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In the shadow of the Kremlin

Russia-generated political threats to eastern and central European states, and to the interests of the West in Europe

The Russian Federation remains a challenge for the West in the context of transforming the international order. The contradictory international interests of Russia and the West have 'infected' their cooperation with each other, especially since the outbreak of the crisis over Ukraine in 2014. The expanding West has faced increasing counteraction from Russia. In particular, the Kremlin is strongly opposed to the growing Western influence in the post-Soviet space. Russia therefore generates various threats to the West as well as to the eastern European countries that strive to build closer relations with the EU and NATO. Among these threats, the most dangerous from the point of view of the Western community seem to be Russia's influence on the political decision-making processes taking place in the central and eastern European states, and Russia's working to break up the coherence of the West. Unfortunately, this situation will not change significantly in the foreseeable future.

Main trends in the European order that is emerging under Russia's influence

The European order has been undergoing a transformation since the end of the cold war. In the 1990s, as well as in the 2000s, this order was reported as 'in statu nascendi'. The process is still ongoing in the third decade of this century.

To a large extent, the European order has been shaped by relations between the Russian Federation and the West – their cooperation but also competition and even rivalry. Indeed, competition and rivalry gained in significance in the 21st century as the Western institutions, the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have enlarged and deepened their engagement in the post-Soviet area. The contradictory interests of Russia and the West have 'infected' their cooperation with each other. The expanding West has thus faced increasing discontent and counteraction from Russia. Even

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if the Kremlin agreed (or was obliged to agree due to its difficult political situation, depending on the point of view) on the EU- and NATO-accession of its former central European vassals, including the post-Soviet Baltic republics, Russia is strongly opposed to the growing Western influence in the 'common neighbourhood' area. Indeed, this is the factor that has had the greatest impact on the deterioration of relations between the West and Russia, as well as on the Kremlin's policy towards the newly independent states. It is also the factor that has had the greatest impact on the

Kremlin's increasing authoritarianism at domestic level in Russia. In short, in the 21st century Russia's narratives of 'Western expansionism' have clashed with the West's narratives of 'Russian imperialism'.

Some of the Russian processes and tendencies that influence the European order and threaten the interests of the West, and in particular the security of eastern and central European countries, are set out below.

- 1) The Russian Federation tries to maintain or increase its influence on the political decision-making processes taking place in the central and eastern European states, and thus to influence the sovereign functioning of their national political institutions. Actions of this kind are perceived by these states as a threat to their national security. This is especially the case for those countries and political groups that are Western-oriented and that aim to implement and strengthen a development model based on liberal democracy, human rights protection, and a free-market economy.
- 2) Russia aims to obtain a relatively permanent, temporary, or incidental possibility of influencing directly state institutions participating in the political decision-making processes in the field of foreign policy, security policy, and foreign economic policy. Russia in particular seeks indirect influence on the views and positions of selected social groups and individuals (eg, politicians and their advisers, experts, and influencers).
- 3) Some of Russia's main goals for this policy of direct and indirect influence are:
 - to undermine the cohesion of the West, including by strengthening the divisions between the 'old' and 'new' members of NATO and the EU; reducing the United States' engagement in Europe; and limiting the influence of Western states and institutions in the post-Soviet space;
 - to subjugate the eastern European countries, including by attracting them to participate in the 'Eurasian' integration institutions – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – instead of the European and transatlantic ones.
- 4) The Kremlin diversifies its goals and methods of political influence depending on its addressee, which can even be individual social groups within an individual country. Russia's political action towards the post-Soviet states is generally much more extensive than its political action towards central European and Balkan states, especially those that are NATO and EU members.

- 5) Russia aims to influence the policy of other European states using a whole range of instruments of a political, diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic (especially energy), information-psychological, socio-cultural, and even ideological or confessional nature.

