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HOW TO TALK WITH RUSSIA

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SUMMARY

- A growing sense of cultural alienation is making it progressively harder to talk to Russia.
- There is an understanding amongst Western policymakers that Russia wants to be treated as an equal but a disagreement about equality remains. For Russia, it means having the right to set and tweak "the rules of the game".
- This misalignment is worsened by an inability to pick the right tone when communicating. Putin and his core team are highly influenced by their Soviet backgrounds and speak and listen on different terms to the West.
- Current approaches to talking to Russia miss the mark. Instead of communicating on commonalities, diplomacy should aim at rationalising the context of disagreements and agreeing on their nature.
- Nonetheless, the West should be very clear on its vision as concerns the implementation of the Minsk agreement, and should only accept full implementation as a condition for removal of sanctions.
- Europe should consider engaging civil society actors and experts who may become thought leaders in the future.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea, many policymakers in Europe concluded that it had been a mistake to let Russia get away with the 2008 Georgian war. "We were not clear enough on Georgia, that's why they moved to Ukraine," was the gloomy conclusion. In all likelihood, similar conversations took place also in Moscow. "We were not clear enough in Georgia, that's why they moved to Ukraine," people would say, having in mind the expansion of Western outreach.

This example illustrates the problem that Russia and the West now face. We have fundamentally different understandings not only of what constitutes acceptable international behaviour, but also of the goals and "natural" drivers that underpin it. And we are unable to have a direct conversation about our differences. Different frameworks combined with miscommunication have grown, over time, into self-perpetuating antagonistic narratives.

In Russia, where decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a narrow and like-minded group of people, a coherent anti-Western narrative has emerged that is already nearly impossible to penetrate. At delicate moments, this can be highly dangerous: if both sides consider the other side the aggressor, misreading the other side's intentions can lead to reckless action.

In this context of cultural alienation, is it still possible to talk to Russia, and what would that take?

This is the question that now plagues both NATO and the EU. While in the NATO context the dangers of miscommunication are sometimes recognised, EU discussions are all too often

driven by bureaucratic political logic. A desire to have “a positive conversation” alongside (or instead of) sanctions, fosters the hope that, if engaged positively, Russia will mellow and a “new deal” might be found that turns Russia towards co-operation again. In the latter context, cooperation between the EU and Eurasian Economic Union is often mentioned as a potential deal-maker.

While the desire to have “a positive conversation” is in itself understandable, and cooperative co-existence with Russia should definitely remain Europe’s long-term strategic goal, a shallow approach to the issue holds considerable dangers. Our differences run so deep that they cannot be papered over with another bureaucratic initiative, however well-intentioned. Worse still, in the context of mutual miscommunication, raising expectations based on false assumptions will not just lead to disappointment. Given our history of disillusionment, each future disappointment is likely to be more emotional than the last, and cause a more dangerous backlash.

America’s experience with its reset policy is an instructive example here. For the US, the reset was just such a “positive conversation.” It was pragmatic policy – an attempt to work with Russia on areas of common interest and therefore to limit publicity around disagreements. But in Russia, the reset – coming so soon after the Georgia war – was interpreted effectively as a geopolitical apology: as America’s admission that it had ventured too close to what Russia considers its sphere of influence. It was seen as a promise to change course.

As a former Russian diplomat, speaking under Chatham House rule, later acknowledged:

“The concept of the reset was misinterpreted by Russia. Russia thought it was finally accepted among the great powers, but in fact the reset turned out to be about a narrow set of issues. This was a great disappointment. The concept of tactical co-operation is alien to the Russian elite. Relations with other countries have always been emotionally charged. Recognition is an important concept and Russia wants to be treated as an equal.”

The nature of the disagreement

That Russia wants to be treated as “an equal” is a phrase that often comes up in conversations with Russian policymakers and experts. However, the definition of “equal” is elusive. Institutionally, one could argue that Russia has been treated as more than equal: it has been admitted to all the Western organisations it wished to join without necessarily qualifying for them. The West has also done its utmost to link Russia up with the EU and NATO as a like-minded “strategic partner”. But Russia still feels less than equal and humiliated. How come?

The truth seems to be that Russia has never wanted to be treated as an equal partner inside the Western OSCE-based system. Rather, for Moscow, being “equal” means having

the right to set and tweak the rules, not just to advance its own interests within the post-Cold War European system with its common set of rules. It means having geopolitical veto rights and uncritical acceptance of the nature and practices of its domestic regime – neither of which the OSCE principles can provide.

