

# Southeast European and Black Sea Studies

## Russia–EU relations at a crossroads: preventing a new Cold War in a polycentric world

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In the past year, the Ukrainian crisis has generated an international discussion about a ‘new Cold War’. This article looks into the likelihood of such a scenario and makes suggestions of how it may be precluded. The course of events depends on whether the current model of globalization can be reversed. This would mean not only a change in the current structure of the global economy, but its dismantling. However, it is obvious that for most European and other states, the risks associated with such a policy outweigh potential geopolitical and economic benefits. The international order is in a state of flux. High risks are unacceptable when governments or nations pursue their interests in a stable environment. But when the balance of power shifts substantially, as it has now, the perception of risk threshold also begins to change. European history has shown that large-scale transformations in international relations in most cases triggered tension and violence, caused by rising demands of ascending powers and by resistance of those who were challenged. In the twenty-first century, the polycentric structure of the world provides an opportunity to achieve a new lasting global settlement, and to put an end to the current period of increasing tension.

**Keywords:** Russia; EU; new Cold War; security; Ukrainian crisis; globalization

### Introduction

In the past year, the Ukrainian crisis has generated an international discussion about the future of global politics and the possible emergence of a ‘new Cold War’ era. Such as development, i.e. a new Cold War era, would also mean that the current structure of the global economy and model of globalization may be reversed or dismantled. However, such a structural change in global political economy would be associated with significant risks for most European and other large or systemic economies.

Current events in global security and economy indicate that the international order is in a state of flux. In periods marked by fundamental shifts in the balance of power, as the one we currently live through, the perception of risk threshold also begins to change. European history has shown that large-scale transformations in international relations in most cases have triggered tension and violence, caused by rising demands of ascending powers and by resistance of those who were challenged. In the twenty-first century, the multipolar structure of the world provides an

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opportunity to achieve a new lasting global settlement, and to put an end to the current period of increasing tension.

### **Forward into the past?**

The Ukrainian crisis has proved the strongest argument in recent years for those both abroad and inside Russia who have been applauding Russia's involvement in a new round of confrontation with several Western states. On most counts, a 'new Cold War' is unlikely. Nevertheless, there are quite a few people who lament the end of its predecessor. That Cold War was the product of a bipolar world, while the world of the twenty-first century is a polycentric one. Yet, it cannot be denied that we see the emergence of opposing military and political blocs with accompanying ideological differences, real or artificial. This can be identified as a probability of a small Cold War.

A negative course of events depends on an answer to the question: Is it possible to reverse the current model of globalization? Under certain conditions, the answer is yes. This would mean not only a change of the current structure of the global economy, but its complete dismantling. Today, the global economy is more or less integrated, characterized by mutual dependence among states, including even rather isolated counties such as North Korea. This model is difficult to take apart without many influential players' sustained efforts. However, it is obvious that for most of the leading European and other powers, the risks associated with such policy outweigh potential geopolitical and economic benefits. Still, such a scenario should not be dismissed or overlooked to prevent it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The international order is in a state of flux, and this is a period of high risks. High risks are unacceptable, when governments or nations pursue their interests in a stable environment. But when the balance of power shifts substantially, the perception of risk threshold also begins to change. Recent European history has shown that large-scale transformations in international relations have always, unfortunately, triggered tensions and violence, the result of rising demands of ascending powers and resistance of those who have been challenged. Both sides managed to achieve settlement only as a compromise, either voluntary or imposed.

The fast emerging model of international relations, just like the previous ones, is the expression of the law of the 'rise and fall of great powers'. The unique thing about it is that for the first time, we may see new rules of the game worked out, not only in the interests of the 'Old World', but also with the interests and values of non-European regional powers taken into account. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) club and G20 are good examples of this trend. Each of the world's regions has had its instances of hegemony, but never before has the 'concert of powers' principle been used to govern relations between them; the world was too fragmented, too disunited and not interdependent enough. In the twenty-first century, the odds to establish a balance of interests on a global scale, not just on a regional one, are real.

