



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

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REP Programme Paper

Western Attitudes Towards Russia

Sir Andrew Wood

Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House; former UK Ambassador to Russia

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There is no general Western view of Russia that goes beyond policy-free generalities. Two of my favourites are that we should “engage” with that country and second that Russia’s “inescapable direction of travel” is towards European values and therefore ways of behaviour. The first proposition is content-free as it stands, since ignoring the country is not an option, for Europeans at least. And the second is a statement of faith, not a guide to policy today.

Both these propositions are, however, reflected in different ways in three broad camps within the Atlantic community whose ideas about Russia have developed over the years. The United States has generally been in one group, Germany, France and Italy in another, and former Warsaw Pact countries together with the UK and Scandinavian countries in the third. The EU, as one result, has never been able to build coherent policies towards Russia, or been consistent in the pursuit of its declared broad and ambitious aims.

The balance between doing what we can to support the desirable evolution of a liberal polity in Russia, or at least a Russian state ready to work constructively with the rest of us on the one hand, and dealing with Moscow’s imperial leanings on the other is, of course, difficult to strike. We paid quite a lot on account in the 90s in the hope of encouraging Moscow down the path of what we would see as virtue, most of it wasted. We were quick to acclaim the reforms enacted in Putin’s first term, and to pass by in silence the construction of his ‘vertical of power’ with its accompanying suppression of civil liberties. We have been reluctant to criticize the brutal realities of Moscow’s actions in the Northern Caucasus, and were eager to return to ‘business as usual’ after August 2008. The EU report on the Georgia conflict was notable for the way it evaded coming to an unpalatable judgment by failing to address Russian behaviour in preceding years, preferring to concentrate on the narrower question of the immediate responsibility for the outbreak of fighting. The weight of European opinion over the years has been, in short, on the side of those who assume that engagement means wooing a Russia that will one day recognize her true destiny of becoming more like the rest of us, even one of us.

The United States has a more distant relationship with Russia than the countries of Europe. The ‘reset button’ has led to some useful progress in controlling nuclear weapons. It has also boosted Russia’s view of itself as a natural and even equal counterpart to the United States, with its own singular destiny and individual interests, which is a more ambivalent result. But we have yet to see Russia being persuaded to act in consequence of adjusted

US policies in what for the United States – and by extension the rest of us – would be a more constructive manner either within Europe or outside it.

Thomas Graham gave an authoritative exposition of the ‘pragmatic’ American approach towards Russia in speaking to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in Washington on 17 March 2010, and it is worth careful examination.¹

I have four reservations about it:

- It seems to equate the interests of Russia's ruling elite with those of Russia itself. These are not however the same, and do not legitimate, for instance, Russia's 2008 action against Georgia.
- Russia is not the USSR, and cannot become the ‘great power’ it aspires to be without increasing its power in Europe, and therefore threatening others. Nor is Russia's aspiration to be a ‘great power’ compatible with the suppositions of those who believe the country to be evolving towards European values.
- Russia is not a sort of equivalent of the EU or the potential leg of a security tripod maintained through Moscow, Washington and Brussels. ‘Europe’ is in any event unlikely, in the foreseeable future, to become a unified actor on the world stage capable of bearing the weight of any such structure.
- The problem of the ‘sphere of privileged interests’ is central and cannot be wished away.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) policy document ‘leaked’ to the Russian version of *Newsweek*² in early May has been welcomed as evidence of a more mellow attitude towards the West. Moscow has good present political and economic reasons to want to convey that impression. But a considered reading of the published text does not support the idea of substantive change that several Western observers have already assumed to be there. The Russian MFA (and one can understand why, even if one may dispute it) sees the EU and the US as weakening, and that process as opening up new opportunities for Russia, including by developing closer business and political ties with the EU on (the crucial point) Russia's terms. Russia expects dividends from its existing policies towards, for instance, Iran.

¹ Available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/pdf/Graham%20Testimony%20031710.pdf>

² Available at <http://www.runewsweek.ru/country/34184/>

And the effort to integrate the economies of former Soviet countries while excluding outsiders is to continue. My point here is not to suggest that any of this is surprising, just that a less surly expression of unchanged Russian ambitions has evoked a disproportionately optimistic reaction in the West. That optimism exists despite the considerable changes in the relationship between Moscow and Kiev after the election of President Yanukovich.

