

Russian Foreign Policy: What is not seen from the Kremlin

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Abstract

The rising generation of Russian foreign policy experts and commentators, especially outside Moscow, is increasingly sceptical about the key premises of Russian diplomacy and see more failures than achievements in Russia's relations with its closest partners, including the EU and neighbouring states. This is the conclusion that stems from a series of interviews and focus groups carried out with young Russian professionals about Russia's current foreign policies. The study reveals a strong cognitive dissonance between the official diplomatic discourse of the Kremlin and the perceptions of young experts who work in a variety of fields dealing with international cooperation either at a lower level of the state hierarchy or in different professional domains. This paper summarises the key findings of this project and discusses their practical implications.

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Introduction

The rising generation of Russian foreign policy experts and commentators, especially outside Moscow, is increasingly sceptical about the key premises of Russian diplomacy and see more failures than achievements in Russia's relations with its closest partners, including the EU and neighbouring states. This is the conclusion that stems from a series of about 90 interviews and focus groups with young Russian professionals about Russia's current foreign policies, which were conducted by the authors in March-April 2012, for the Gorchakov and the Nasledie Evrazii Foundations in three cities – Nizhny Novgorod, Tomsk and Petrozavodsk. The respondents were mostly graduates of international relations programmes with professional international experience in business, non-commercial sectors, education, journalism, public service and academia. This paper summarises the key findings of this project and discusses their practical implications.

The field of International Relations (IR) studies has gone through substantial transformation in Russia during the last two decades. In the USSR the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) held the monopoly on training IR specialists and diplomats. Yet since the mid-1990s, this monopoly has eroded, and major regional universities (Saint Petersburg, Nizhniy Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Tomsk, Voronezh, Ivanovo, Volgograd, Tyumen, Irkutsk, Vladivostok, Petrozavodsk, Syktyvkar, etc.) started establishing their own IR departments and developing IR programmes. This opening of a prestigious yet previously Moscow-dominated profession reflected the growing activity of regions in international domain, and also signalled a decentralisation of governance in Russia.

The study showed that during two decades of de-monopolisation of IR in Russia a new generation of specialists emerged and matured. The IR graduates from regional universities have both knowledge and their own opinions about achievements and failures of Russian foreign policy. Although the two foundations that commissioned the research were eager to receive suggestions on how to improve current foreign policy, the study uncovered the existence of strong cognitive dissonance between the official diplomatic discourse of the Kremlin and the perceptions of young experts who work in a variety of fields dealing with international cooperation either at a lower level of the state hierarchy or in different professional domains. This paper presents some findings on how young non-Moscow-based IR professionals assess and evaluate the current foreign policy of Russia.

Methodologically, we used a questionnaire, which contained five blocks (respondents' personal profile, Russia's foreign policy priorities, public diplomacy, information policy and human resources in the Russian diplomatic service and information about the region's resources of internationalisation), and contained more than 20 specific questions. Interviewees were university graduates, post-graduate students, journalists, businessmen

and public officials, all under the age of 30. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. In each of the regions we conducted four in-depth interviews (from 1 to 1.5 hours long), 16 half-structured interviews (from 0.5 to 1 hour) and one focus group (about 2 hours long) with about 10 participants representing different spheres (higher education, state service, journalism, non-governmental organisations and entrepreneurship).

Main Findings: No Good News for the Kremlin

Firstly, young Russian professionals are markedly doubtful that the post-Soviet region is indeed the key priority for Russian diplomacy. Moscow's policies in the CIS were characterised as "neo-imperialist", "irresponsible", or "bringing no practical dividends for the population" (the latter statement was related to Russia's "de-facto occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia"), but definitely not as "cooperative". Many respondents deem that the August 2008 war with Georgia was one of the major diplomatic failures of Russia, and expect the restoration of bilateral relations after the Saakashvili tenure. At the same time some respondents assumed that one of the effects of the military campaign was a growing respect towards Russia.

In the meantime, for many interviewees, the countries seen as genuinely important for Russia are in the West, above all the EU and United States. Most of them portrayed Russia as a de-ideologised 'corporate state', which comprehends the benefits it derives from cooperation with the West, yet this pragmatism is too often undermined by nationalistic rhetoric and (mostly symbolic) attempts to challenge Europe and/or America. Sometimes, as a couple of experts presumed, the perceived disconnections with the West are unintended effects of Russia's adherence to obsolete communications instruments and a foreign policy vocabulary that is hardly compatible with those practiced by its Western interlocutors.

