

# Russia as an international actor

*The view from Europe and the US*

Sean P. Roberts





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## Preface: a converging view?

Perceptions of Russia have changed. The hard-line approach taken by the Russian authorities following the December 2011 parliamentary election has led to growing consternation within the international community, while the return of Vladimir Putin to the post of President of the Russian Federation in May 2012 has generated largely negative evaluations of Russia's political trajectory. But, irrespective of these developments occurring in Russian domestic politics, how is the Russian Federation viewed in a broader context as an actor within the international system? Does Russia play a positive or negative role on the international stage and is Russia viewed as a strategic partner or a strategic competitor by other actors, including the European Union and the United States?

The material presented in this report is a symbiosis of opinions and analysis from European and US researchers and practitioners dealing with these questions, following roundtable discussions held in Finland in January 2013 and in the US in April 2013.\* The first roundtable was held in Mustio and was organised by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in collaboration with the Finnish Foreign Ministry. It included experts from Poland, Germany, France and Finland – four states considered to be the main drivers of the EU's Russia policy due to their unique historical, political, cultural and economic ties with the Russian Federation. The second roundtable was held in Washington D.C and was

\* The material presented in this report does not reflect the views of every participant, but instead presents the overall balance of opinion on all the issues discussed.

organised by the Brookings Institution in collaboration with the Finnish Foreign Ministry and FIIA, and included experts from the US as well as representatives from the four EU member states already mentioned.

This report highlights the main issues raised during the course of these discussions. Part one focuses on Russia as a global actor, including issues of global governance and Russia's positioning in the international system. Part two considers Russia as a regional actor, including Russia's efforts to (re)integrate the post-Soviet space. Part three discusses Russia's capacity in the international system, focusing on recent increases in defence spending, but also the development of Russian 'soft power'. Part four assesses Russia's relations with the EU and the US. A concluding section summarises the main points raised in this report and provides an overall assessment of Russia as a state actor in the international system.

Although Russia's domestic political and economic development figured prominently during the roundtable discussions neither is given individual analysis in a stand-alone section in this report. Unlike Russia's role in the international system, there is less contention surrounding the negative effects of corruption and the persistent weakness of the rule of law which continue to hinder domestic political and economic development in the country.

#### CONTEXT: EUROPEAN AND US APPROACHES TO RUSSIA

The broader context of this report is the perception that we are currently witnessing a narrowing of opinion within the EU and between the EU and the US on issues relating to Russia, since the return of Vladimir Putin to the post of President of the Russian Federation in May 2012. This narrowing of opinion is related first and foremost to the realisation that irrespective of the approach taken, a genuine, strategic partnership with Russia seems no closer.

Within the EU, supporters of the two broad approaches that have dominated thinking on Russia in the post-Soviet period, termed here the 'value-based' and the 'pragmatic' approaches have, to a certain extent, re-evaluated their position in recent years, as the EU-Russia partnership continues to fall short of expectations. At the same time, a third approach to Russia; that of 'bridge building' or selective cooperation on certain issues is, at best, seen as a default option. Selective cooperation with Russia is a necessity as it is with

every state in the international system, but it is in no way the broad ‘partnership’ envisaged earlier by many within the EU.

There is a growing realisation that the pragmatic approach, which became particularly prominent following Dmitri Medvedev’s presidential election victory in 2008, has yet to see a real improvement in EU–Russia relations. The creation of the EU–Russia ‘partnership for modernisation’ in 2010 emphasised trade relations and practical-technical issues surrounding the development of the rule of law in Russia. But, even with a more patient historical perspective of Russia’s transition to democracy, issues relating to poor democratic development have been difficult to ignore. In November 2012, the German Bundestag passed a resolution critical of Russia, in what appears to be an acknowledgement of the limits of the pragmatic approach, despite support from the EU, influential member states and vested interests in Russia.

The value-based approach, suffice to say, has even less evidence of progress in EU–Russia relations. As an approach that advocates significant conditionality as a requisite for a genuine or strategic partnership—namely Russia’s convergence on Western-style liberal democracy—there is little evidence that Russia is fulfilling its side of the bargain. Moreover, the return of Vladimir Putin as President of the Russian Federation appears to signal Russia’s move away from Europe and European values, if not the end of a strategic partnership premised on anything more than trade.

As for the US, there have been persistent attempts by the Obama administration to use ‘interest-based pragmatism’ in an effort to improve relations with Russia, following their deterioration in the aftermath of Russia’s war with Georgia in 2008. From March 2009, the well-documented ‘reset’ between the US and Russia initiated a modest agenda of cooperation which none the less achieved notable successes, such as the signing of the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) on reducing strategic nuclear weapons in April 2010 and securing Russia’s participation in NATO’s Northern Distribution Network to Afghanistan from March 2012.

The premise behind interest-based pragmatism is that, by promoting cooperation on international issues that are a shared concern for both the US and Russia, and by making little, if any linkage to developments occurring in Russian domestic politics, US–Russia relations will be strengthened, perhaps creating a cascade effect for cooperation in other areas. As mentioned in this report, there are a number of international issues on which the US and Russia share the

same broad goals, providing at least the potential for interest-based pragmatism to succeed.

However, tensions over US and EU involvement in Libya in 2011, together with domestic political instability within Russia following the 2011/12 federal election cycle adversely affected US–Russia relations, as well as Russia’s relations with the West more generally. The change in leadership in Russia also played an important role. As mentioned in this report, from the outset the US–Russia ‘reset’ was very much framed in personal terms as an initiative between President Obama and President Medvedev, but the decision of the latter not to run for a second term of office in 2012 hindered bi-lateral relations.

More importantly, the Russian authorities’ efforts to reign in opposition figures during the second part of 2012 resulted in an increase in anti-American rhetoric, as the Putin administration attempted to frame domestic political dissent as a US-backed plot to destabilise the country. The Russian response to the US Magnitsky Act at the end of 2012, which saw a ban on US citizens adopting Russian orphans, marked a new low in US–Russia relations. Despite indications that Moscow is now ready to resolve key differences affecting bi-lateral relations, including the proposed missile defence shield, on-going human rights violations and restrictions on civil society within Russia remain sources of friction with the US.

In sum, there is a feeling that the US ‘reset’, like the EU’s ‘partnership for modernisation’, has so far failed to meet expectations. But, this is not to say that the EU and the US share an identical position on all issues relating to Russia. Although there is a surprising amount of convergence between European and US views, the nature of their geographical, political, economic, military and historical realities condition a different set of priorities when it comes to Russia. For the EU, trade, energy security and developments within the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy are particularly important issues. Conversely, the US tends to place Russia in a wider geopolitical context, with harder security issues taking precedence. There is also a temporal aspect to the way the EU and the US view Russia, seen in the way the EU arrived at a similar conclusion to the US, albeit at a later point in time – that taking a pragmatic approach toward Russia is also problematic and in no way guarantees better relations.

In terms of the roundtable discussions, the main differences of opinion tended to relate to Russia’s intentions, in particular the degree of strategic thinking (or not) behind Russia’s actions on the

international stage and the absence or presence of a positive agenda. At the same time, the broad EU–US consensus on Russia as an international actor should not detract from the on-going debate between, but also among European and US analysts on the best strategy for improving relations with Russia. Ultimately, the pragmatic and the value-based approaches are still there, and neither has lost their sharp distinction on issues pertaining to Russia.

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The material presented in this report reflects the main themes and lines of analysis raised during the roundtable discussions. These discussions followed the Chatham House rule, with the following material presenting a balance of the exchanges and analysis from all the participants involved. This analysis is not an exhaustive treatment of Russia as an international actor, nor is it meant to be. The aim is to highlight the main issues surrounding Russia's international role and to provide a stylised account from the perspective of European and US experts. This report makes the following conclusions:

- Russia has become more integrated in the international system and continues to play a prominent role in global governance, through institutions such as the G20, G8 and recently, the WTO. But, Russia often finds itself opposing the position taken by the West on high-profile issues, such as conflict in Syria, sanctions on Iran, Internet governance and climate change;
- Russia wants to reorient its foreign policy to prioritise its eastern vector, and if successful, this may place Russia further out of step with any EU/US consensus. However, a combination of factors, including caution toward China and a fast changing energy market, make the success of Russia's 'pivot to Asia' doubtful;
- Russia's efforts to (re)integrate the post-Soviet space are seen as a major development with implications for other actors in the region, including the EU and US, with the Customs Union and Eurasian Union projects gaining momentum. Russia appears willing to invest

resources to this end, and its position as a regional power provides a range of pull factors to attract other states to participate;