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Most central and eastern European countries are 'sensitive' to the political influence of the Russian Federation. This is due to their historical experience: they were under the influence of Russia/the USSR in the past, and sometimes were part of them (such as the non-Russian republics of the former USSR or most of the Polish lands during the partition period). The post-Soviet eastern European states and the EU and NATO members located on the 'eastern flank' of these organisations are particularly suspicious of Russian policy.¹ This sensitivity has increased significantly as a result of Russia's actions in 2014 and the outbreak of the conflict over Ukraine.

New era in the Russia-West relations

From 2000 to 2014 Russia's relations with the West, and with certain EU member states, developed relatively well. However, these contacts were mainly limited to the economy or cross-border cooperation. The West, especially the EU, accepted such a state of affairs, assuming that economic cooperation with Russia ('doing business as usual') was a significant advantage in conditions of poor political contact. Indeed, the EU enjoyed economic growth in Russia, and higher profits obtained on the Russian market. Furthermore, some European elites believed it was possible to achieve two goals in parallel: 'anchoring' Russia within Europe, and building a lasting and independent relationship with other post-Soviet states. Accordingly, a central place was given to special relations with Russia, as the country was perceived to be an essential component of European security, a key external supplier of primary energy resources, and an important export market. Russia hoped that with such economic benefits the EU elites could accept Russia's systemic difference, and could, at least partially, 'understand' Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space. However, the two sides came to be increasingly divided by the Russian Federation's economic recovery at the beginning of this century, coupled with its growing confidence, assertiveness and suspicion of its Western counterparts, and the West's attempts meanwhile to promote its own norms and interests eastwards, as well as by a growing values gap. Indeed, since 2014 a transition to open confrontation has essentially taken place between the two sides.²

1 This is also the case for Finland and Sweden.

2 See: Khudoley, K. and Raś, M. (2021) 'The history of Russia-European Union relations', in M. David and T. Romanova (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of EU-Russia relations*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge pp. 15-25; Hiltz, W., Minasyan, S. and Raś, M. (eds) (2020) *Ambiguities of Europe's eastern neighbourhood: perspectives from Germany and Poland*, Wiesbaden: Springer.

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We are therefore currently dealing with an open and long-term conflict between Russia and the West, described by some as a ‘new cold war’. It is better to make this clear than to pretend it is not the case. It seems particularly dangerous (especially for the cohesion of the West) that some politicians and experts point to ‘peripheral’ sources of contradiction (occurring outside the West, for example in Ukraine) which they say are stoked by the Russophobia of ‘certain EU member states’ or ‘driven’ by the US. This is not a conflict similar to the disputes and tensions in relations between Russia and the West in the 2000s, when Russia occasionally opposed the actions of the West and was able to express its own interests strongly (eg, in the case of the EU’s neighbourhood policy). Sharp tensions arose and sanctions were even imposed but Russia recognised the West as an important and necessary – although not always ‘convenient’ – partner if only because of the Russian Federation’s need for development and the possibility of pursuing the personal interests of the Kremlin elite. This could be applied primarily to the Russia-EU relations.

The current conflict between Russia and the West is systemic in nature. The Kremlin has decided to confront the West both under the influence of internal factors (the weakening legitimacy of Russia’s political regime and growing socio-economic challenges) and external factors (the West’s tenacity and relative internal cohesion; Russia’s inability to reach a ‘compromise’ with the West on conditions favourable to the Kremlin that Russia’s propaganda could then present as a success of a ‘strong Russia’ and of its leader personally).

Russia would need an agreement with the West, but on the terms Russia proposes. This would mean, for example, the acceptance by the West of a ‘polycentric’ international order based on a division of ‘zones of influence’ and the ‘concert of powers’, among which Russia would take its ‘rightful place’ and could co-decide ‘on an equal footing’ with the US or China, despite its much smaller potential. Russia’s recent (December 2021) proposals³ to ‘settle’ the conflict with the West prove precisely this.

