in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought pro-Western governments into power. Russia saw this as direct Western interference, triggering a lasting paranoid angst concerning foreign NGOs, which could one day support regime change in Russia.

At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin gave a pivotal speech laying out his frustrations with Western policy, and in particular NATO enlargement.

At the summit in Bucharest in March 2008, NATO agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the Alliance some time in the future. However, their Membership Action Plans were postponed due to German and French opposition. Meanwhile, American Missile Defence plans in Europe were further souring relations with Russia.

By the end of Putin's second term, Russia had given up all hope of joining the West or even being associated with it as an independent partner. An enlarged NATO, the NATO Partnerships, the EU Eastern Partnership and Russia's near abroad now overlapped considerably. Russia began looking for an alternative project where it could be a regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space.

THE RUSSIAN NARRATIVE

In order to ideologically underpin this shift away from integration with the West, Russia relies on a narrative lamenting Western exploitation of its weakness after the fall of the Soviet Union, and claiming leadership of a Russian cultural and geopolitical entity.

Russia did not lose the Cold War

Even though NATO's armies did not invade and occupy Russia, to all intents and purposes, the Soviet Union did lose the Cold War. Its political and economic system imploded under its own contradictions and through competition with the West.

According to Sergei Karaganov,² Russia underwent a soft version of the Versailles Treaty, pushing it into the periphery of global politics and cutting it out of European decision-making. Russia considers current events in Eastern Europe as an indispensable step in undoing the outcome of the Cold War.

According to the Russian narrative, the world has not treated Russia with the respect due to a great power since the end of the Cold War. For Russia, respect is not admiration for what a country has to offer, but fear of its military might. As Putin put it at his Valdai speech in 2014:³

'Besides, we had such brilliant politicians like Nikita Khrushchev, who hammered the desk with his shoe at the UN. And the whole world, primarily the United States, and NATO thought: this Nikita is best left alone, he might just go and fire a missile, they have lots of them, we should better show some respect.'

No apologies for the Communist past

In contrast with Germany, Russia has never come to grips with the legacy of its past – the forced collectivisation, purges, and deportations of non-Russian minorities in the Soviet Union. Nor has Russia been prepared to accept any responsibility for the Soviet

repression in Central Europe that followed the Second World War. On the contrary, the Kremlin, if not entirely rehabilitating the Soviet regime, is downplaying some of its more unsavoury characteristics. The same goes for Stalin, whose ‘managerial qualities’ are being praised.

The West humiliated Russia

At the 25th anniversary symposium of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev expressed Russia’s frustration as follows:

‘Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world.’

However, much of Russia’s humiliation was of its own making. The West supported Russia’s assumption of the Soviet Union’s seat on the United Nations Security Council. Russia joined the G8 even though it did not qualify as a major economy or democracy. The West helped transfer nuclear weapons from Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan to Russia in exchange for Russia guaranteeing the borders of these countries.

Western interference caused the failure of political and economic reform

The failure of political and economic reforms in Russia in the 1990s cannot be blamed on Western interference. Russia never sought to transform itself into a genuine democracy along the lines of Central European countries. This unwillingness to introduce real democratic reforms and the pillaging of state assets by a select few was in no way encouraged by the West. What is more, corruption has grown since Putin came to power.

Furthermore, the stagnation of Medvedev’s modernisation drive is not the consequence of some Western plot. On the contrary, the West was prepared to assist with modernisation. Its abandonment was instead the result of a deliberate policy to keep the regime in place.

The West never intended to integrate Russia into European structures

After the Cold War, Russia hoped that NATO would be disbanded, and Russia would join Western institutions. These would transform themselves into new pan-European bodies in which Russia would be a leading member.

Russia had hoped in vain to be able to influence NATO decision-making from within the NATO–Russia Council. Therefore, in June 2008, Russia proposed a new European security architecture. In November 2009, Russia presented a draft treaty that the West rejected unanimously, because it would have given Russia a veto over Western decision-making, and constituted a new Yalta.

Furthermore, Russia was not able to exert much influence in other fields, even after joining the Council of Europe and, after a long period of waiting, the WTO.

Therefore Russia believes that the post-Cold War international system only serves Western interests. In Europe, this led to a security system solely based on NATO and the EU.

The West has double standards

Russia accuses the West of employing double standards when it comes to applying international law to the inviolability of national borders. This is remarkable when one considers that it took nine years before the first countries recognised Kosovo. Today it is recognised by 108 states. It took Russia 19 days to annex Crimea and Sevastopol. Only six countries recognise this annexation. Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has kept the frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova alive.