- Nonetheless, there are significant barriers toward creating a viable, successful regional union, not least Russian domestic public opinion. In addition, Russian foreign policy is not always conducive to integration and may actually exacerbate pre-existing divisions and rivalries;
- Recent increases in Russia's defence spending, accompanied by an intensification of military exercises, have raised concerns that Russia is militarising at a time when other actors, notably EU member states, are reducing defence spending. Russia's deployment of offensive weaponry near EU borders contributes to a lack of confidence and transparency on security issues;
- At the same time, the modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces is seen as essential and may actually increase the potential for cooperation on regional security issues between Russia and the West, although there are a number of concerns, not least Russia's poor communication on security issues and anti-Western rhetoric;
- 'Soft power' or the ability of actors to achieve their goals through attraction rather than coercion has received impetus from the Russian state in recent years. In sum, the development of language and cultural institutions, appeals to the large Russian-speaking diaspora and the use of Soviet-style 'conservative' messages may be influencing attitudes in the post-Soviet space. But, there are contradictions that limit its effectiveness, including the absence of an attractive, basic idea as a foundation;
- In terms of EU-Russia and US-Russia relations, there is an acknowledgement that institutional and decision-making problems within the EU, together with the contours of previous US foreign policy initiatives, have

hindered relations. But, there are notable successes, including improving trade relations, arms reduction agreements and cooperation in the Arctic;

- However, there are negative aspects that are impossible to ignore. A problem for both EU-Russia and US-Russia relations is the perception that Russia does not want to cooperate on a broad range of issues, including conflict resolution in the Middle East and ‘frozen’ or ‘unresolved’ conflicts in the post-Soviet space, despite a perceived, common interest;
- Overall, Russia is not viewed as a strategic partner for either the EU or the US, but as an ‘ad hoc’ partner, willing to cooperate on a narrow range of issues that fall well within its own interests. However, Russia’s weakness on the international stage often limits its ability to be a strategic competitor. Instead, on some, but not all issues, Russia is seen to play the role of ‘spoiler’ – an actor unable to push its own self-interest to conclusion, but ready to hinder other actors from achieving their goals.





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# 1. Russia as a global actor

Russia is considered an important actor on the global stage, conditioned in no small part by its seat on the United Nations Security Council, which often provides a decisive voice in some of the most pressing issues facing the international community. At the same time, Russia is becoming more integrated in intergovernmental organisations, evident by Russia's ascendancy to the WTO in 2012 and its current efforts to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Russia, it should be noted, will hold the presidency of both the G20 and G8 in 2013 and 2014 respectively, serving to enhance Russia's global visibility. However, there is no indication or anticipation of any real innovation through these forums, despite a busy start to the G20 presidency. Instead, Russia will likely remain conservative and consensual in its approach, pushing for economic growth as the global economy continues its recovery, although there are signs that Russia is ready to play a greater role in the global financial system. Russia made an important financial intervention in restructuring Cypriot loans in April 2013, in what was a difficult period for EU-Russia relations. But despite this issue, Russia is expected to continue supporting the EU's post-crisis efforts as the Eurozone remains crucial for Russia, both in terms of trade and the significant Euro reserves held by the Russian state. Russia is also supporting efforts to create a multilateral banking system along with Brazil, India, China and South Africa, to provide an alternative source of investment to pre-existing development banks, with the idea of a BRICS bank agreed in principle at the 2013 BRICS summit held in Durban, South Africa, in March 2013.

As for WTO accession, it is still premature to draw conclusions regarding its effect on Russia's integration in the international system or its influence on domestic political and economic development. However, any potential it may have to generate positive outcomes is tempered by early signs that Russia may selectively use the WTO to further its own narrow interests. Rather than generate greater transparency and cooperation, there is a possibility that Russia will follow the Chinese model and use the WTO to push economic conflicts with certain states, including EU member states and the US.

Indeed, there appears to be some ambiguity concerning Russia's growing integration in the international system and what this means for its position on important issues relating to global governance. At the same time, Russia's stated intention of repositioning away from the West toward Asia may have serious implications for the kind of role it plays on the international stage in the future. *Thus, the important questions concerning Russia as a global actor include Russia's role in resolving global governance issues considered crucial for the international community, as well as the implications of Russia's so-called 'pivot to Asia' for relations with the EU and the US.*

#### RUSSIA AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Despite the positive development of continuing integration in the international system, there is a clear parallel trend that sees Russia challenging the international consensus on a range of important issues. These issues have ramifications for global governance as their resolution is increasingly demanding a concerted, international effort and agreement among states.

Overall, Russia's challenge to the international consensus can be seen in a number of areas. First, there is the issue of Internet governance. Managing the World Wide Web is emerging as a leading issue of twenty-first century global governance. However, Russia has taken a contrary stance to the EU and US, and along the United Arab Emirates, China, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Sudan (the so-called RUCASS states) is pushing for tighter controls. The December 2012 International Union of Telecommunications conference saw Russia promote the adoption of restrictive Internet regulation, and as the Russian state continues to invest resources to control the Internet, both at home and abroad, there is a high likelihood that these efforts will continue.

A second area where Russia appears to be challenging the international consensus can be seen in efforts to combat climate change. The Doha climate conference held in December 2012 also showed Russia ready to side with a minority of states intent on resisting international efforts to renew the Kyoto protocol. The suggestion on greenhouse gas emission quotas made by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus was seen as largely unacceptable by the wider international community in the context of continuing efforts to tackle climate change.

Elsewhere, Russia's efforts to redevelop its strategic and non-strategic nuclear potential as part of a significant increase in defence spending also places Russia out of step with the EU, US and the larger international community. While the proposed US missile shield serves the Russian party as a pretext, there is none the less a perception that strategic nuclear weapons have decreasing value and that their reduction is desirable. At the same time, there is a belief that non-strategic nuclear weapons should be covered by an arms control regime.

A more high-profile set of issues relating to global governance, notably in the Middle East and Iran, also shows Russia increasingly out of step with world opinion. The most obvious issue concerns Russia's position on the civil war in Syria, although this is a much more complex issue for Russia than Western media typically acknowledges.

Aside from vested interests in the naval facility in Tartus, Russia has consistently stressed the primacy of sovereignty over the responsibility to protect approach (R2P), dating back to the first post-Yeltsin foreign policy concept approved by Vladimir Putin in 2000. There are also genuine concerns in Moscow over the potential and actual spread of radical Islam in Syria, as the Assad regime weakens and a political vacuum opens. However, despite Russia's consistency on this issue, at least when viewed from the larger perspective of post-Yeltsin foreign policy, Russia's use of its Security Council veto, along with China, to repeatedly prevent a UN resolution pressuring Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down is viewed as a major factor in the conflict's continuation. In December 2012, the Russian state publicly accepted the possibility of regime change in Syria and disclosed attempts to contact the Syrian National Coalition opposition, but as of June 2013, Russia continues to support the Assad regime.

In other areas, Russia's approach to important global governance issues reveals a growing difference of opinion with the EU and US, and perhaps the wider international community as a whole. While it is unlikely that a nuclear-armed Tehran would be in Russia's interests, Moscow considers existing sanctions excessive, criticising the EU in

October 2012 for imposing fresh sanctions and indicating its own unwillingness to follow suit. Russia remains a key player in efforts to resolve issues surrounding Iran's nuclear programme, but the possibility of a common front with the EU and US now appears unlikely.

In many ways, Russia's specific position on issues such as Iran's nuclear programme and conflict in Syria is reflected in Moscow's overall, negative evaluation of the Arab Spring, perhaps influenced by Russia's internal problems with political opposition and radical Islam. Despite the fact that Moscow supports France in its efforts to combat the insurgency in Mali, there is a degree of scepticism toward the wave of democratic change occurring in parts of North Africa and the Middle East. This is in contrast to the majority of the international community, which has largely welcomed the Arab Spring as a positive development.

This last point on the Arab Spring, as in the case in Syria, is inevitably more complex than it first appears, as too the nature of Russia's involvement in the region more generally. More research is needed in this area, in particular on Russia-Algeria and Russia-Qatar relations—two pivotal states for Russia in the Middle East/North Africa. Excluding Syria, Algeria is one of the few Russian allies in the region, not least because of their similar reading of the Arab Spring, although the relationship is a little more ambiguous in the context of their rivalry as gas exporters. Russia's relationship with Qatar is equally important, but this time in terms of its problematic nature. Moscow views this resource-rich Persian Gulf state as a source of funding for Islamic extremists and as a security threat to Russia. This ties in to Moscow's attempt to highlight the potential of a domino effect of Islamic extremism that links conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa to domestic concerns with militant Islam in Russia's southern regions. However, this domino effect is by no means clear, as Russia's own policies in the Caucasus are a major part of the problem, although there is little doubt that conflict in the Islamic world, including tensions between the West and Iran, may affect the Islamic community in Russia.

#### RUSSIA'S POSITIONING IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In terms of Russia's positioning in the international system, the post financial crisis period has witnessed Russia's gradual reorientation toward Asia, accelerated by the return of Vladimir Putin to

presidential office in May 2012. The well-documented problems in the Eurozone have served to dampen Russia's enthusiasm for closer relations with the EU, as too Western criticism of the Putin administration's hard-line approach in dealing with domestic political opposition. Russia's so-called pivot to Asia is therefore viewed as a significant development with the potential to further exacerbate problems between Russia and the EU/US, as well as increase Russia's opposition to the West on those issues of global governance already mentioned.