Russia's foreign policy is often referred to in the West as a 'revolt against globalization' (Krastev and Leonard 2014, 3). In reality, it is some Western powers that have recently been pursuing de-globalization to marginalize their opponents. It would be more rational to assert that a 'revolt against globalization' is undertaken by those opposing the emerging polycentricity, which is more of a product and manifestation of globalization than anything else.

This year, we mark the 70th anniversary of joint Victory in World War Two, and one cannot cease to admire the vision of the allied powers. The Yalta and Potsdam settlement not only brought about the post-war world order in the form of the United Nations and its Security Council, but contained in itself the seeds of multipolarity. The Security Council consists not only of European powers, but also of two non-European ones, the United States (US) and China. This is a demonstration of the fact that international relations in the twenty-first century evolve not on the ruins of the post-war world order, but incorporating some of its key features. Among them is a legacy of the Westphalian model of international relations with its state sovereignty and balance of power principles (Kissinger 2014).

Ever since then, the state has remained the key player in international relations and the cornerstone of their architecture. Indeed, it is undergoing significant change, but within one regional integration project – the European Union, whose members voluntarily delegate a significant part of their sovereignty to supranational structures.

One may feel that the idea of a ‘new Cold War’ is exactly the answer to the resistance against polycentricity. Actually, it is a geopolitical trap. Russia needs to continue its multi-vector foreign policy, employ various international formats to explain and promote its views, and work not only with its allies, but also with difficult partners, most of which are to the west of its borders.

### **Increasing competition**

In Europe, the legacy of the Cold War is evident in the way NATO acts. This organization revised the boundaries of its responsibility, effectively extending it across the globe, and still is keen on further expansion. It is a tragedy for European security that ideas discussed with Gorbachev in 1989–1990 on a pan-European security architecture did not later materialize. Meanwhile, it is clear that neither Russia nor China nor India nor Brazil nor many other countries that are important for global development and stability in the twenty-first century are likely to join the alliance any time in the future. For Russia, in this situation, it is important to steer clear of a new arms race by applying smart power and asymmetric responses to security threats.

Competition is hardening along economic, trade and financial lines. The US is working on two transcontinental free-trade zones: Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and Transpacific Partnership. Should the two projects come into being, the big nations left outside would redouble their efforts to create or strengthen trade and economic bodies with their participation. This is already happening, both in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the free-trade zone between China and ASEAN, and in the form of a roadmap toward establishing an Asia-Pacific free-trade zone as was decided at the Beijing APEC summit in November 2014.

The hardening of structural competition is tangible in the creeping ineffectiveness of international law, in promoting the doctrine of a regime change and in discarding the presumption of innocence as a principle in international affairs. The US, the UK and a number of their allies grossly violated international law in 1998 when they bombed Yugoslavia, then in 2003, when they invaded Iraq, then in 2011, when they intervened in internal political conflicts in Libya and Syria, bringing about catastrophic consequences for the two countries. On the other hand, some members of the international community criticized Russia for ‘disproportionate use

of force' in the Caucasus in August 2008 and for alleged violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity in 2014. Against the backdrop of contradictory approaches and clashing interpretations of various parts of international law, the UN Security Council has increasingly turned into a field of confrontation instead of offering a platform to search for compromises.

### **Regime change policy**

No less damaging for international relations is the concept of regime change. It is obvious that if not for external meddling, the situation in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Georgia, Libya, Syria and now in Ukraine would have developed in a more favourable way. The murder of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, which Western capitals took with satisfaction, did not help the two countries improve the lives of ordinary people, and effectively threw them several decades back in terms of development. New evidence of US actions to change foreign governments was made public in 2014, when a number of official documents were declassified (Devine 2014; Takeyh 2014; Weissman 2014). Well-known assumptions of US intelligence playing a leading role in the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in 1961, Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, to name a few, were confirmed. Someday, we will learn the truth about the external factor in the overthrow of the government in Kiev.