Contrary to what many would claim, Russia is not an expansionist power. It does not want to dominate the world, conquer Europe or even restore the Soviet Union. But it wants a sphere of control in the area that the EU calls its Eastern neighbourhood, and it wants spheres of control as such to be accepted as an organising principle of international life. Russia does not have an ambitious global agenda: its approach to the Asia-Pacific region is inspired more by its Western and great power relationships than by any local context. Likewise, its actions in the Middle East have less to do with the region itself than with Moscow’s counter-revolutionary stance and the “principle of inviolability of regimes”. These are issues that have troubled Russia in the Western context, rather than the Eastern one, as Russia views the West as having engineered most of the popular revolutions of the last few decades.

While these actions do not constitute a global challenge to the West – reminiscent of the Cold War times – they nevertheless do constitute a sharp clash of paradigms that is bound to manifest itself again and again.

The nature of the miscommunication

This clash is magnified by the accompanying misunderstandings and miscommunications. Decision-makers in Russia view Western actions through their own paradigms: they seem to sincerely believe that the West is engineering “colour revolutions” with the aim of weakening Russia’s sphere of influence and strengthening its own. They suspect that the ultimate goal is to bring about regime change in Russia.

The West in turn has until recently been largely oblivious of the extent to which Russia sees the world and its working principles differently. It has interpreted Russia’s actions as aberrations, misunderstandings, or as inspired by domestic political considerations. There has been a strong belief that as Russia experiences the benefits of co-operation, it will eventually become a fully paid-up member of the OSCE-based order.

It is entirely normal that the abyss between our world views should have deepened as the authoritarian regime consolidated itself in Russia. However – and this is not entirely logical –, the West’s ability to grasp the depth of it did not catch up, at least until the annexation of Crimea served as a wake-up call. This ignorance is rooted not only in intellectual laziness and wishful thinking. It also has to do with the decline in the quality of communication – and this in turn has something to do with the personalities of leaders, first and foremost with the personality of Vladimir Putin.

A Russian expert who for a long time has been advising the Foreign Ministry, has pointed out that the reason why Russia acquiesced to the first two rounds of NATO enlargement was the fact that these had been discussed with Moscow in terms that were understandable to them:

“They did not like enlargement, but they saw that stopping it had an unacceptable price, and so they negotiated compensation. All Russia’s wishes that Moscow managed to articulate were met – whether Russia managed to make use of what it got is a different matter. But it was a deal that Russia knew it had accepted.”

These talks, however, had mostly taken place between the Yeltsin government and the Clinton administration. With the advent of the Putin and Bush presidencies, both Russia’s ability to articulate its wishes and the West’s ability to understand them started to decline.

And here one comes to Putin’s personality. Putin’s worldview and his modus operandi have been shaped by Soviet norms and hagiography to a greater extent than is necessarily common among Russians, even of his generation. His communication habits bear some unmistakable Soviet characteristics, which when used in conversation with the West, are often misunderstood and make him seem deceptive. This is not necessarily intentional.

In Soviet life, hypocrisy was the norm, characterised by the famous Soviet saying: “we pretend to work, they pretend to pay us”. Adherence to the nominal state of affairs – pretending to work, pretending to believe in Communism – was a social obligation, but everyone knew that this was just a pretence. In these circumstances, there were just two ways of discussing the true state of affairs: between the lines (using official rhetoric), or in a trusted environment, abandoning the pretence.

In his communication with the West, Putin has used both: he has used Western liberal rhetoric to get across his own – often quite illiberal – messages. He has also resorted to the crude naked truth – exposed in statements such as “Ukraine is not even a country”. The West, however, tends not to hear his message: in “politically correct” statements we miss the double speak; the more “naked” messages can be so crude as to be grotesque, or they are dismissed as bullying and blackmailing not worth engaging with.

This is not to say that the West never uses double speak itself. It does, but of a different kind. In the West, double speak may be used to cut some corners and solve some thorny real-life problems, but it has never become a norm nor led to a sustained double reality. Rules can be breached, but they still remain rules, even in the eyes of those who breach them. In the Soviet system, it was vice versa: rules were known to be fictional even in the eyes of those who followed them.

This logic may also explain why Russia is so unhappy with

many of the international rules and norms it has voluntarily signed up to, be it the OSCE charter or WTO rulebook: it never thought that these were meant to be followed in letter as well as in spirit.

Russia has an interesting double-track behaviour when it comes to rules and norms. While it can be very rigid and legalistic in clinging to the letter of the law, it can also freely ignore its spirit. It can also use the letter of the law to evade the spirit. But such behaviour is often driven by Russia’s notion that by so doing, it in fact engages with the “real conversation,” beneath the veneer of public norms – as the Soviet Constitution covered the realities of Soviet policy making.

Its special operation in Crimea bears all the hallmarks of such logic. It was important to observe the “letter of the law” – that is, to pretend that the Crimea referendum had local roots, to have at least implausible deniability of Russia’s involvement.