However, the willingness of the Russian authorities to prioritise the East as a major foreign policy vector is no guarantee of closer relations with Asia. Although the high-profile APEC summit held in Vladivostok in September 2012 saw Russia invest considerable resources to promote its 'Asian focus', there are doubts surrounding Russia's ability to reposition eastwards.

There is the factor of a changing energy market to take into account, as the expected development of shale gas means that Russia may lose any future market share in Asia in what remains Russia's only real leverage in the region. Emerging gas-exporting competitors, such as the United States and Australia, make the potential of Russian exports questionable, irrespective of the expected domestic exploitation of shale gas in South-East Asia. For the time being, there appear to be opportunities for Russia to meet the growing energy needs of China, Japan and South Korea, among others, but Russia does not possess the economic dynamism, political weight or military capabilities to present itself as a power in the region.

There are also a number of unresolved or residual problems that are preventing Russia from improving relations with Asian partners, but it is unclear if there is either the political will or the leadership resources required to overcome them. Russia continues to reiterate the need to normalise relations with Japan, but two official visits made to the Kuril Islands by Dmitri Medvedev (the first as President of the RF in 2010, the second as prime minister in July 2012) damaged Russia-Japan relations. Overall, Russia's international priorities are increasingly subordinated to the short-term expediencies of domestic politics and leader approval ratings, rather than long-term foreign policy objectives. In addition, and despite the fact that Russia has made positive strides to develop Sakhalin and the Russian Far East, the conservative approach taken by the Russian political establishment in developing its eastern regions may also hinder or at least slow its pivot to Asia.

Elsewhere, the Russia–China axis looms large as an important element of any repositioning eastwards, as Russia’s pivot is contingent on closer relations with this Asian power. But, Russo–Sino relations are not without problems. Both view each other as competitors in the region, not only in economic terms, but also in military terms, with the overall military balance between Russia and China constantly shifting in favour of the latter. This is one factor likely to induce caution.

The last point; on Russia–China relations, is a crucial one, and requires clarification. Clearly, there are many areas of international politics where Russia and China share a similar view and this becomes immediately apparent if we consider their positions on issues relating to international law, stability of borders, multilateralism, Internet regulation, and their stance on global hotspots such as Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran and Syria. A glance at their veto record in the UN Security Council in recent years also shows similar thinking, if not a coordinated effort.

There are also areas that could see more cooperation between Russia and China in the future. Efforts to develop the BRICS format and alternative financial institutions, for example, could see more cooperation, as too efforts to develop the Arctic transit route, potentially opening the European market for Chinese goods, but inevitably involving cooperation with Russia. However, in almost every aspect of this relationship, it is China that has the upper hand. China, for example, is able to take positions of principle on a range of issues, such as refusing to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. China also dictates the economic agenda, not only because it has genuine economic dynamism, but because it has alternatives that by-pass Russia, such as importing hydrocarbons from Central Asia and/or Australia. China is also the leading force in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS and has a decisive say in their development.

In fact, the point on energy alternatives is perhaps the most significant for Russia’s pivot to Asia, as the rapidly changing energy market undermines Russia’s only real leverage as an Asian player. However, this changing energy market also threatens Russia’s existing dominance in the European energy market too. Although the Nord Stream Baltic gas-pipeline came online in 2011, the anticipated growth in shale gas production presents genuine challenges to Russia’s position in the EU energy market. The EU has significant shale resources, and even though the EU is experiencing an internal crisis, there is none the less an energy transition under way. As with



Russia's surprise (if not shock) at the growth of Australian gas exports to China in the East, Russia may need to rapidly reassess its position in the West, if the anticipated shale gas revolution takes place.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, Russia not only finds itself positioned against the larger international community on key issues of global governance, but its own leverage on the international stage is declining. Russia is expected to face growing difficulties in utilising its energy resource base in both eastward and westward directions. Russia has also experienced a decline in influence in the Middle East in recent months, having lost ground in Syria and having seen relations with Turkey deteriorate although, conversely, Russia may see relations with Israel improve as a result.

This creates an interesting juncture in the estimations of Russia as a global actor. From one perspective, Russia finds itself adopting a position contrary to the EU and US on many key issues of global governance, even attempting to reposition its foreign policy away from the West. But, from another angle, we see a state actor lacking the requisite capacity to successfully follow and secure its own agenda. As mentioned in subsequent sections, European and US analysts share the same opinions on most issues concerning Russia, although in the case of Russia as a global actor, there is some contention regarding the Russian agenda.

For European analysts, the label 'spoiler' captures the reality of a state that cannot be described as a strategic partner, but at the same time lacks the strength to be a strategic competitor. In short, Russia, as a spoiler, is a state actor that can often do little more than prevent other actors from achieving their goals. However, for US analysts the term spoiler disguises the extent of Russian strategic thinking on a number of issues. It also misses the way Russia is able to play the role of spoiler selectively, depending on the context and the issue in question. For example, Russia's resistance to the US over Syria is justified by the fact that previous, Western backed intervention in Iraq and Libya has not had the envisaged positive results, but it is also calculated in the sense that Russia understands full well the US will not intervene in the conflict. As mentioned in the material that follows, Russia often switches between a constructive stance and one of resistance, depending on circumstances.



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## 2. Russia as a regional actor

Russia is traditionally considered the dominant power in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, there is little doubt that Russia has prioritised this region in its foreign policy over the past decade. However, it is by no means clear what Russia is trying to achieve in its short and long-term planning and if these goals are contrary or complimentary to those of other actors in the region. The Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, created in 2010, appears to be a significant development, especially as there is a plan to use it as a platform for a larger 'Eurasian Union' timetabled for 2015. *As such, the most salient questions for this section relate to Russia's integrative potential in the region and the potential of the Customs Union and Eurasian Union to successfully reconnect the post-Soviet space.*

Ultimately, Russia may be promoting the Eurasian Union and closer economic and political integration to serve a number of purposes, including geo-political. While it is possible, even likely, that Russia simply wishes to create strong, close links with its neighbours, there is also a possibility that Russia is attempting to establish a buffer zone or network of satellite states that serve some kind of practical value, not least in preventing other actors from gaining ground in the region.

While it is difficult to 'double guess' the Putin administration and to ascertain any hidden designs with these integrative projects, their success will depend on Russia's ability to remain a dominant actor in the region and to attract other states to join. Ultimately, Russia's ability to create strong political, economic and societal relations with its neighbours carries implications for the EU and the US, as well as other actors with interests in the region, making Russia's attempt to integrate the post-Soviet space an important development.

Russia's ability to integrate the post-Soviet space is premised on a number of favourable conditions that serve as 'pull factors' to attract other states – part of Russia's status as a regional power. While there are numerous advantages to being a regional power, three in particular provide Russia with serious leverage.

The first and most obvious advantage relates to Russia's natural resources and control over the energy sector in the region, which in turn allows for the provision of oil and gas discounts to favoured neighbours. Although the development of shale gas mentioned in the previous section questions the future effectiveness of the supply of energy as an instrument of Russian foreign policy, for the time being, it represents a key pull factor. The second advantage concerns the dynamics of the labour market in the post-Soviet space. The Russian labour market is emerging as an important basis for favourable relations with neighbouring states. The combination of Russia's demographic decline combined with high unemployment in neighbouring countries affords Russia increasing influence in the region as a whole. Finally, there is the issue of security and the fact that Russia remains the region's dominant military power, able to provide certain security guarantees and to regulate border issues – issues that are likely to become more pressing after the planned withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014.

In addition, there are a number of secondary factors that supplement Russia's integrative potential and the attractiveness of the Customs Union and future Eurasian Union, not least the extent of their financial backing. Russia, it seems, is willing to pay for integration in what is a change in tact in recent years. In the period 2006–2007, Russian policy toward the western part of the CIS became more market-oriented, manifesting in the high-profile energy conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and Belarus. But the Russian state now appears ready to subsidise Belarus and, potentially, Ukraine to secure their participation in the Customs Union. As Ukraine's membership would likely see Russia lose revenue on gas exports, there is every reason to take Russia's integrative intentions seriously.

In more general terms, another factor that strengthens Russia's integrative potential is the predominance of weak states that have little to lose from closer economic and political union. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have expressed interest in joining the Customs

Union. Kyrgyzstan is currently experiencing difficulties due to the restrictions the new customs regime has placed on smuggling to Kazakhstan, while Tajikistan has a large migrant workforce already based in Russia. In sum, there is potential for the Customs Union to boost regional trade, and so the enticement of reduced trade tariffs should not be underestimated, in particular if they are followed by the removal of non-tariff or administrative barriers to internal trade. Overall, there are obvious economic advantages for smaller economies in gaining access to the larger Russian market.