In these proposals, the Kremlin suggests that the US should recognise Russia’s sphere of influence – which does not end with the countries of the former USSR, but also relates to some central European NATO and EU members, including Poland and the post-Soviet Baltic states. Moscow publicly identifies a part of the West as an area of its imperial aspirations. A curious (or rather insolent) element of the proposed agreement with NATO is the prohibition to deploy troops of other allied countries in the ‘new’ (that have joined NATO since 1997) member states of the Alliance unless Russia agrees. These proposals are unacceptable for the West, which is perfectly understandable for Moscow. The submitted proposals, however, constitute another example of the Kremlin’s slow but consistent attempt to shift the limits of the West’s sensitivity.

3 See for example: Press release on Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO, 17 December 2021 (www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1790809/?lang=en).

This demand underlines the change in Russia's approach to the European order and relations with the West, as well as the systemic nature of the conflict between the West and Russia. Previously, it was unthinkable that Russia would dare to change borders in Europe. Today, by threatening to start a new war with Ukraine, the Kremlin is *de facto* pushing the West to negotiate. Moreover, Moscow proposes to negotiate with the US over the heads of central and eastern European countries. Alongside this, Russia encourages the EU members to become 'independent' from Washington.

The Kremlin's objectives

In this context, the objectives of the Russian Federation's political influence can be summarised as set out below.

First, like any other state, the Russian Federation strives to shape the international environment in such a way as to facilitate the realisation of its own national interests to the greatest possible extent. According to the Russian doctrine, an international order of a 'multipolar'/'polycentric' character would be desirable, in which Russia would take 'its rightful place'. This means Russia would have a significant influence on shaping this multipolar international order – primarily in the political dimension, both on global and regional levels. Russia's approach stems from its desire for superpower traditions, and from its aspirations for the Russian Federation's contemporary national and international identity.

Second, the Kremlin strives to integrate ('reintegrate') the post-Soviet republics, especially the eastern European states, into the institutional networks initiated and dominated by the Russian Federation – from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the future Eurasian Union. Indeed, the Kremlin pays particular attention to the post-Soviet space, which it perceives as its own sphere of influence ('zone of privileged interests') and one of the pillars of Russia's power status. Undoubtedly, the eastern European sub-region of the former USSR is of greatest value, not only because of its geographical location between Russia and the West (the EU and NATO), but above all because of the potential of the post-Soviet states in this area, and their social and cultural closeness to the Russian Federation – including the presence of numerous ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. Belarus and Ukraine, in particular, are considered to be the closest entities to Russia – components of the 'Russian world' for which the Russian Federation should be the closest political and socio-economic partner. Ukraine is the greatest challenge in this context as it has the second biggest economic, demographic and political-military potential in the post-Soviet area. The Kremlin's objective of political and institutional ties with the post-Soviet states is also to facilitate the economic,

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social and cultural ‘penetration’ of partners, which in turn should lead to a further increase in Russia’s political influence. Russia’s minimum political goal is to ‘neutralise’ the post-Soviet states which do not want to become allies of the Russian Federation and cannot become part of the integration structures under its control. From the Kremlin’s point of view, they should at least not be allowed to come closer to and integrated with the West, through their being turned into a buffer between Russia and the West. Russia’s objective is therefore both to maintain and to expand its political influence in relation to these states, in order to integrate them with Russia under favourable circumstances.