It is interesting that present-day politicians are less scrupulous about keeping secrets. In December 2011, when speaking in a public interview for a documentary called *Putin, Russia and the West*, Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff, admitted that MI-6 was responsible for an undercover operation in Moscow in 2006, the so-called 'spy rock' row (Topping and Elder 2012). Last year, as he addressed Harvard University students, US Vice-President Joe Biden admitted that Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were providing arms worth 'hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons' to Sunni militants fighting to overthrow the regime of Assad (Carter, Brumfield, and Mazloumsaki 2014).

In the second half of 2014, the regime change doctrine became in effect the mainstream one in relation to Russia. Speaking at the United Nations on September 24 last year, the US President called Russia the main threat alongside the Islamic state and the Ebola virus (The White House 2014). Earlier, in July, the then-Minister of Defence Chuck Hagel in a meeting with Barack Obama told him that Moscow rather than the Middle East posed a key long-term threat to international security, and in a letter to the President in September, he called for taking a tougher stance on the Kremlin (Entous, Barnes, and Lee 2014, 2).

Pressure on Moscow and elsewhere was applied by driving oil prices down, and this is not a matter of any sort of conspiracy theory. Indeed, the plunge in prices was driven by the state of the global economy. But the depth of the fall cannot be explained only by this. Larry Elliott, *the Guardian's* economics editor, believes that Washington and Riyadh, each pursuing its own goals, agreed in September that the Saudis would push oil prices down (Elliott 2014, 1).

### **Presumption of innocence in international relations?**

Presumption of innocence is the cornerstone of any judicial system. But some countries completely ignore it in international relations. Iraq was invaded in the

absence of evidence linking Baghdad with al-Qaeda or the production of weapons of mass destruction. The West condemned Moscow for deploying troops in South Ossetia in August 2008. It was not until one year later that a report of the international commission headed by Heidi Tagliavini named the true culprit behind the conflict, the Saakashvili regime. It is noteworthy that the former president now is on the run and his own country is looking for him to put on trial.

A significant body of evidence suggests that neither Russia nor the rebels in Eastern Ukraine were responsible for shooting down MH17, if only because they were the least interested in it.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, the results of the ongoing international investigation are much anticipated to shed light on the case. Another investigation, which is of paramount importance, is the so-called sniper case in Maidan, though it is too much to expect Kiev to conduct it in the unbiased way. Instead, international investigation is long overdue. Meanwhile, it would be recommended to look at investigations undertaken by different groups of people, including by the American director and cinematographer John Beck-Hofmann.

An encounter with a senior Western diplomat in Moscow and our discussion about possible causes of the MH17 tragedy was revealing.<sup>2</sup> During the public part of the event, the diplomat blamed 'Russia-armed separatists'. In the private conversation that followed and when arguments were presented against 'Donetsk connection', the diplomat ended up by seriously claiming that the Boeing had been shot down with Buk fired from Ukrainian territory by a special Russian military unit, which made a mistake while targeting another plane. The astonishing logic is that if they had succeeded, Moscow would have blamed Kiev for a slaughter of Russian citizens as an excuse to intervene Ukraine.

Also, it is disturbing how opposing opinions are being treated in our countries. Quite a revelation was an interview published in December of a well-known American journalist Laura Poitras, to whom (besides Glenn Greenwald) Edward Snowden had confided his secrets about the Prism Program and the Tempora Program.<sup>3</sup> After 2006, when Poitras filmed a documentary about Iraqis living under US occupation, she had been questioned at US airports about 40 times. Since 2012, she has been living in Germany. But, according to her, the last country she would like to visit is, *alas*, the United Kingdom, where she says the law leaves the journalist totally unprotected from politically motivated prosecution.

So, given a certain course of events, a 'small Cold War' may happen, especially if Russia succumbs to its confrontational allure. But it would not be so difficult to avert it. The polycentric nature of the modern world will keep Russia from isolation and, consequently, from the sanctions achieving significant success. The fact that Putin in the last year alone visited Austria, Serbia, Hungary, Turkey, Latin America, China, India, Australia speaks to the diversity of this world.

Nobody is immune from isolation. In November last year, Russia with 40 other nations proposed to the UN General Assembly a resolution condemning heroization of Nazism. Only three countries voted against – the US, Canada and Ukraine.