#### THE LIMIT OF RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

Despite a number of potential candidates ready to join the Customs Union and a future Eurasian Union, there are several factors that will likely limit the ability of Russia to integrate the post-Soviet space with a degree of success comparable to other regionally-based international organisations, such as the EU or NAFTA. These factors need to be considered in order to understand the limit of Russia's positive role in the region, as well as the actual 'competitive' threat posed by a future Eurasian Union to the EU, US and other actors with interests in the region.

There are clearly interested parties with nothing to lose from integration, but post-Soviet history shows that there are likely to be unwilling partners too. Previous efforts to integrate the post-Soviet space, in particular security agreements such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), show the problems in creating effective and durable institutions in the region. Uzbekistan suspended its membership of CSTO in June 2012, despite Vladimir Putin's official visit to Tashkent just days earlier.

Part of the problem relates to the actual benefits of union and there remain a number of unanswered questions in this area. For example, there are indications that Russian administrative barriers are hindering the full benefit of free trade within the Customs Union, closing-off the domestic market and preventing Russian companies from relocating to Kazakhstan. In fact, a legitimate question to ask at this stage is whether Kazakhstan will remain part of the Customs Union. Kazakhstan is a pivotal player in the Customs Union and key to the future success of the Eurasian Union. However, there are suggestions that Kazakhstan is bearing more of the costs than previously thought. There is also a growing debate within Kazakhstan as to the

benefits of the Customs Union following significant price increases at home and restrictions on Chinese imports.

There is also the issue of Ukraine and its possible membership of either the Customs or Eurasian Union. Like Kazakhstan, the situation with Ukraine is also pivotal in the sense that its inclusion would mark a major success for Moscow's integrative efforts. Overall, Ukraine is still dependent on Russian energy and appears to be drifting toward greater integration with Russia. The 2009 agreement between Russia and Ukraine for the supply of natural gas was very unfavourable to the latter and led to sustained efforts to reduce domestic gas consumption and diversify supply. But, despite the possibility of gaining cheaper gas from Russia upon accession to the Customs Union, Ukraine is a complicated case that is finally balanced by the competing influence of the EU and significant domestic resistance to integration with Russia.

In any case, it is worth bearing in mind Ukraine's disruptive potential. Russian pressure on Ukraine to join the Customs Union could prove counter-productive in the long run and affect the overall smoothness of decision-making, if there is any residual resentment to joining. There would also be significant fall-out, should Ukraine join under duress and then re-evaluate its membership at a later date.

There are also several factors likely to make Russia cautious in its attempts to further integrate the post-Soviet space and expand the Customs Union, beyond Belarus and Kazakhstan. This relates first and foremost to unstable domestic political conditions within Russia which have the potential to constrain foreign policy initiatives. Further integration may prove politically unacceptable for a Russian public already losing trust in the regime. Tajikistan, for example, has a negative image among the Russian populace and is associated with drug trafficking and the large numbers of immigrant workers (legal and illegal) already in Russia. Another consideration for Russia is border security. From one perspective, it may be easier to protect the Kazakhstani border rather than the Tajikistani border and any integration between Russia and the former Soviet Central Asian states carries significant security risks in terms of cross-border crime and terrorism.

Ultimately, Russia may be a force for integration in the region, but Russian foreign policy does not always serve to unify, and although there are enough pre-existing divisions and rivalries in the post-Soviet space to make integration a serious challenge, there is a danger of overstating Russia's role as a positive 'order power'. For



example, Russia's supply of weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan undermines efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue or at least to prevent further conflict. Russia's refusal to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan in 2010 also questions the ability of Moscow to guarantee security in the region. From this perspective, there is a case to be made that Russian foreign policy is also a disintegrative force in the region.

Russia's position as a regional leader offers numerous opportunities to integrate the post-Soviet space and create a durable sphere of influence. However, there are no clear indications that Russia is seriously interested in creating an all-encompassing structure of post-Soviet integration and there are enough obstacles to question the actual potential of the Eurasian Union project.

If Russian society is taken into account, then public opinion does not support free borders with countries such as Tajikistan or even Kazakhstan. As such, it may prove more prudent for the Russian authorities to simply maintain the Customs Union in its present configuration rather than develop it further. Indeed, in view of Russia's poorly defined intentions when it comes to the post-Soviet space, it is entirely possible that the Customs Union will persist in a limited format in order to achieve a shorter-term goal of preventing other states in the region from taking the European or Western road to development.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, there are political and economic motives behind Russia's latest attempt to (re)integrate the post-Soviet space, and both require more research and analysis. The idea that Russia is simply pursuing better relations with its neighbours is not in question, but there are likely to be a number of geopolitical drivers that influence Russian thinking on the Customs Union and Eurasian Union and these drivers remain unclear.

While there is a consensus on the kind of push and pull factors likely to enable or inhibit Russia from successfully developing its latest regional integration project, there are some differences in the way European and US analysts view the question of geopolitics. As mentioned, although there is no denying the role of geopolitical considerations, European analysts tend to frame Moscow's thinking in more negative terms – that Russia has no clear agenda (the lack

of strategic thinking under Putin) or that this agenda is designed to complicate the presence of other actors in the region – the spoiler label mentioned in the previous section.

Accordingly, Russia's integrative aims in the post-Soviet space are either symbolic, involving the creation of client states to bolster Russia's great power image, or to stop the EU, US and/or China from gaining a foothold. In terms of the latter, the Customs Union does impose certain restrictions on Chinese exports, and there is already evidence that Moscow feels the need to balance its relationship with Beijing seen, for example, in Russian support for an observer status for India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. However, much depends on the perspective taken. For US analysts, Russia's self-interest may be narrow, but it is none the less a systematic, well thought-out agenda. In this sense, the spoiler label disguises the way in which Russia's efforts at hindering change in the post-Soviet space (although appearing negative to Western observers) are actually positive for Russia. In short, a no-change agenda does not make Russia a spoiler by default. Moreover, Russia's lack of desire for political change should not be equated with an absence of strategy.

3



### 3. Russia's capacity to project its influence

A component of Russia's international status and integrative potential relates to its ability to project power, both in terms of conventional military 'hard power' but also 'soft power', or the ability to influence other actors in the international system through non-coercive means.

Both these issues are important considerations in their own right and naturally present themselves in any discussion of Russia's role in the international system. Moreover, Russia is clearly diverting resources toward the modernisation of its military and the development of soft power to the point where more analysis is needed. Russian defence spending over the next three years will see a sharp increase, raising genuine concerns among bordering states, including EU member states, as to Moscow's intentions. Likewise, the promotion of Russian language and culture, but also attempts to present a contrary and alternative conception of democracy and international relations should be of interest to the West. *In view of these tendencies, the key questions for this section relate to the threat posed by Russia, seen in terms of its capacity to project hard and soft power, and if this capacity should elicit a positive or negative estimation of Russia as an international actor.*

Of course, context is crucial for any analysis. In terms of Russia's recent increase in military spending, it is clear that the war with Georgia in 2008 was a major contributory factor. Although there were pre-existing plans to modernise the Armed Forces, these plans were fast-tracked following the conflict in order to create a more mobile army. Russia also has to deal with a changing security landscape that includes traditional threats, either real or perceived, such as NATO in the West, but also cyber security, issues surrounding

immigration, drug-trafficking, organised crime, terrorism, and the threat of regional conflicts, among others. Russia's investment in soft power is simply an extension of this security concern in the face of what may be described as a relentless projection of Western soft power in the region.

#### RUSSIA'S SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

From an EU and US perspective, security is an important issue in relations with Russia, in particular in view of the emerging asymmetry in this area. At a time when the EU is decreasing defence spending, Russia plans to increase spending on its military by over 25 per cent in the period 2013–2015. In fact, the extent of Russian defence spending raises a legitimate question as to whether Russia is currently militarising, although it is by no means clear what kind of impact this spending increase and military reform will actually have.

In terms of the threat level to the West, it is important to make the following points. First, the purpose of Russia's military spending is multifaceted, but there are clear limitations with the short time-frame involved and there is no indication that this will herald the start of sustained investment over a longer period of time. For this reason, there are doubts surrounding the ability of Russia to breach the technology gap with the West and to produce the hardware needed to pose a genuine threat.

Second, the modernisation of the Russian armed forces is likely to increase its capacity to fight asymmetrical wars, primarily in the South, with Russia unlikely to project its force beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus. In terms of Kaliningrad, Russia uses this enclave as leverage – its military presence enhancing its bargaining potential with the EU. However, despite the very real and actual threat of the Russian military presence in Kaliningrad, there appears to be little change in Moscow's position. In reality, Russia is not interested in the EU's military development at present, but this could change if the EU develops its Common Security Defence Policy and if it appears that the EU is serious and willing to invest resources to this end. There is an acknowledgement that the EU is militarily unable to intervene in any conflict involving Russia in the post-Soviet space – the Russian military establishment is well aware of this.