NATO’s ‘broken promise’

One of the major issues that spoiled relations between the West and Russia was whether or not the West had given a commitment not to expand NATO eastwards. Russia considers

that the West formally did so as part of a deal over the reunification of Germany. Using recently declassified documents, Mary Elise Sarotte describes in *Foreign Affairs* how Russia might have been led to believe that such a commitment could have been acceptable to the West. Even though Kohl and Genscher, angling for Russia to green light German reunification, told their Russian counterparts that NATO would not expand to the East, a written promise was never made. More importantly, no other Western leader was prepared to go along with what Germany had put forward unilaterally.

Surprisingly, in an interview on ZDF television on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev unequivocally stated that the issue of NATO enlargement was not discussed prior to the German reunification for the simple reason that the Warsaw Pact still existed.⁴

Moreover, Russia contends that NATO undertook not to station foreign troops in new member states. The NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997 does contain a statement regarding deployment of troops, but it is conditional:

NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries. . . . NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces. . . . In this context, reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defence against a threat of aggression . . . Russia will exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe.'

Until 2014, NATO did not plan to deploy troops on the territory of 'new' members. Even now, none will be based permanently in Poland and the Baltic States, but will instead be continuously rotated.

The decisions taken at the Summit in Wales concerning a Readiness Action Plan and a

Spearhead Force are based on two arguments. Firstly, NATO has concluded that the Ukraine crisis has resulted in an adversarial relationship with Russia. Secondly, the Founding Act allows for reinforcements when necessary.

The West wants to dismantle Russia.

In an interview in *Novaya Gazeta*, Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council and former head of the Russian Federal Security Service or FSB, sheds light on the Russian obsession that the West is systematically attempting to dismantle the Russian Federation.⁵ Patrushev sees the Ukrainian crisis as a continuation of the American containment policy against the Soviet Union.

By the beginning of the 1980s, America had decided to attack the Soviet Union's vulnerabilities to provoke financial and economic bankruptcy. The collapse of the price of oil, coupled with an increase in military expenditure due to the war in Afghanistan, the rising tensions within Warsaw Pact member states and a renewed arms race, provoked a profound economic crisis, which had far-reaching political and ideological repercussions.

Following the Cold War, the West, according to Patrushev, took advantage of Russia's impotence to realise its long-term goal of bringing the Balkans within its orbit by breaking up Yugoslavia.

The West then moved on to dismember the Russian Federation. According to Patrushev, the West actively supported the separatists in Chechnya, 'which declared its independence and was temporarily under effective control of the West.'

According to this logic, the West caused the crisis in Ukraine on purpose. The objective once again is to provoke Russia into stepping up its defence expenditure and undermining its

economy through sanctions.

The West is supporting regime change

From the Russian point of view, the Revolution of the Roses in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 unmistakably point to the West's encouragement of regime change. This backing is not limited to the post-Soviet space, as is demonstrated by the wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria.

What the Kremlin fears most is regime change in Russia, fermented by foreign influence. Its reactions to the protests in 2011 and 2012, the clampdown on the internet, and the measures taken against NGOs labelled as foreign agents, all point to this unease with external influences. Therefore, the Maidan movement is depicted as a fascist junta, ousting a democratically elected head of state.

Ukraine should not be allowed to succeed in any democratic experiment because this would undermine the Kremlin hold on power in Russia. Therein lies the vital contradiction between the goal of trying to integrate Russia into European civilisation, and the survival of the present political system in Moscow.

The West is encroaching on traditional Russian spheres of influence

According to Russia, NATO and the EU are encroaching on the Soviet Union's traditional post-Second World War sphere of influence in Europe. Russia contends that the United States provided direct support for Georgian attacks against Russian citizens and peacekeepers in 2008.

Through the war in Georgia, Russia tried to make it clear that Ukraine joining NATO would be considered a *casus belli*.

In 2013, the West supported what the Kremlin considers a coup d'état in Kyiv, directly threatening Russia.

The right to protect Russians anywhere

The disintegration of the Soviet Union split up its three Slavic components, leaving a third of the Slavic population outside Russia. Without Ukraine and Belarus, Russia does not possess the indispensable demographic base to compete with the United States, the EU, China, or other upcoming powers. Hence the unacceptability for Russia of these countries drifting towards the West, and the urgency of consolidating a union of some sort.

Moreover, 25 million ethnic Russians got stranded in former Soviet states. Even though Russia views these states as part of the *Russian historical space*, it also considers it its duty to protect its ethnic kin.