Respondents referred to widespread anti-American, anti-Western and anti-NATO stereotypes among many Russians, especially among the older generation. One respondent said: "Many people think that the main enemy of Russia is America, and that we should be ready for a fight and have to contain it by all possible means." Some deplored that Russia often looks for friends among those countries that challenge the US. It was noted that Russian mainstream media often create and support narratives of Russia as a country allegedly surrounded by adversaries who wish to weaken Russia. Some recalled widespread spy mania and conspiracy theories deeply rooted among older generations. Talking about Russia's self-perception, respondents ironically referred to "remnants of the imperial syndrome" and a "great nuclear power complex" that wishes to be involved everywhere, and is reluctant to compromise as a result of this misplaced sense of grandeur.

Secondly, none of the respondents believed in Russia's "civilisational" mission, while some even identified certain dangers in messianic rhetoric. This scepticism can be explained by the growing mistrust toward the state and the Russian Orthodox Church as the two sources of civilisational discourse in Russia. Some of the young experts acknowledged that the self-ascribed role of a "bridge between West and East" is neither recognised nor accepted by other nations. Ironically, the focus group participants assumed that perhaps Russia's "mission" in the world is to expel the best minds out of the country and thus contribute to the cultural and technological development of the West.

Even those who still think that Russia has a mission interpret it quite differently. They tend to believe that Russia is a part of European civilization, mostly referring to its literature, language, history, music and cultural heritage. Another interpretation puts Russia's mission in a regional rather than a global context, which can make some sense only for those countries that are located at the cultural intersection of Asia and Europe, such as, for instance, Central Asia which can appreciate Russia's help to move them closer to European

civilisation. Thus Russia could provide “regionally adapted versions of European cultural patterns to peoples of the post-Soviet region that differ tremendously from Europeans”. In other words, Russia is viewed as a country that ‘is deeply entrenched in Asia’ but still remains a part of Europe.

However, instead of futile talks about a “civilisational mission”, most of the interviewees were open to a different concept – that of “soft power” which Russia potentially possesses due to its rich historical heritage and dynamic cultural life (music, cinema, arts, literature, etc.). Yet, unfortunately, neither the state nor the Russian corporate world is interested in promoting these “immaterial attractors” to Western audiences. The Russkii Mir Foundation’s exclusive focus on Russian-speaking communities abroad is obviously insufficient.

Those respondents who opined that the countries of the ‘near aboard’ are natural allies of Russia, assumed that they should be given more attention and respectfully treated as equals. Many experts noted that still there is more rhetoric than real substance in Russia’s relationship within CIS countries, and it is exactly this short-sighted approach that pushed some of them towards the West. Against this backdrop, Russia is steadily losing its influence in former Soviet republics, because it often treats them as “not fully independent”. Respondents reasonably claimed that the Kremlin expects special loyalty from Russia’s neighbours and neglects the simple fact that all post-Soviet political leaders are motivated by their own countries’ national agendas. The well-known problems with the Russian language in former Soviet countries are the results of such a policy, which enlarges the gaps in mutual understanding and creates obstacles for full-fledged cooperation. The problem is the hard, heavy-handed politicisation of the language question by the Kremlin. This is in strong contrast to what young IR professionals advocate, namely a soft-power promotion of the Russian language and culture, which has huge potential if done in a manner that makes no association with semi-coercive diplomacy.

Thirdly, the young Russian international relations specialists do not seem to believe that their country is rising from its knees. As many respondents assumed, Russia initially thought that it was capable of maintaining its role in the international system as a great power roughly equal in status to the US and the EU. Russia’s leaders continue to believe that its place at the table of the leading powers is assured, that it could and should be a rule-maker and not a rule-taker in the international system. Yet at the same time, Russia’s foreign policy is typically characterised as lacking in priorities, erratic, circumstantial, mostly reactive and short of constructive ideas – as illustrated, for instance, by its position in the UN debate on Syria, which was widely perceived by the Western public as Russia being in solidarity with a tyrant. Consequently, the Kremlin’s resistance to the West is mostly symbolic and rhetorical, and lacks a considered strategy.

Russia’s foreign policy was often described by interviewees as “one-sided”, which broadens a gap between “officially declared priorities and de-facto interests that are implemented in real life”. Official slogans on “modernisation” were not taken seriously. The discussants explained the existing gap between what is proclaimed and what is practiced by the undue influence wielded by interest groups that control foreign policy-making in Russia, including raw-materials and export-oriented lobby which appears to be much stronger than promoters of high technology development and modernisation.