Western attitudes towards Russia have of course shifted over time, and will continue to do so. Different countries of the West, and the various international groupings involved, have their individual agendas, and different historical perspectives to bring to bear. But it is the evolution of Russia which is the driving force, and Western policies and hopes play a subordinate role. That is not to say that what the various groupings within the Atlantic community believe or advocate is irrelevant, only that our efforts are complementary to developments within Russia, and that these flow from internal causes. We pay too much attention when Moscow blames the West for problems it has created itself. Many in the West have been quick to give credence to Moscow's officially promulgated point of view as opposed to judging it by the values we profess – values which have their purchase for the wider Russian public too, for that matter. This has reinforced a sense of Western weakness in both Russian official and liberal circles.

There are plausible tactical reasons for us in varying degrees to have taken an essentially placatory attitude towards Russia. One is that we have hoped, and still hope, to work more closely with Moscow. That is arguably incompatible with a continuing tense relationship with the Russian government, and, again arguably, with our commercial interests. Another is that the Russians have remained masters of the Soviet diplomatic technique of endless repetition of a set of propositions until those propositions dominate the agenda. The litany about Russia being humiliated by the West has been a notable instance. So has the claim that European security structures are outmoded. Objections are dealt with by irrelevant but often disorienting allegations about their critics. A third is that there is a natural tendency for both leaders and commentators to personalize matters: hence friend Bill or Jacques for Yeltsin, or friend Gerhard for Putin. The risk of confusing the leading Russian of the day with Russia itself is all the greater given the way that the personalization of the Russian system of power has advanced over the past ten years. That has been made still more seductive by the conflation in both Russian and Western understanding of the Soviet Union with today's Russia, and Russia with Putin.

If Russia were now about to begin a new stage in its evolution, this time in the

direction of a more liberal society, then it would of course be right to encourage that process. Western hopes of this are of long standing. We have been ready to rationalise our disappointment so far with questionable arguments such as that the Russians are not suited to democracy, or that time is needed under central rule for the groundwork to be laid, or even that it is somehow our fault that so little positive has happened yet. It is now suggested that President Medvedev has, by raising the modernization issue, created a momentum towards benign evolution within Russia and between Russia and the West. There are plenty of people outside Russia who would like to believe that – and quite a number also who go on to imagine therefore that it is so. But it is hard to find anyone independent and authoritative in Russia itself with real faith in early or bankable progress here, or belief in Medvedev's wish or ability to act separately from Putin.

We do not always understand Russia's conversation with itself too clearly. We tend to be behind the game, and we tend to see, like the Russians for that matter when they look at the West, what we expect, or even want, to see. That was true in the 90s, and it has been true with Putin and now with Putin/Medvedev, as we have retrospectively revised our view of what happened during the Yeltsin years. Thus for example the proposition that Putin brought prosperous stability after chaos and corruption is widely accepted in the West. It is however for question whether what amounts to a political coma over the past decade, induced in good part by oil and gas wealth, amounts to real stability. The regime has yet to prove that it can renew itself, or to develop the country to match the aspirations of its elite. Putin and Medvedev still have high poll ratings, but so have others before them when their luck ran out. Public discontent with corruption is rising. Russia was rated by Transparency International 82nd in its corruption list at the end of the last century. Now it is 146th. (One can argue as to the meaning of these figures but the trend is clear).

Modernization is a pleasing word and I do not doubt that it is used sincerely enough by President Medvedev, as it was by President Putin before him. The West would welcome it. But if it is to mean anything, it ought to apply, by way of example, to Gazprom – a company whose hidden processes, direct links to power and inefficiency are legendary. It does not, and on present form it will not. Instead, it will be sectoral, top-down, and ineffective. Real modernization would disrupt the power of the small group that rules Russia, and the system that flows from that. Neither Putin nor Medvedev is ready for that disruption.

Given the rigidity of the political construct in Russia, and the pressures acting on it, the West ought in my view to be more ready than it at present seems to be to consider the possibility that Russia's future will be grim, and that playing too much to its leaders' apologias will not help us, all of us, to avoid the consequences. This, I should stress, is not a prediction, but it is a possibility, and one that is present to many Russian minds. President Medvedev himself has spoken of potential catastrophe. The West is at present too ready to treat Russia as a singularity. The urge to make over-arching patterns, and to see Russia as a separate and powerful element within them, and one that is able or even entitled to act by its own variable rules, remains deep-seated. There are Soviet inherited ideas in both our and Russian heads. Yet Russia is still, in the end, one country among others. It has no special rights. A more modest Western perception of Russia, and accepting a higher degree of uncertainty as to its unfolding meaning, would be wise.