### **'Not business as usual'**

In the beginning of 2015, the 'Issues Paper on Relations with Russia' was produced by the European Commission for Member States' Foreign Ministers in advance of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which took place on 19 January 2015. It was seen as a basis for further deliberations prior to the EU summit in March.

The paper was then leaked to the press and became the object of numerous comments. There are reasons to believe that the leak was deliberate and the intention was to hamper the debate, which was supposed to proceed confidentially. Still the paper deserves to be examined carefully as it reflects a certain trend in EU foreign policy thinking, which is valuable for the future of the EU–Russia relations.

The ‘Issues paper’ as a whole seems to represent a positive shift in EU political thinking about relations with Russia, although not in the narrative of the Ukrainian crisis, not to mention its genesis. For example, it says a lot about ‘major contributions’ of the EU to the search for a solution to the crisis. However, it neglects the fact that so far, all efforts of the EU have been directed at *stabilization* of the present government in Kiev, not at its *transformation* from nationalistic and aggressive to a moderate, inclusive and federal regime. The matter is that from the very start, long before the military assault on Lugansk and Donbas by Kiev’s regular forces and militia, the new Ukrainian authorities were strongly anti-Russian. Regrettably, that was openly or tacitly supported by most Western capitals. A crucial moment was missed when neighbours of Ukraine could have pressed the opposing sides to find a peaceful solution to the problem. Instead, everybody urged their favourites to take an offensive posture.

The rational core of the ‘Issues paper’ is wrapped up in language of Western ‘political correctness’, with a strong anti-Russian bias, which is understandable in the light of different approaches of memberstates towards relations with Moscow. The paper is constructed in a way to accommodate this diversity. The good news is that it is not the other way around (not an iron fist in a velvet glove).

As to positive highlights, I would point out to the ideas of a ‘proactive approach’ and a ‘strategic discussion’. It is common in recent years to say that the EU lacks strategic thinking, and that its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is in a stalemate since the first and so far the only security strategy published in 2003. There is a carefully crafted phrase: ‘The goal underpinning any decision regarding the bilateral relations with Russia is to increase the EU’s leverage to promote EU interests ...’, it is thus indicated that at least some European capitals tacitly acknowledge the poor performance of EU foreign policy since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, as one of the factors allowing events in and around Ukraine to degenerate to such a low level.

The ‘Issues paper’ is a mix of realistic and non-realistic assumptions. For example, in January 2015, it was unrealistic to base relations with rebels and Russia on ‘full implementation’ of the Minsk agreements. These agreements were a step forward when they were signed, but not a final goal of the settlement. Since then, both Kiev and Donetsk and Lugansk have made it clear that they have different and even incompatible interpretations of some points of the Minsk declaration and protocol. These documents meant to stop the active phase of fighting, which they did for a certain amount of time, and then be negotiated further. For example, from the very start, it was clear that Minsk I did not solve the issue of the Donetsk airport.

In this respect, the fate of Minsk I did not differ from previous agreements. For example, Russia has insisted many times that the settlement of the Ukrainian crisis should be based on the agreement of 21 February 2014, signed by V. Yanukovich and opposition leaders, then on Berlin agreements, rather than on Geneva agreements, but each time, Kiev and its supporters took the stance that previous agreements had become outdated, and that events had moved forward, so something

new should be negotiated to reflect the present situation. Both Minsk-I documents were full of trade-offs and to take them as cast in stone is a road to nowhere. New concessions and compromises are necessary on both sides of the Ukrainian civil war.

What is realistic and welcome is the continued application of two existing trilateral formats (Russia–EU–Ukraine), first, on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between EU and Ukraine and, second, on gas, as precious and still-fragile platforms for enhancing trilateral dialogue. This should become the focus of diplomacy with respect to the Ukrainian crisis. If these two platforms collapse, nothing else would work. The approach suggested in the ‘Issues paper’ is realistic – to differentiate between sanctions with regard to Crimea and to Eastern Ukraine. What the ‘Issues paper’ understandably could not say is that Crimea is a closed issue if not for declaratory purposes; instead, negotiations should concentrate on sectoral sanctions linked to the situation in Eastern Ukraine, which hurt everybody.