Seeing what was happening, many Europeans concluded bitterly that “Putin lies”. But there is a logic to his lies. They are not just intended to deceive, but to communicate. The Crimea operation communicated that Russia was willing and able to set rules in its neighbourhood. It was not just physical, but also a mental demonstration of force, telling the West that: “you may know we are there, but you cannot prove it, so you cannot do anything and so you had better accept our terms”.

It is often said that Putin is a good tactician with no strategy. Perhaps. But he knows very well where he wants to get, makes use of the openings he sees and often uses escalation as an invitation to talk or a demand that his wishes be taken seriously. Doing so is often his substitute for direct discussion. As one astonished Brussels official acknowledged:

“Russia never said it wanted a sphere of influence in Ukraine! Had they said so, we would have approached the issue differently.”

But neither Russia nor Putin said it. They thought it was self-evident, too obvious to be put into words.

After Putin’s first years in power, a Russian media article characterised his foreign policy as “Bulgakovian,” referring to the famous sentence from Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*: “You should never ask anyone for anything. Never. Especially not from those who are more powerful than you”. Contrary to expectations, Putin did not pick a fight over the Baltics joining NATO; he did not ask for money or for a sphere of influence. After 9/11 he sided with the US without asking for anything in return. But the fact that he did not articulate demands does not mean that he did not have expectations. After all, Bulgakov’s next sentence reads: “They will make the offer and they will give of their own accord”.

This offer, however, never materialised. What for Putin were great concessions on his part, the West interpreted just as common interests, and instead of coming up with a payback

of a suitable nature and magnitude, or – rather – explaining why the latter could not be offered, it simply said “thank you”. And so the cycle of miscommunication started.

What next? Policies and problems

After the annexation of Crimea exposed the depth of differences, three different policy options have been put forward in the West.

The first focuses on constraining Russia. It suggests beefing up the defence plans for NATO territory, trying to limit Russia’s leverage in its non-NATO neighbourhood, and sticking to economic sanctions that supposedly sooner or later will bring down the ever more brittle regime in Moscow.

The second approach – advocated, among others, by US foreign policy gurus Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger – is essentially a geopolitical deal with Russia, which focuses around a permanent non-aligned status for Ukraine.

The third approach is a mix of carrots and sticks. This is the position often heard in Europe: we need to be firm on sanctions and use them to regulate the situation in Ukraine, but at the same time we should look out for ways to offer Russia a new stake in the European order. This could be done by legitimising the Eurasian Economic Union by allowing it to co-operate with the EU.

All these suggestions have been made with the best of intentions, but people remain unaware as to what it would really take to adopt any of these concepts as a policy.

While constraining Russia is clearly necessary, one needs to resist the temptation to draw excessive parallels with the old Cold War. Doing so would encourage people to apply old solutions to new challenges; instead of informing thinking it would risk making one blind to current realities. The memory of the Cold War has also now become an “edited” memory in the minds of many Westerners – a heroic time with great clarity about good and evil. The real dangers and confusions have largely been forgotten.

In reality, a new containment policy may not be such a smooth success. Compared to the old days, Russia is a lot weaker than the West, but the West is a lot more distracted. A new Cold War would thus be an “asymmetric” one; and so far, the West has done a lot worse in “asymmetric” wars than symmetric ones. In fact, a proper public Cold War would actually suit Russia’s regime pretty well: prolonging its life expectancy through the ability to consolidate the people against an external enemy. And the fall of the regime in itself is not a solution either. For good things to take root on its ruins, the regime needs to first discredit itself in the eyes of the population, and then be changed by that same population.

However, doing a geopolitical deal with Russia would not be any more straightforward. Not only would such a deal run counter to a whole array of documents that regulate the

international behaviour of European countries (the OSCE charter, the principles of the Council of Europe, the founding documents of the EU and NATO), it would also be impossible in practice. While after the Cold War the spheres of influence could be held together by coercion, these days some attraction is needed. Moscow may lay a claim to a sphere of influence, but it cannot really hold on to it without this being accepted by the societies of the countries concerned. These societies, in turn, are starting to mature and demand more accountability from their elites who have often run their countries in a self-interested and corrupt manner.

This manifests itself in a bumpy, but inevitable evolutionary process that the EU did not launch and does not control, but cannot do anything other than support. Moscow, on the other hand, is fixated on the elites it can control – and is therefore bound to resist the change. Furthermore, it would interpret any difficulties with the societies as subversion originating in Europe. That way, even if the West did concede Russia a sphere of influence, it would never reap the desired benefits in terms of stability – but it would have lost the OSCE-based principles of the European order.

Finally, the third option – a combination of firmness and an appealing project – runs the risk of being misunderstood by Russia in the same way the reset was misunderstood. The EU-EEU cooperation especially has its natural limits and cannot be ignored. For the time being, the EEU Commission has a mandate to handle just the trade issues, but one of the Union’s members, Belarus, is not a member of the WTO. For the EU, all trade negotiations are based on WTO rules. This means that it is hard to find an actual agenda for any discussion with the EEU: one can think only of low-level technical issues, such as standards and customs procedures. To invest such low-level interaction with expectations of a major break-through would be not just futile, but also dangerous.