What is more, Russians interpret this duty very broadly. Already in 1994, Putin declared that "Territories, which are impregnated by Russian or Slavic blood, have a right to remain forever in Slavic possession."⁶ In his speech in the Kremlin on 18 March this year, Putin once again linked territory with the past and with spilt Russian blood.

This view of a broader Russian world is not limited to the Slavic components of the former empire. In July this year, at a meeting with Russian ambassadors in Moscow, Putin extended this duty of protection not only to ethnic Russians, but equally to everyone who feels they belong to the *Great Russian World*:

'When I speak of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community, they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people.'

Seen in the light of the Ukraine crisis, this rhetoric is beginning to worry some of Russia's neighbours, especially Kazakhstan with its large ethnic Russian minority. The fact that Russia, as one of the guarantors of Ukrainian, Belorussian and Kazakh sovereignty and

independence in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, does not feel bound by its obligations towards a new government in Kyiv, is not reassuring for Nazarbayev's or Lukashenko's successors.

Russia as guardian of a Russian–Eurasian civilisation

In the Russian view, civilisations are the foremost entities of geopolitics. Russia, as the leader of the Russian–Eurasian civilisation, has to counteract the onslaught of global colour revolutions incited by the Atlantic civilisation. Russia's holy mission is to preserve the Russian civilisation and to fight Western moral decadence.

Russia's contention that its conservative orthodox values will save European and Christian civilisation contrasts sharply with the lack of values in Russian society. Indeed, Moscow and the other main cities are notable for their decadence, the whole country for its corruption.

A MUTUAL LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

It undoubtedly is true that there is a lack of understanding in the West about Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has focussed on other problems, losing touch with developments in Russia. There is, however, a tendency in some quarters, under the guise of expertise, to accept all that is put forward in Russia's narrative.

However, the opposite also applies. Russians have little insight into how Western democracies work. Autocratic regimes all too quickly focus on slow decision-making at national and multinational levels, as in NATO and the EU. They do not realise that, even if it takes time, once Western democracies do decide to get involved, one should not underestimate their determination.

Neither does Russia understand the resentment in Central Europe against the Soviet occupation,

which resulted in hundreds of thousands being executed and deported, as well as setting back the development of political and economic freedom by 45 years.

CONCLUSIONS

We should not accept the fallacious narrative of victimhood propagated by the Kremlin's Versailles syndrome. Nor should we go along with Russia's superpower hangover, whose only remnants seem to be nuclear weapons.

Russia wants respect. Perhaps the best way to earn this would be by developing its soft power, not through a mixture of Soviet, nationalistic and ethnic nostalgia, but by making the country politically and economically attractive.

Russia's real problem is that it remains steeped in a Cold War attitude, replaying the Brezhnev doctrine, in which smaller countries are not allowed to chart their future.

Russia apologists – some would call them 'useful idiots' – make the leap from understanding Russia's frustrations to taking them at face value. This is not helpful if one is trying to analyse events objectively, but it does lend the Kremlin a helping hand in spreading its message.

RECOMMENDATION: HOLD OUT, HOLD OFF, HOLD IN

The West has to hold out, not only against actions in Ukraine but also against Russia's narrative. This means not accepting the annexation of Crimea or the invasion of Eastern Ukraine as a *fait accompli*, but instead actively countering the Kremlin's information war.

Fending off Russian adventurism means first of all recognising that Russia poses a real threat to peace in Europe, and not only Ukraine. Russia will continue to attempt to undo the setbacks it suffered in Ukraine. First

and foremost it cannot accept the success of a pro-Western government. Secondly, if Russia cannot annex the Ukrainian Donbas and a land corridor to Crimea, it will support autonomy, which is a euphemism for a frozen conflict. Thirdly, success in Ukraine risks emboldening Russia. Peace in Europe depends, therefore, on showing resolve and striking a fine balance between deterrence and diplomacy.

Finally, in order to either contain Russia or bring it back into a European security system, the West and Russia have to find ways of defusing the crisis and rebuilding a partnership based on mutually accepted rules. Toning down the oratory and turning up diplomacy should be a first step. Revamping the Helsinki Process and the disarmament and arms control agreements of the Cold War would also make a good starting point for channelling geopolitical competition. However, a broader agreement is

necessary. Even Medvedev's proposal for a New Security Architecture in Europe could provide some ideas, as long as it does not lead to a new Yalta and does not give Russia a veto over NATO or EU decisions. This is not the equivalent of trying once again to integrate Russia into the West. It is about coexisting with Russia, taking account of Russia's real geopolitical and geoeconomic weight, and not Russia's delusions about a 'Russian world'.

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ENDNOTES

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