As for the US, Russia's longer-term plans for modernising its military – including new long-range nuclear missiles, fifth

generation fighter-jets and upgrading the state's blue water naval capacity – may look impressive, but these plans are still in their embryonic phase. Although the Russian military is modernising, the official targets for producing military hardware over the next decade are not seen as realistic. As a result, Russia is only likely to succeed in increasing its military capacity vis-à-vis its former Soviet neighbours, but no more.

The bottom line is that Russia needs military reform. Rather than the militarisation of Russia, what we see is a practical necessity to modernise. Although there are doubts surrounding the modernisation of the Armed Forces, especially with the firing of the Russian Defence Minister in November 2012 amid corruption allegations, it is imperative that Russia makes the transition away from the mass-mobilisation military model, and for this reason increases in defence spending are seen as essential.

In fact, it is not inconceivable that the envisaged reform of the Russian Armed Forces may have several positive outcomes, especially if it contributes to greater inter-operability within the Russian military, in turn creating the potential for Russian inter-operability with the EU, US and NATO. However, there are a number of enduring concerns in the sphere of security. One of these concerns relates to arms control and non-proliferation and Russia's position on both. In 2007, Russia suspended its obligations under the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE). As a result, foreign arms inspectors have been denied access to Russian facilities and Russia has ceased to exchange military information. Using NATO's planned missile defence as a pretext, Russia has also deployed offensive missile systems capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction in the vicinity of EU borders. Russia has also rejected requests by NATO to discuss arms control options for non-strategic nuclear weapons.

There is also a feeling that Russia remains 'kidnapped' by geopolitics and finds it difficult to cooperate fully with the West. In terms of fighting common threats, Russia does acknowledge that NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 may result in a collapse of Central Asian regimes under the pressure of religious extremists and drug traffickers. But instead of promoting cooperation with the OSCE and/or the EU and US, Moscow continues to accuse Western powers of conspiring against Russia's regional status. As a result, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) serves as a tool for stabilisation by subordinating Central Asian states, rather than promoting cooperation.

Elsewhere, Russia's general posturing on military issues does little to create an atmosphere of trust. Russia's opposition to the US missile defence, the deployment of offensive military systems in Kaliningrad, the conduct of 'Zapad' military exercises based on conflict scenarios with the West and the confrontational rhetoric from Russian generals and ministers appear to coincide with a desire on the part of Moscow to create a buffer zone in Central Europe, where any strategic security policy decisions are to be co-decided by Moscow.

There is also the important issue of 'critical infrastructure', as there is no indication that increased military spending will see resources channelled to maintain the safety and security of existing weapons systems. As such, there remains the threat of spill over effects to Russia's neighbours and there are worrying signs that Russia is not investing sufficiently in this area. Moreover, there are now problems in researching this subject, in light of the new treason law signed into effect by Vladimir Putin in November 2012.

Overall, these issues relate to a wider perception that Russia is disorganised and lacks a coherent defence policy. While the debates in Moscow surrounding security and defence policy are often heated, there is not always evidence of a clear end-product. There is a belief that Russia is clumsy and prone to military improvisation – as seen in the Georgia conflict. While improvisation is largely unavoidable in military conflict, the lack of preparation may create unintended consequences with the potential to affect other countries, as well as Russia itself.

#### RUSSIA'S DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT POWER

Soft power is the ability of actors to achieve their goals through attraction rather than coercion. In recent years, Russia has made a noticeable effort to develop its soft power, including the creation of the *Russia Today* English language news channel (2005), the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* (2007) and *Rossostrudnichestvo* (2008). This effort has also seen attempts to elevate the international status of the Russian language, as well as Moscow's particular vision of international relations. At the same time, Russia's latest foreign policy concept published in February 2013 underscores the emphasis on soft power by making explicit reference to the term (absent in the previous concepts from 2008 and 2000).



But, despite the popularity of the term, soft power is not without its problems. Besides the fact that it is difficult to conceptualise and almost impossible to quantify, there is a danger of misunderstanding the potential of soft power purely because its tenets may not be attractive to those unfamiliar with it. However, in the case of Russian soft power, unfamiliarity should not detract from the possibility that it may still be attractive to many people residing in the post-Soviet space and beyond.

Russian soft power is premised on a largely conservative message, with a conception of international relations that plays on older, Soviet ideas that may none the less have resonance among the large number of ethnic Russians living abroad, but also other ethnic groups in the post-Soviet space. By appealing to conservatism within the parameters of the Soviet experience, Russian soft power has the potential to influence the political elite in neighbouring countries, even if they are broadly following a European or Western path of development. This touches on the power of language, and we should not underestimate the potential of Russian soft power to reach an audience inside the EU. Russian language radio and TV channels broadcasting in the Baltic States could well be influencing attitudes among the Russian speaking population.

In addition, and despite recent setbacks, the Russian ‘political model’ still has traction among the elite and general populace in the post-Soviet space, in a region blighted by corruption and poor governance. United Russia has developed significant political linkage with other ruling parties in the region and Russia is able to offer at least the semblance of a functioning political and economic model to neighbouring countries. The Russian Orthodox Church is also seen as a capable soft power agent. The church is actively developing its profile in neighbouring countries and there is some indication that the head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, may want to play a role as mediator in Russia’s dispute with Georgia.

However, there are a number of factors that appear to limit the overall effectiveness of Russian soft power, including the lack of coordination between its constituent elements. Russian soft power relies, in part, on a certain Soviet nostalgia, but high-level criticism of Stalin and the Soviet period by Russian leaders, notably Dmitri Medvedev, reveals the inconsistencies in the overall approach. In addition, Russia may not have the right personnel developing its soft power strategy, with figures such as the head of *Rosstrudnichestvo*, Konstantin Kosachev, viewed as too conservative.

There are also problems relating to the ideas behind the soft power and the time horizons involved. Appealing to and utilising the Russian diaspora and attempting to propagate Soviet nostalgia have potential, but also limitations. Ultimately, to be effective in projecting soft power it is important to have a basic, attractive idea, but this is something the Russian state has not yet found. Russian soft power initiatives are also limited in their ability to achieve longer-term results as they often clash with a short-term, neoliberal logic of moneymaking. For example, there is a perception that Russia does not develop its oil and gas supply network to project long-term soft power, but simply so that individuals can make quick profits on the construction of pipelines.

Another drawback concerns competing interests. The Russian Orthodox Church does have an agenda, but this agenda is not identical to that of the Russian state. It simply corresponds. For example, the church did not recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the Georgian Orthodox Church and strongly rejects the Stalinist legacy. As Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland in August 2012 proved, even when strategically rivalling one another, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church can find common ground when it comes to the most important issues, such as promoting the pro-life doctrine in Europe. But the Russian state, in contrast, finds it much more difficult to find common ground with its western partners, even on technicalities. Although the church represents an interesting vector in Russian soft power development, it is not without its drawbacks and it is not always clear that the Russian State benefits. For example, visits by Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine provoked a negative reaction toward Russia and contributed to an increased self-confidence among Ukrainians as 'non-Russians'. Ultimately, the Church has a much longer-term agenda than that of the current Russian regime, so the two do not always work in tandem.

In a similar way, there are also certain counter-veiling trends with Russian soft power which limit its ability to influence attitudes in the post-Soviet space. Although the post-Soviet mind-set increases the effectiveness of Russian soft power in certain circumstances, it also serves to limit it. The Soviet mind-set makes a clear distinction between good and evil. This means that high-profile problems within Russia, such as corruption, recent political instability and hostility toward labour migrants, among others, may actually create negative estimations.

Russian soft power remains an interesting aspect of recent foreign policy efforts designed to boost Russian influence and counter-act alternative soft power programmes from other actors in the region. While Russian cultural and political organisations have begun to develop a network of contacts and affiliates throughout the post-Soviet space, and also within the EU, it should not be forgotten that state-owned economic actors, such as Inter RAO UES (Unified Energy System of Russia), Russian Railways and several oil and gas companies have also established significant leverage in the region. However, the effects of soft power are still unknown. While the post-Soviet elite may be amenable to certain, Soviet-style messages, there is unlikely to be a queue of willing client states ready to fall further under the orbit of Russian influence.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, Russia's investment in both soft power and hard power has implications for the post-Soviet space as a whole. What is more, the weakness of the Russian state means that there is always a danger of unintended consequences resulting from an inability to maintain weapon systems and communicate with partners or from a propensity to promote views and opinions that conflict with or undermine those promoted in other states.

As with Russia as a global actor and Russia as a regional actor, European and US analysts share similar opinions on Russian hard and soft power capacity. However, a more complex set of questions relates to the intentions behind the capacity, and this is where no definitive answers are possible.