Third, the central European and Balkan states are the targets of intense political influence of the Russian Federation, although their importance in the politics of this power is less than that of the post-Soviet eastern European countries or the leading Western European powers. The goals of Russia’s policy towards central European states are varied and depend on the nature of the relations currently binding Moscow with individual entities in the region, and on the potential of the latter (usually limited). In the case of some (such as Serbia or Hungary), the Kremlin is striving to develop as much comprehensive cooperation as possible, while in the context of others (for example, Poland) the Kremlin’s objective is to limit the political importance of an ‘unfriendly state’ on the forum of Western institutions, to deepen the discrepancies between such a country and the US and the European ‘mainstream’, or to weaken that country’s ties with the post-Soviet republics. In the case of countries that are seeking accession to the EU and NATO, the Russian Federation is trying to hinder these processes, in particular in the context of NATO (visible examples are Montenegro and North Macedonia). Moreover, Russia supports any ‘sovereignty’ initiatives in the region, which could lead to weakening the region’s links with the US and Western Europe and to the decomposition of policies within NATO and the EU, in particular with regard to the Russian Federation (with the ‘flagship’ topic of anti-Russian sanctions) and the post-Soviet area. The Kremlin is aware of the strength of influence of Western powers and institutions in central Europe and the Balkans, the aspirations and identity of those states and societies, and of its own limited attractiveness and ‘competitiveness’ in the context of rivalry with the West over the region.

Fourth, Russia’s policy goals towards Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are more extensive than those towards central European states. Even though these three former Soviet republics are institutionally, politically and economically part of the West, Russia treats them in a special way. This is due not only to historical conditions, but also to their geographical location, modest potential, the presence of large Russian and Russian-speaking minorities (especially in Latvia and Estonia), and specific socio-economic ties. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has therefore had much more influence over Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia than over, for example, Poland, Hungary or Bulgaria. This has resulted in Russia’s desire to gain significant influence on the decision-making processes in these post-Soviet Baltic republics. However, the consolidation of the statehood of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, their deepening integration with the West and their increasing security after 2014 – thanks to the actions of the USA, NATO and the EU – have reduced Russia’s possibilities of political influence. Currently, the Kremlin is primarily interested in limiting the influence of these

countries on Western policy, especially with regard to the Russian Federation and the ‘eastern dimension’ of the EU and NATO, while maintaining other types of influence there, for example economic.

Perspectives

Under the conditions of this rivalry between the West and Russia over the post-Soviet space, it seems extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create a stable European order. The West or Russia would have to give up their ambitions to transform the area of the ‘common neighbourhood’ in the (divergent) directions desired by them. Rapid westernisation and democratisation of the Russian Federation also seems unlikely. It is therefore fairly easy to predict that the post-Soviet republics will remain one of the main causes of tension in Russia’s relations with the West, destabilising the regional and, indirectly, global order. The Kremlin will maintain the policy pursued so far – that is, the domination of individual partners belonging to its ‘close abroad’ or raising the costs of their sovereignisation from Russia (as in the cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Moscow will continue to ‘test’ the limits of the West’s resilience, decisiveness, and cohesion, counting on the West’s ‘fatigue’ from the prolonged rivalry over the ‘common neighbourhood’ area.

By analysing the likely accents in Russia’s foreign policy in the coming years, the theses below can be made.

- 1) The Kremlin considers ties with the West, including the EU, not as an ideological or political imperative, but as a ‘technical tool’ to modernise Russia.⁴
- 2) The Russian Federation will not become closer to the EU and NATO, as this would limit its ‘strategic independence’. Russia will not therefore become a real ‘strategic partner’ of the West in the foreseeable future, but will mainly develop economic ties.
- 3) The EU-Russia and Russia-US relations will be based on the principle of limited cooperation with a high likelihood of local/regional competition or even sharp political clashes, regarding eastern Europe in particular and some problem-oriented issues (eg, energy security).
- 4) The Kremlin will focus on bilateral cooperation with individual EU members (especially with Germany and the states whose governments could favour Russian interests in a given period), while trying to stimulate the decomposition of the EU’s unity and, more broadly, of the West’s coherence; Russia will tend to instrumentalise bilateral relations with some EU members to influence the EU decision-making processes.
- 5) Moscow will strive to base the European order on ‘equal’ cooperation between the Western and ‘Eurasian’ institutions (EU-EAEU, NATO-CSTO). The goal of the Kremlin’s policy is to regain, as much as possible, the influence lost as a result of the cold war collapse and the dissolution of the USSR.