Of course, in the 2000s, Russia’s gross domestic product has doubled, and Russia’s political system was stabilised under the semi-autocratic leadership of Putin-Medvedev. But these positive domestic developments did not translate into a breakthrough on the international front. On the contrary, Russia’s resurgence seemed, paradoxically, to be accompanied by a deterioration of relations between Moscow and its Western partners.

The Russian Foreign Ministry is largely described as an institution that is clan-like, stiff, inert, highly conservative, insensitive to new ideas, and reproducing the Soviet-style communicative practices that only alienate Russia from the West. It is revealing that none of the IR graduates interviewed is considering the pursuit of a diplomatic career due to insufficient professional and financial incentives, as well as the discouraging bureaucratic environment.

Some respondents referred to their own experience with a discriminatory recruitment policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which disadvantages regional graduates and female applicants and also affects the quality of policy-making. One respondent from Tomsk emotionally said: “Who makes foreign policy in Russia? Are they Muscovites with their narrow vision of how everything should be run?” Another respondent having extensive work experience in regional administration mentioned that Russian officials from the Foreign Ministry are often inaccessible, arrogant and unwilling to improve their professional knowledge after having attained a certain position as if they already have learned everything.

Correspondingly, most of the respondents claimed that the widespread negative perceptions of Russia in the West are largely substantiated. Russia essentially has no new message to deliver to the West and therefore is very weak in a global information milieu. The research showed that the image of Russia in the world has not changed much since the time of the fall of the USSR. Russia is often portrayed as a country that is difficult to understand, insufficiently transparent and appears uncivilised. It is worth noting that the issue of stereotypes was emotionally discussed as a failure of communication between Russia and the West. The negative roles of mass media and immigrants from Russia who support and reproduce such stereotypes were also mentioned.

Fourthly, young Russian experts are far from adapting the rhetoric of sovereignty. In its stead, they prefer enjoying the benefits of globalisation and taking advantage – both personally and professionally – of plugging into transnational exchanges and communication flows. Yet they deplore en masse that almost all cross-border projects are financed by their Western partners and colleagues, while their own state – obviously not short of money! – stays completely aloof and even hinders the development of grassroots public or cultural diplomacy by pressuring foreign non-governmental institutions and artificially creating negative images of the West.

The research made clear that a major obstacle to effective foreign policy is the limited political and economic capacities of Russian regions. For example, from the early post-Soviet years, the Republic of Karelia was an active participant in sub-regional projects promoting ‘soft’ security cooperation across the Russian-Finnish border. Uniquely among Russian regions, it acquired its own representative in the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Council of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, although its involvement in these institutions was sporadic and guided by the federal centre. The cross-border cooperation programmes have undoubtedly generated a sense of inclusion in the wider sub-region among Karelian policy analysts and provided learning models for regional administration, local self-government and civil society. The Petrozavodsk-based interviews have clearly shown that Russia’s involvement in the EU’s regional initiatives facilitated joint responses with neighbouring countries to a range of common ‘soft’ security challenges. Cross-border cooperation arrangements have promoted mutual understanding between Russia’s frontier regions and their neighbours, and provided an important alternative channel to state-level contacts.

Fifthly, almost all of the young people participating in the interviews were certain that Russia desperately needs to find new forms of influence in the world, different from military might and energy supplies. One respondent from Tomsk made the following comment

regarding Russia's role in the world market of oil and gas: "I am not sure that the energy policy should be treated as a success, even if it is often portrayed this way by Russian officials. I don't want to live in a country that is widely perceived as a raw-materials appendage to the rest of the world." Others indicated that military issues are gradually decreasing in importance, while the role of soft power and economic innovation, on the contrary, is on the rise. Most of the young people participating in the interviews mentioned that the use of coercive diplomacy to settle conflicts over resources or political influence is becoming virtually inconceivable; some envisage a kind of nascent security community developing across Russia's borders based on shared norms and values, reciprocity and common interests. Yet both Russia's ideational and normative appeals and its technological modernisation prospects are seriously under question.

Against this backdrop, it is indicative that most of the respondents saw the major threats to Russian security as originating inside the country itself. They mentioned poor environmental protection, matters of information security, ineffectiveness of police in combating crime, terrorism and narcotics, degrading technological infrastructure (from housing to atomic stations) and so forth. Many respondents assumed that splits within the society (between the rich and the poor, between the public and the powerful institutions) represent a real danger for the country's well being and stability. Some of the interviewees admitted that the external environment is "mild" for Russia in the sense that none of the major powers is eager to take advantage of Russia's obvious internal weaknesses. By the same token, references to "NATO tanks allegedly ready to invade Russia" were put in a clearly ironic context.