Does Russia really know what it wants to achieve with either its hard or soft power development? There are a number of factors driving Russia's military modernisation, including a desire to enhance the status of the Russian state and to show domestic audiences that modernisation is actually happening, at least in one sector. There is also obvious political benefit in channelling state resources to key constituencies via the military industrial complex. An increased military capacity may also give Russia more bargaining power with other states, if diplomacy rests on a fully modernised military capacity. In terms of soft power, the aims range from a relatively benign attempt to improve Russia's image, perhaps as a means to enhance its investment climate, but also a more worrying possibility that Russia

is attempting to use soft power to subvert democracy and create a buffer zone of non-democratic states in its neighbourhood.

While these intentions continue to draw a range of opinions, there is another, related area where European and US analysts found disagreement – the role of the West in enabling Russia’s soft power message to gain ground in the post-Soviet space. While there is agreement that both the EU and the US have failed to develop effective policies in the region, and that this has presented Russia with an opportunity to further its influence, European analysts may be overlooking the role that EU accession prospects (or the lack of) have played in this process. Russian soft power is in many ways opportunistic – it is a default path for states such as Belarus and Ukraine which understand that the EU does not really want to incorporate them. In short, there is an acknowledgement of the need for sustained political cooperation, perhaps building on successful military cooperation in the post-Soviet period. For example, NATO’s military contact with Ukraine is a model of sustained cooperation, persisting over a longer time-frame, despite difficulties, and helping to create a generation of Ukrainian officers trained in the West.

4



## 4. Russia's relations with the EU and US

In the context of the roundtable discussions that form the basis of this report, relations with the EU and US are viewed as central to the analysis of Russia's role in the international system. Both the EU and the US have important international roles in their own right, but more importantly, both share overlapping interests with Russia that make interaction largely unavoidable. What is clear is that expectations figure prominently in both EU-Russia and US-Russia relations, including disappointment that relations have failed to realise their potential.

In retrospect, Russia-EU and Russia-US relations have experienced a great deal of change in the post-financial crisis period, 2008-13. For the EU, improving relations between Russia and Poland coupled with the special Russian-German bilateral relationship gave the appearance of progress, but there remain fundamental questions concerning the results and trajectory of the EU-Russia partnership. The same is true for the US, which after the 2009 'restart' saw some notable successes followed by some considerable backsliding. *As such, the key question for this section relates to the nature of EU-Russia and US-Russia relations – if currently, on balance, relations can be considered more or less positive? A second question concerns the expectations already mentioned and why Russia's partnership with both the EU and US has failed to meet them, despite the desirability of this outcome and the investment of considerable resources to this end?*

The relationship between the EU and Russia is immediately more complex than the corresponding relationship between the US and Russia, owing to the nature of the EU as a supranational actor comprised of member states with, at times, divergent interests in the sphere of foreign relations. As such, many of the negative aspects in EU–Russia relations may be described as institutional in nature, emanating squarely from the side of the EU. Russia is not dealing with a static EU, but one that is constantly changing as member states try to implement the Lisbon Treaty that came into force at the end of 2009. Another factor is that, occasionally, there is rollback in EU policy and a reaffirmation of the interests of member states—a move away from the common good toward selective interests. Ultimately, there is not a lack of willingness to improve relations with Russia, but there are a number of factors preventing this, not least the basic organising principle of equality which means the EU must take the interests of every member state into account. This alone provides at least a partial explanation for the mixed relations with Russia to date.

In addition, there are certainly issues that the EU could address to improve EU–Russia relations. One area relates to perceptions—that the EU may be expecting too much from Russia and that the EU may not fully understand Russia’s situation. There is also a feeling that the EU is losing its expertise on Russia, and that there is a growing ignorance among the EU public regarding the post–Soviet space. The same is true for the Russian side, which may not fully appreciate that the EU is experiencing its own crisis at present. But in the final analysis, these perception gaps do not reflect a deep-seated flaw in the relationship, although there is an acknowledgment that the situation is unlikely to improve, unless the EU can develop a clearer strategy toward Russia.

Notwithstanding, there are clearly areas where the EU–Russia relationship has achieved notable successes in recent years. Overall, the fundamentals are positive. For example, the EU has demanded and received stable energy supplies from Russia. Russia is also seen as a strong market for European investors with a great deal of potential—Russia is expected to become the EU’s largest retail market in the near future. Elsewhere, Russia’s accession to the WTO in 2012 and the normalisation of Polish–Russian relations are viewed as positive, recent developments.

In addition, the EU issued over 5 million Schengen visas to Russian citizens in 2012, and this figure is expected to rise by 20 per



cent in 2013. From this perspective, Russia–EU relations are moving forward. In fact, visas could well be a factor in improving long-term relations between the EU and Russia, if it results in large numbers of young Russians entering the EU and taking positive impressions back with them. As for visa liberalisation between the EU and Russia, there appears to be at least a formal commitment to abolish visa restrictions at some point in the future, which again points to the possibility of improved relations.

As for the US, its status as a unified state actor may ease certain aspects of foreign policy, but it does not render relations with Russia uncomplicated. US–Russia relations, unlike EU–Russia relations, suffer from a lack of dedicated stakeholders able to forward and develop the bilateral relationship. As a result, US–Russia relations tend to be dominated by a relatively small group of individuals with an overriding focus on security issues, including nuclear weapons reduction. However, these issues are clearly important and there are other areas where the US and Russia share similar concerns, despite first appearances.

In terms of security issues, the long-standing disagreement between Russia and the US on the planned missile defence may not be as intractable as it first appears. Discussions have been frozen since 2012, largely due to Russia's insistence on linking other security issues with the proposed missile defence shield. However, as of early 2013 there are signs that Russia would like to reengage and find a solution to this issue, if the US can allay fears that the missile defence is not aimed at Russia. Moscow reacted positively to the US decision in March 2013 to abandon phase four of the Phased Adaptive Approach involving the deployment of missile interceptors in Europe. In addition, Russia and the US agreed the New START in April 2010 designed to reduce the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers. A new verification programme was also agreed. Elsewhere in the sphere of security, the US would also like to see a new programme for decommissioning weapons of mass destruction to replace the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Programme. Although Russia said it would not extend the Nunn–Lugar programme in 2012, there remains some optimism on the US side that a deal can be reached in the near future.

There is also broad agreement on a number of other security issues that typically receive less media coverage in the West than they deserve. Neither Russia nor the US wants to see a radical Islamic government in Afghanistan. In many ways, US involvement in

Afghanistan justifies Russia's earlier warnings that the Taliban were a problem for international security. There is also an acknowledgment in Moscow that NATO forces in Afghanistan have helped Russia and so Russia's involvement in the Northern Distribution Network may be seen as evidence of this shared interest. Aside from Afghanistan, Russia and the US share a broader concern with combating terrorism and there is a possibility of greater cooperation in the aftermath of the Boston terror act in April 2013.

In addition, there are a number of high-profile differences in approach between Russia and the US that distract attention from shared goals. Russia's position on issues such as Iran is often oversimplified, but in reality it is not fundamentally different to that of the US. Although Russia does not want to see Iran make a 'Western turn', it does not want Iran to make an 'Islamic turn' either. Russia simply wants Iran to believe it is staving off the West, but has little interest in seeing a nuclear-armed, Islamic nation on its border. Russia and the US mostly share the same broad goals in preventing and resolving conflicts elsewhere, just with different opinions on the best way to achieve these goals.

Ultimately, the US is pragmatic and has shown a willingness to admit US policy failure in the past, most notably through Obama's reset. There is an acknowledgement that the US may have miscalculated on Ukraine and Georgia, and that the Bush Administration was mistaken in thinking that colour revolution was anything more than a change in the elite. Increasingly, US policy is realising the extent of the ties that bind the post-Soviet space and in this way, there are grounds for optimism that a better understanding between the US and Russia will emerge.

There are also common areas where both the EU and the US have seen improved relations with Russia in recent years, as well as areas with potential for future engagement. For example, the Arctic can be seen as a functioning model of cooperation, even if the emphasis tends to be on softer issues rather than larger political questions. There is also the issue of Central Asia, and this region too may become a key area for future cooperation between the EU, US and Russia, in particular following the planned withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014 and the shared concerns with drug trafficking and terrorism. Likewise, there may be opportunities for the EU, Russia, NATO and the CSTO to cooperate in Afghanistan, post-2014.

Paradoxically, Russia's pivot to Asia may also lead to opportunities for Russia-West cooperation. Even though there is increased

rhetoric within Russia on the need to re-orient foreign policy away from the 'historical West' and to emphasise the eastern vector, Asia is not entirely non-Western. The US, for example, retains considerable influence in Japan, South Korea and Australasia, and so any repositioning eastwards will inevitably involve Russia's engagement with the West.

There is also the delicate question of Russia's future modernisation. Russian society is demanding reform, and even though recent domestic political events do not give grounds for optimism, change cannot be postponed indefinitely. While domestic conditions in Russia limit the amount of pressure actors such as the EU and the US can exert on the regime, EU-Russia and US-Russia relations have the potential to improve, if political modernisation in Russia is resumed.