The most important part of the paper is the practical, and therefore valuable for further negotiations, section entitled ‘Possible elements for selective and gradual re-engagement’. Firstly, what is timidly called ‘communication lines’ is in fact the only way, and a paramount one, to re-engage the EU and Russia in dealing with pressing regional and global hotspots, like Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Middle East Quartet, Iran, North Korea, etc. To let the Ukrainian crisis hijack cooperation on these problems would be short-sighted and in fact, a betrayal of the international obligations of the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Secondly, in the ‘Trade’ section of the ‘Issues Paper’, the key point is engagement with the EEU. Russia has been suggesting it for a long time, in general, as a mechanism to reinvigorate the joint objective of the common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and in particular as one of the tools to diffuse the Ukrainian crisis.

Thirdly, relaunching Sectorial dialogues would be momentous for restoring the fabric of the EU–Russian relations. Among them, the Energy dialogue and the Visa dialogue are the most important ones.

Most points listed within these three core areas are welcome starting points for resuming systemic dialogue between the EU and Russia. Several additions would be useful to include in the package: first, further dialogue on a joint foreign policy and security ministerial committee (Meseberg initiative); second, further deliberations on joint EU–Russia peacekeeping missions; third, Moldova’s Association Agreement with the EU – the issue, which has some sinister resemblance with the initial phase of the Ukrainian crisis; fourth, cooperation in the Arctic region.

All in all, for Russia, the notion of ‘not business as usual’, which is stipulated in the ‘Issues paper’, is an acceptable approach, as for Moscow, it is not impossible to return to the narrative of strategic partnership with Brussels under the conditions of imposed sanctions. But politics is not about amicability, but rather about promotion of national interests. Also, it is easy to predict that Moscow, in a situation of the secondary role of CSDP in the Ukrainian crisis’ settlement, will enhance its reliance on bilateral relations with different European capitals and beyond.

The visit of A. Merkel and F. Hollande to Moscow for negotiations with V. Putin in February 2015 and the following summit in Minsk in Normandy format plus P. Poroshenko and the simultaneous negotiations among members of Contact Group, including Donetsk and Lugansk proclaimed republics (Minsk2), probably is the last real chance to establish lasting peace in Ukraine. In the unprecedented



move, the leaders of four countries spend long hours throughout the night to work out the advanced version of the peace agreement between two sides of the Ukrainian civil war. It is difficult to imagine that they would be ready to repeat the same torturous experience ever again. In Minsk, all of them invested huge political capital in the peace process and all of them should be deeply interested in the success.

Since then, Minsk2 has become the symbol of hope and reconciliation, although a very fragile one. Provocations are many. The political configuration in Kiev is such that many politicians, like A. Yatsenyuk, A. Avakov, A. Parubiy and A. Turchinov rather benefit from the peace process failure than from its success. They are the product of Maidan *coup d'état* and the 'anti-terrorist operation' launched by Turchinov. This is the main challenge for Poroshenko. Many politicians in Washington, Ottawa and London regrettably belong to the same belligerent category. In these circumstances in the western camp, most depends on the political will of Berlin and France to press Kiev to follow Minsk-2 agreements.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. See, 'What did US Spy Satellites see in Ukraine?' Consortiumnews.com. July 20, 2014. <https://consortiumnews.com/2014/07/20/what-did-us-spy-satellites-see-in-ukraine> (accessed March 30, 2015). Also see 'Ukrainian rebels hand over black boxes as bodies depart'. *The Guardian Weekly*, July 25, 2014 and 'Специальный брифинг Минобороны России по вопросам катастрофы рейса MH17 в небе Украины' [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11970654@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11970654@egNews) (accessed March 30, 2015).
2. Confidential discussion between the author and senior western diplomat in Moscow in the aftermath of MH17 tragedy.
3. Women of 2014, Special issue, *Financial Times Weekend Magazine*, December 13–14, 2014.

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