Perhaps, the only noteworthy external threat that was touched upon by the respondents from Nizhny Novgorod was China as a source of mass-scale – and mostly informal – migration and possible creeping expansion into the Russian Far East and Siberia. For most speakers, China is associated with either threats or indifference to Russia, which – again – contradicts the official policy discourse of Moscow. Interestingly, most of the respondents in Tomsk (located in Western Siberia) with their own extensive experiences in working with the Chinese and in China were reluctant to portray China as a source of migration or economic challenges. Moreover, they believed that China's economic activity helps to develop Russia's more remote regions that are otherwise abandoned by the central government. In evaluating Russia's official rhetoric of partnership with China, many said that it reflects a lack of understanding of China in Moscow. Respondents noted that China – in comparison to European countries – is not interested in contributing to Russia's growth and developing its infrastructure, science and technology.

Analysis and Implications

As we can see, there is a huge semantic gap between the Kremlin's triumphalist narrative of Russia in the world, and the opinions of young urban (regional) professionals who are deeply critical of their country's international profile. The bad news is that most of them do not expect any meaningful improvement in Russia's behaviour in the near future. But the good news is that at least some of them still believe that the society itself – without the state's guidance or supervision – is capable of bridging cultural and communication gaps with neighbouring countries and, by so doing, of reinvigorating Russia's European identity.

One young specialist described the perception of Russia in the outer world as a "state bear", which has rather negative connotations, sustained by the emblem of the ruling United Russia party. Many respondents believed that the main challenge facing the country is the need to diversify its economy, to improve relations with other countries and to find its own niche in the world, based on pragmatic and realistic calculations of its national needs. The good news

is that most of the respondents indicated willingness to contribute to confronting this challenge.

The perceptual gap, by and large, stems from the Kremlin's inertia and poor adaptation to a fast-changing world in which the states have no other option but to change – for the sake of their survival. Official Moscow sticks to a set of obsolete Westphalian and sovereignty-based approaches which become less and less relevant in the 21st century. This is largely due to the Kremlin's obstinacy with the sovereignty-based political discourse and attempts to manipulate domestic public opinion by artificially creating hostile and threatening images of the West. All this only invigorates a value gap between Europe and Russia, which boils down to stark differences between a political community that inhabits a post-national and, to some extent, post-modern world, and one that is still stuck in reproducing old patterns of modernity with its hierarchical and state-centric thinking.

On the official level, the EU and Russia very differently interpret the ideas of freedom, civil society and human rights. They certainly disagree on the meaning of sovereignty in a world of trans- and supra-national patterns of integration. Yet on the societal level, this value gap is much less noticeable, which was convincingly demonstrated by the interviews, as well as by mass-scale protests in Moscow and other large cities of Russia. The young generation of Russian students and educators, NGO activists and urban professionals, who could be identified as the first post-9/11 generation, has absolutely no problem in either understanding or communicating with their Western counterparts. They are interested in learning to live in a post-Soviet, post-modern, post-industrial and post-sovereign world. Social networks hopefully will decrease the importance of value distance as well. From a practical viewpoint, this means that the more the societies directly interact (i.e. without government supervision) with each other, the greater are the chances for leaving the value gap behind. Yet this gap can be bridged only with the advent of a new generation of Russian politicians, with a different mentality and much wider worldviews. This can happen only in the case of a radical modernisation of Russian political institutions, since it is unlikely that the EU will take further political steps towards the Kremlin, which has a steady reputation of being a manipulative, repressive and corrupt regime, drastically different in its normative foundations from most of the European states. Ideally, the current Russian regime could have fostered Russia's openness to the world, mostly in non-political domains (cultural exchanges, educational and academic projects, supporting civil society initiatives, etc.), but this prospect seems to be too optimistic due to the Kremlin's prevailing attitudes towards Russian NGOs working with foreign funds.

The most the EU can do in this situation is to maintain the issues of democracy and human rights in its political agenda with Russia. The EU has to insist that Russia observes the normative obligations it has undertaken – a legal argument can be more persuasive for the Kremlin than purely humanitarian talks. The EU has to insist on expanding the agenda of bilateral relations by including NGOs with their concerns and interests, thus contributing to the practical implementation of the idea of public diplomacy.



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