#### NEGATIVE TRENDS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

Despite the achievements and potential for future cooperation, there are clearly longer-term problems in both EU-Russia and US-Russia relations that are difficult to ignore. Again, there is an acknowledgment that the EU's own internal problems and past shortcomings with US foreign policy have been contributory factors, often in ways that were largely unanticipated.

The EU has experienced a decline in its influence over and within Russia, as well as in the international system as a whole. This is despite some significant successes for the EU on the international stage at the beginning of the financial crisis. In 2008, the EU brokered a ceasefire in Georgia and was steadily developing its Eastern Partnership, but the situation appears to have deteriorated from this high point. Overall, and following the financial crisis, the EU finds itself in a deep identity and institutional crisis which has certainly affected its profile within Russia.

Part of the decreasing relevance of the EU in recent years can be seen in the way that the political opposition within Russia refers less to the EU than in the 1990s – a corollary of the perception that the EU no longer cares about democratic development in Russia. There is also a feeling that Russian society has grown disillusioned with the EU and its political, economic and social model, with a growing belief that Asian governments 'do things better'.

Although Russia may have weathered the financial crisis better than many anticipated, it too has experienced a decline in its

international standing, not least due to on-going domestic political problems. Indeed, in what appears to be reciprocation, there is a growing disillusionment within the EU concerning the political development of Russia, mainly in the sphere of domestic politics, but also the overall contours of Russian foreign policy. This has led to negative estimations of the Russia-EU partnership, as well as its future potential in its current format.

There is also a growing, negative appraisal of the role of the Russian state in the EU's internal affairs. The EU is becoming more aware of its susceptibility to professional lobbying by Russian state interests and the fact that the Russian Federation operates a large number of Foreign Intelligence Service agents in the EU.

There is also the issue of a stagnating security dialogue. Although there were plans for a major reform of the OSCE following the Georgian conflict in 2008, Russia's suggestions were seen as too radical, involving too much change to the OSCE and to the European and American security system as a whole. As a result, the OSCE remains an unreformed and weak organisation. The 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) is also stagnating, following Russia's suspension of its participation in 2007. Although there may be potential for cooperation in Central Asia, Russia does not see the EU as a serious security partner. While it is true that Russia does not see a coherent European defence force because there is no effective European security arrangement, independent of NATO, there is a perception that Russia does not take European security policy seriously.

The EU and Russia also have different approaches to shared problems. For example, in terms of 'unresolved conflicts' in the post-Soviet space, Russia would like to solve problems on its own terms even if the proposals are often unworkable (e.g. the 2003 Kozak plan for Transnistria's secession from Moldova). The EU would like to cooperate and to overcome problems in the post-Soviet space, but unresolved conflicts are seen to be profitable for Russia, which uses its mediating position to boost its own power and prestige on the international stage.

This leads to the question of whether Russia is competing with the EU in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, on issues concerning Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and others, there is a growing perception that Russia and the EU are increasingly competing for influence. There is further evidence in the absence of any trilateral partnership between the EU, Russia and any other former Soviet state. There is also a perception that Russia is not only attempting to promote its own

interests in the region, but that these interests include preventing the Western orientation of other states. Ukraine is a case in point.

In fact, beyond the post-Soviet space there is little, if any, cooperation between Russia and the EU in other regions, such as the Middle East. The Middle East, it should be noted, has been a major focus of international attention since the Arab spring in 2011, and so offers an immediate indication of the health of the relationship between the EU and its partners.

But even within the EU, there is a feeling that Russia is not trustworthy. While relations between Russia and Poland have improved, it is premature to talk in terms of rapprochement. All of the old issues are still there and there is also growing disappointment that the Russian authorities repeatedly fall short of their promises – be it commitments to conduct a just investigation into the Katyn massacre of 1940, the Smolensk air crash of 2010 or the EU-brokered cease-fire obligations in Georgia.

As for the US, past foreign policy initiatives continue to affect relations with Russia, not only the policies of the Bush administration, but also the Obama administration. Russia's abstention in the UN Security Council vote on resolution 1973 in March 2011 allowing the creation of a NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Libya was seen as Moscow's tacit support for US efforts to resolve the conflict. But, the subsequent intervention and overthrow of the Gaddafi regime was seen as a betrayal of trust by the Russian side.

Closer to home, suspicions remain that the long-term goal of the US in the post-Soviet space is to roll-back Russian influence and foment leadership change within the country. The wave of political unrest following the December 2011 State Duma election led to accusations that the US was attempting to destabilise domestic politics and orchestrate regime change. As a result, new regulations targeting NGO funding led to the closure of USAID's operation in Russia.

Although, the passage of the Magnitsky Act by US Congress in November/December 2012 highlighted genuine problems with human rights abuses and high-level corruption in Russia, it also constrained the options for the Obama administration and elicited an inevitable response from Moscow. At the same time, and even though President Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, it was against his administration's 'interest-based pragmatism' initiative that sought to decouple bilateral relations from domestic political issues in Russia.

As mentioned, the US and Russia do share similar, broad positions on many issues, such as preventing and resolving conflict in global

hotspots, but we should not underestimate the significant differences that exist between their approaches, even if the goals are the same. For the US, R2P and humanitarian intervention, even regime change in some extreme cases, are justified as they concern US obligations to ensure stability in the international system. This is in complete contrast to Russia's fixation with sovereignty, which stresses non-intervention and non-interference by state actors in the internal affairs of other states as a way to maintain stability. The same stark differences in approach can be seen in preventing conflict too. The US belief that authoritarian political systems create the conditions for Islamic extremism contrasts with Russia's view that the spread of democracy is the root of the problem. Even though the Obama administration appears less inclined to the same policies of regime change that characterised the previous Bush administration, the Obama administration is none the less committed to global democracy promotion.

Elsewhere, there are a number of areas that reveal problems in US-Russia relations and present few reasons to expect any convergence in approaches in the short-term. In Central Asia, Russia is hedging its bets on what will actually happen following NATO's planned withdrawal in 2014 and although there is a possibility for NATO cooperation with CSTO, there is simply too much uncertainty. The United States has no clear role in Central Asia, and until this is resolved, suspicion will prevail. The same may be said in other areas. Although it is not anticipated that Russia will increase its support for the Assad regime in Syria, it is unlikely that Russia will help the US either. The same is true for the potential for cooperation concerning North Korea. When it comes to North Korea, the perception is that Russia would like to keep out the problem, rather than cooperate with the US to try and resolve it.

There is also the issue of Russia's 'isolationist turn' in recent months. There are currently elevated levels of anti-Americanism in Russia following accusations of US involvement in recent political protests in Russia, a charge that the US is intent on facilitating regime change. In this sense, Russia's so-called 'pivot to Asia' may simply be part of a more limited plan to isolate Russia from the West, in particular from US influence. Although repositioning as an Asian power may be beyond Russia's present capabilities, isolation is easier to accomplish. Therefore, a relevant question is does Russia really want to cooperate? There is potential for cooperation on counterterrorism issues, in particular ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics in

2014. There is also potential for cooperation in Afghanistan post-2014 and in the Arctic, if anticipated climate change further opens this region. But does Russia really want a strategic partnership in any of these areas? Russia has already signalled that it does not want NATO in the Arctic.

There is a perception that Russia is either unwilling or unable to sufficiently introspect and admit its mistakes. Russia too often takes the view that it is victimised on the international stage, in particular by the US, and this makes relations complicated. More frustratingly, Moscow often takes the view that it is beyond reproach. For example, Russia's own problems, be it opposition protests in the capital or Islamic insurgency in the Caucasus, are often explained in terms of foreign meddling, rather than the failings of the Russian state itself.

As such, a related question is how much patience does the US have? While the US may be ready to admit past mistakes and miscalculations in the post-Soviet space, the US is suffering from a 'Ukraine and Georgia fatigue', and this could easily extend to 'Russia fatigue', limiting further engagement. Ultimately, Russia is an important consideration for the US, but it is by no means the only one, and so the temptation to overlook Russia may prove too strong. The fact of the matter is that the US and Russia are not natural economic partners. The US does not need Russian oil, gas, or weapons – the extent of economic production in Russia. Ultimately, Russia does not produce goods that can sustain a genuine partnership with the US.

The issue of trade is an important one, as international cooperation in the post-War period has been largely premised on contact facilitated by the free movement of goods, people and ideas. But, besides trade, Russia seems to have an active interest in preventing the traction of Western ideas in its territory, while the movement of people to and from Russia is also in retreat. As with the EU, there are increasing numbers of Russians visiting the US, but a decreasing number of US citizens travelling to Russia. There appears to be a great deal of imbalance in travel to and from Russia and the 'West'.