It might happen that Russia would just fail to appreciate the proposal, but in a worst-case scenario it would misinterpret it altogether. It may hope that the West has finally granted it its due geopolitical entitlement and other sorts of unconditional acceptance. But this would not be the case. Unconditional acceptance is something that the EU does not give even to its member states.

The EU might also hope that limited cooperation with Russia would, over time, grow into something bigger and make Russia a cooperative partner in a Western system. This would not be the case either. A semi-symbolic gesture of goodwill would not “buy” Russia’s acquiescence. If we look at the proposals that Russia is making – on geopolitical order, or even on the DCFTA with Ukraine – we quickly realise that to really meet Russia’s expectations, we would need to accept a profound overhaul of the principles of most post-Cold War institutions; not just NATO and the OSCE would need to change their principles, but so would the WTO, possibly the Bretton Woods system, and so forth.

Focus on differences and talk

In the absence of a workable policy with an acceptable price tag, what should Western dialogue with Russia look like? Counterintuitively, we should start the Russia-West conversations not with commonalities – as would be a diplomat's instinct – but on the differences.

The primary aim of communication should be to rationalise the context and to agree on the nature of disagreements. If this could be achieved, then the differences would still be there, but they would be less dangerous. Once Moscow is convinced that even though the West tries to defend its principles in Ukraine, it is not in fact plotting an attack on Moscow, then the chances of a pre-emptive attack on Western allies or assets would be much reduced. Likewise, once Russia is convinced that even though the West may be desperate for cooperation with Russia, it is ready to be tough when it comes to defending some basic principles, then the danger of a “next Ukraine” will be much reduced.

Such a conversation should take place at different levels and in various formats. Starting from the top – it is important to keep the conversation going with President Putin. Even though he “lives in a different world”, as famously stated by Angela Merkel, it is still important to let him know how his actions are understood by the West.

To reduce dangers stemming from misunderstandings on the political level, it is important to have working contacts among the military. These need to be calibrated carefully. Russia must not be able to use any conversations, military or otherwise, to legitimise its actions in Ukraine – but it should know for certain that while the West is preparing to defend the NATO territory, it is not preparing to attack Russia's territory.

On the diplomatic front, the West should be very clear on its vision as concerns implementation of the Minsk agreement: only full implementation would qualify as a condition for removal of the sanctions. Up until now, the West has tried to force-feed Russia a face-saving exit from Donbas, while Russia has still been eager to eat Kyiv, to gain control over its decision making. This must not succeed and the EU needs to be clear on it. That said, if one day Russia indeed wants a face-saving way out, it should be granted – but again, with full clarity on what it is: saving face and not a solution on Russia's terms. Russia's (mis)interpretation of the Western-mediated agreement between Viktor Yanukovich and his opposition should serve as a warning example on how mediation can be misunderstood.

On the institutional level, we should consider re-shaping some of the discussion formats to suit today's needs. Most, if not all formats that unite Russia and the West are based on the assumption that we share interests or even values. That has been the source of much frustration on both sides. Russia has felt permanently criticised, while Western allies have felt they need to choose between good relations with Russia and their sense of truth. We could get rid of

that frustration by redesigning the discussion in ways that do not imply like-mindedness. The Russia-NATO Council would be the obvious first candidate for such an overhaul, but there are others.

We should also try to engage with Russia's civil society, even though the Kremlin has made it difficult. Some Russian NGOs are remarkably active and well-organised, and clearly incubators of Russia's future elite. Their activities in Russia are hindered, but many have branched out to the West, while still maintaining influence in Russia. Europe should support such organisations and socialise the activists into Western discussions. For the time being, it is impossible to reach out to wider Russian audiences who are recipients of the information the Kremlin chooses. But NGO activists are usually eager to have contacts. And it is they who will almost certainly become opinion leaders in Russia when the TV dictatorship ends.

We should also continue the conversation with Russia's expert circles. While many experts undoubtedly serve as spokespersons for the regime, many others have retained a desire to actually understand events, and some are balancing between the two. It may be hard to change these people's minds, but it is possible for good personal relationships to emerge, which – at time of crises – will be useful to get a better understanding of the other side's thinking and policy drivers.

In short, Europe should launch a multi-layered conversation with Russia about our differences without the immediate aim of solving them via some grand bargain. We should talk about differences in order to rationalise them. To compartmentalise the relationship and find areas for co-operation would still be fine, but only if such co-operation is understood by both sides for what it is. But embarking on a symbolic positive project in the framework of misunderstandings will be dangerous, as raised expectations, if unfounded, are bound to generate a dangerous backlash – more dangerous each time it re-occurs.

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