4 Important also for Russian elites for private and business reasons.

- 6) The Kremlin's elite is aware of Russia's declining relative power and its weaker position vis-à-vis other powers. Postponing the actual modernisation of the state only strengthens this process. Maintaining dependence on revenues from the extraction and export of fossil fuels seems to be of key importance in this context. Taking the above into account, the Kremlin aims to force 'strategic' concessions from the West in the coming years. At the same time, it will not hesitate to test the limits of concessions with the use of aggressive policies and actions on the brink of limited armed conflict, especially towards countries outside the EU and NATO, but those remaining in the orbit of Western influence.

It seems impossible for Russia to act, even to a relatively small extent, in accordance with international and supranational institutions, which is necessary in the process of European integration. In current Russia, it is not acceptable to think that this country could be 'one of many' in any integration grouping. It would require breaking the imperial complex and rejecting the idea of *samobytnost* (originality, uniqueness). For a large part of the Russian elite, modernisation does not have to mean Europeanisation. By following this path in this way, while looking for its international identity, Russia may be moving

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away from an integrated Europe. Geographically and culturally, Russia is, of course, part of Europe. But being in Europe and being European are slightly different things. The 'European self-identification' of the Russian Federation is also limited by the attitude of the EU itself. The EU is not considering Russia's accession. Furthermore, a process of this kind would be considered by the EU as a threat to its own identity and further development.

The possibility of reaching a compromise is also complicated by the interests of the Russian ruling elite, who focus mainly on the problem of maintaining full control over political, social, and economic processes inside the country. The image they portray of Russia in the international environment – an image built to strengthen the people in power – helps consolidate and mobilise the public in Russia, ensuring a relatively high level of trust and support, especially for Vladimir Putin personally, who is presented as a strong and effective state leader and one of the world leaders. However, this hampers any possible change in the foreign policy implemented by the Kremlin.

Most Russian elites see the West as a source of threat to Russia's domestic status as well as a challenge to its international position. The Kremlin has recently taken a number of unprecedented steps to eliminate any real domestic competition and eradicate the political influence of external powers in the domestic arena. This process will be continued. In view of the prospect of permanent stagnation, the spectre of further impoverishment of the population, and the progressive erosion of public support for the government, one should expect further escalation of repression in order to control all spheres of independent citizens' activities. Russia's regime will be likely to focus on destroying or taking over the

last relatively free institutions (eg, universities), paralysing the independent media, stepping up online censorship, as well as isolating Russians from 'subversive' circles at home and abroad.⁵ This will provoke further tensions and the growing lack of trust between the West and Russia, aggravated also by the increasing US factor in the fields of European politics, military and energy security (increasing military presence on NATO's eastern flank, new supplies of American liquified natural gas, etc).

If it was to accept the earlier-mentioned Russian 'peace proposals' of December 2021, the West would in fact have to give up its active policy towards eastern Europe, and in particular its efforts of westernisation, which – in the Kremlin's view – pose a threat not only to Russia's influence in its 'zone of privileged interests', but also to the stability of the current Russian regime. Moreover, the West giving up on its efforts of westernisation would not necessarily guarantee that Russia would abandon its policy aimed at dismantling the cohesion of the West – especially the cohesion of the transatlantic community and of the EU itself. Nor would it necessarily guarantee that Russia would abandon its aggressive measures in its policy towards some post-Soviet states.

On the one hand, for Russia to abandon Europeanisation would mean social stagnation and serious problems with modernisation in the long run. On the other, for the West to reject the Russian Federation means the West potentially being threatened with the creation of a genuinely independent 'centre of power' in Europe, disinclined to the West, and with numerous problems. Dialogue with Russia therefore remains an indispensable tool for building European security. In conducting this dialogue, however, one should not forget about deterrence.

5 See Domańska, M. (2021) 'Russia 2021: Consolidation of a dictatorship', Centre for Eastern Studies, 8 December (www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Commentary_419.pdf).