Ultimately, what perspectives does the US-Russia 'reset' really have? After all, 'reset' was very much about the personal relationship between Medvedev and Obama, but with the arrival of Putin as president, this crucial personal dynamic appears to be lost. Reset is also viewed by Russia in rather negative terms as a sign of American weakness, an acknowledgement of American errors in their thinking, and this does not bode well for relations in the future.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The EU–Russia and US–Russia partnerships are currently facing critical junctures, with the future of the relationship dependent on changes occurring within Russia, but also changes within the EU and US. Can the EU overcome its own internal crisis and devote the energy needed to formulate a successful strategy toward Russia? Can the US overcome its fatigue with the post–Soviet space and maintain engagement in the face of its global commitments? Can the EU and US and the ‘West’ coordinate effectively with each other and maintain their dialogue?

The problems facing the US and the EU in their relations with Russia are by no means the same, but there is an agreement among European and US analysts that Russia is, at best, an ‘ad hoc’ partner – one willing to cooperate on a range of issues, but only those that fall squarely within Russia’s narrowly defined self–interest. In this sense, Russia is a long way from being a strategic partner for either the EU or the US.

There is also a consensus that we will see political change in Russia, with clear signs of this emerging in the debate on the performance of the government following the 2011/12 election cycle. Although in retrospect, Medvedev’s modernisation agenda appears to be little more than empty rhetoric, the Russian political model itself is viewed as unsustainable, so in the short to medium–term, change is anticipated. But, there are no guarantees that this change will be for the better. In the meantime, and as the survival of the regime is now a pressing concern for Putin and the elite, the manipulation of anti–Westernism may see relations deteriorate before they improve.



5



## 5. Conclusion: Russia in the international system

Russia is becoming more integrated in the international system, through institutions such as the G20, G8 and recently, the WTO, and this is a welcome and positive development. However, there are a number of high-profile issues relating to global governance where Russia is clearly opposing the EU and the US, if not swimming against the tide of international opinion. Resolving a range of issues, including conflict in Syria, Iran's nuclear programme and others are currently hindered by Russia's position. At the same time, Russia's attempt to reorient its foreign policy and prioritise Asia is an interesting and important recent development that may see Russia fall further out of step with any EU/US consensus. However, hesitation and a lack of economic and political dynamism may hinder the success of this pivot, despite Moscow's success in developing parts of its far-eastern territories.

In terms of the post-Soviet space, Russia's latest efforts at integration are seen as a major development, but also a positive development – if it facilitates trade and reduces the potential for conflict in the region. There is no doubt that Russia, as the dominant actor in the region, has considerable integrative potential boosted by a number of favourable circumstances, including control over energy supplies, an attractive labour market and the ability to provide certain security guarantees in the region. But, there are significant barriers to further integration, not least Russian domestic opinion that is opposed to (re)integration with former Soviet Central Asian republics. At the same time, Russia is not always a positive 'order power' in the region. There is evidence that Russian foreign policy actually contributes to pre-existing divisions and rivalries. The larger geo-political goal

behind Russian integration may be the more modest and negative ambition of preventing the further European or Western orientation of states in the region.

In terms of Russia's capacity to project its influence in the international system, recent, substantial increases in defence spending are seen as an important development, which although alarming in magnitude, may have positive outcomes, including increased potential for cooperation with the West on regional security issues. However, there is a perception that Russian defence policy is disorganised and that communication on security issues is ineffective. Russia also continues to neglect its critical infrastructure and ensure the safety of existing weapon systems. In terms of Russian soft power, this is viewed as neither threatening nor negative in its own right, although the potential to present a message contrary to shared EU and US values, either within the EU or the post-Soviet space, needs to be carefully monitored.

In terms of EU-Russia and US-Russia relations, there are undoubted positives, seen in growing bi-lateral trade, the reset in relations between Russia and the US and Russia and Poland, and successful cooperation in the Arctic. Central Asia may yet present itself as an area for cooperation in the future. But, despite the acknowledged shortcomings on the part of both the EU and the US, there is also a growing realisation that Russia plays its own, significant role in hindering relations with the West. For the EU, there is a realisation that Russia is attempting to unduly influence internal decision-making processes and is preventing the resolution of thus-far unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space. There are no tri-lateral agreements between the EU, Russia and other CIS states and there is little cooperation in other regions, such as the Middle East. For the US, there are areas of common interest, but the approach to resolving problems differs markedly. Afghanistan, terrorism, North Korea, the Arctic, etc. may never move beyond their potential to lead to greater cooperation, if Moscow is unable to overcome its geopolitical suspicion of the US.

In terms of the opinions and analysis of European and US experts, there is clearly a great deal of common ground, perhaps a surprising amount of convergence on the range of issues considered. Importantly, both the EU and the US are conscious of the long-term costs of pragmatism, notably the danger of encouraging Russia's further retreat from democracy. There is also a shared and somewhat sober assessment that a lack of decisiveness and interest on the part of the

West could de facto leave the post-Soviet space to Russia – with all its inferred consequences.

Is Russia a strategic partner or a strategic competitor? The consensus among European and US analysts is that Russia is an ad hoc partner, one that respects certain deals, but no more. Russia is not considered a strategic partner for either the EU or the US, but at the same time, and despite evidence of competition, Russia lacks the capacity to seriously compete. Russia is increasingly viewed as a weak international actor, often playing the negative role of spoiler – preventing other actors from realising their goals, but lacking the capacity to implement its own agenda.

However, as discussed in previous sections, the label ‘spoiler’ needs to be understood as a Western-centric label that belies (what Russia no doubt views) a positive agenda of no-change on certain issues. In certain circumstances, Russia seems to go out of its way to prevent the EU and US from achieving their desired goals, notably on issues pertaining to R2P and ‘humanitarian’ intervention – those issues relating to sovereignty that Russia consistently defends. But this must be understood in the context of Russia’s resistance to revisionist ideas that are seen as threatening, either to Russia or to the balance of the international system.

In these situations, no-change is the positive strategic goal that Moscow pursues. But, in other cases, it is Russia that appears revisionist, seen in Moscow’s efforts to increase its influence in the post-Soviet space, perhaps at the expense of the EU and US. Russia may not be a partner across the board, but neither is Russia a habitual spoiler on every issue. Ultimately, there is a difference of opinion when it comes to Russia’s intentions and its degree of ‘strategic thinking’, but these differences are as evident among European and US analysts as between them.

In summary, and without consideration of non-traditional aspects of international relations, such as organised crime, cyber-security, etc., there is a consensus that Russia’s global role has retreated in recent years. Part of the problem is that Russia is too focused on domestic issues to play any kind of coherent or consequential global role. If in 2007 Putin was able to make his Munich speech to sharply criticise the West, perhaps rival the West with a conception of multi-polarity and energy ‘superpower’ status, then this ability has decreased with the return of Putin in 2012. Putin is now thinking in less ambitious terms about the survival of the regime, in dealing with domestic problems, rather than in competing with the West. This is

the constraining influence of domestic politics over Russia's role on the international stage.

However, Russia is still seen as a risk because there are areas in which it remains an unknown quantity, because of the uncertainty regarding intentions already mentioned, and because of the danger of unintended consequences, either in Russia's handling of regional conflicts or its ability to secure its critical infrastructure. There is also a societal aspect to take into account, as there is clearly a manipulation of the West in Russia as a means to influence public opinion. New regulations for NGOs (the so-called 'foreign agent law') is one example of the way the authorities have portrayed the West as a threat, and this appears to be a new dynamic in Russian domestic politics from 2012. Again, any hopes that visa regimes or greater contact will improve Russia-EU or Russia-US relations in the long-term is premised on young people travelling to the West unhindered by negative pre-conceptions formed by Russian state media. The possible disruptive influence of anti-Western ideas within the EU, in particular in the Baltics, but also in the US and the post-Soviet space is another risk to consider, serving as a cautionary reason not to dismiss Russian soft power out of hand.

Russia's latest foreign policy concept was officially approved by Vladimir Putin on February 12, 2013. This concept gives comprehensive coverage to a range of core issues and key partnerships, including an express desire to conclude a new agreement with the EU concerning its 'strategic partnership' and to further develop the 'significant potential' of US-Russia relations in several areas of common interest. However, Russian foreign policy concepts have changed little in the course of the past decade and so Russia's relations with its partners, along with its role in the international system, are unlikely to change in the near future.

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# Russia as an international actor

*The view from Europe and the US*

Sean P. Roberts

The hard-line approach taken by the Russian authorities following the December 2011 parliamentary election has led to growing consternation within the international community, while the return of Vladimir Putin to the post of President of the Russian Federation in May 2012 has generated largely negative evaluations of Russia's political trajectory.

But how is the Russian Federation viewed in a broader context as an actor within the international system? Does Russia play a positive or negative role on the international stage and is Russia viewed as a strategic partner or a strategic competitor by other actors, including the European Union and the United States?

The material presented in this report is a symbiosis of opinions and analysis from European and US researchers and practitioners dealing with these questions, following roundtable discussions held in Finland in January 2013 and in the US in April 2013. The report highlights the main issues raised during the course of these discussions.