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Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia

How they affect Western policy, and what can be done

Duncan Allan, Annette Bohr, Mathieu Boulègue, Keir Giles, Nigel Gould-Davies, Philip Hanson, John Lough, Orysia Lutsevych, Kate Mallinson, Anaïs Marin, James Nixey, Ben Noble, Nikolai Petrov, Ekaterina Schulmann, James Sherr, Kataryna Wolczuk and Andrew Wood

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Summary

This report deconstructs 16 of the most prevalent myths that shape contemporary Western thinking on Russia, and explains their detrimental impact on the design and execution of policy.

Western policies towards Russia have failed to achieve their basic goal of establishing a stable and manageable relationship with Moscow because the thinking behind them has often been unrealistic or simply flawed. This study encourages Western governments and institutions to reassess their assumptions about Russia in order to develop more effective responses to the increasing challenges the country presents. 'Effective' in this context means, in particular, deterring Russian aggression abroad and ultimately securing a less adversarial relationship with Russia without compromising principles of sovereignty and security and the values on which they are based.

To this end, the report presents 16 of the most prevalent 'myths' – in a broadly defined sense – that distort the Western policy debate on Russia. It outlines how specific misconceptions have gained unwarranted traction in policymaking circles in the 'West' (understood here principally as Western Europe and North America). It describes the impact of these misconceptions on Western policy towards Russia, and in each case suggests what better-informed policy would look like.

The origins and causes of these myths can be divided into several broad categories. Some originate in the West, based on the default assumptions of politicians and policymakers whose formative experience has been restricted to operating in Western democratic systems and interacting with like-minded countries. The belief, for example, that Russia and the West have the same desired end state for their relationship arises when we project our own values on to Moscow and assume that we share a default common understanding of basic principles. So, too, does the argument that it is necessary or desirable for the West to make concessions to win Russian cooperation on particular issues. Similarly, the notion that the problem in relations with Russia is a lack of dialogue presupposes that more dialogue will narrow differences, when in fact Russia's current leadership is strongly motivated to maintain confrontation as a means of forcing concessions from the West.

Other prevalent myths simply reflect inadequate knowledge of Russia. For example, the widespread impression that the regime is effectively a one-man show controlled by Vladimir Putin is a consequence of insufficient understanding of how the country is really governed, and of the significant roles played by other individual officials and the institutions they control in shaping, negotiating and delivering

policy. Similarly, the assumption that what comes after Putin must necessarily be better than the current leadership derives from an entirely human inclination towards optimism which has not been tempered by exposure to the realities of Russian politics and history.

A further, distinct category of myth relates to Russia's relationship with China. For example, the idea that the West as a whole can find common cause with Russia against China, or contrive a means to set Russia and China against each other, is a confection of multiple myths – most notably regarding the complex nature of the Sino-Russian relationship itself, and Russia's long-term objectives for its own relationships with Euro-Atlantic states and institutions.

However, the majority of the myths presented here have become embedded in Western policy discourse as a direct result of deliberate Russian lobbying and disinformation. Several of the myths are prevalent not only because they arise spontaneously and out of good faith, but also because it is in the Kremlin's interest to cultivate them. Some reflect long-standing aspirations on the part of Russia: its quest for a pan-European security system on a Russian design has persisted in various forms since the 1950s. Equally, certain myths reflect broader strategic narratives that provide a framework for legitimizing Russian foreign policy goals: for example, the notion that Russia can rightfully lay claim to a sphere of privileged interests; or the suggestion that Ukrainians and Belarusians together with Russians are one Slavic people rather than having their own identities and separate forms of statehood. At other times, Russia's aim in propagating a myth can be linked to a discrete foreign policy outcome such as promoting the Eurasian Economic Union as an economic integration project equivalent to the EU.

Many of these myths, whether deliberately promoted and promulgated by Russia or not, find a willing audience in the West because they sit comfortably with audiences not attuned to Russia's understanding of history and its current leaders' definition of national interests. Adherence to myths can sometimes provide convenient excuses for inaction – or coping strategies in the face of fear and discomfort over the idea of Russia as a strategic adversary, and in the face of Russian actions that should otherwise be unacceptable. As such, the myths exert a pernicious influence on Western policy, distorting it to favour or permit outcomes desirable for Russia but not for the West.

One of the aims of this report is to call out these myths and encourage a reappraisal by Western policymakers who have misconstrued the nature of the relationship with Russia for too long. By challenging incorrect assumptions about Russia, and the flawed policy arguments that are based on them, this report urges Western politicians and officials to re-examine their positions on Russia and the effects of their assumptions on policy.

In April 2021, US President Joe Biden stated a desire for 'predictable and stable relations' with Russia. This was not a naive call for a reset. The explicit invitation to de-escalate, accompanying a carefully calibrated package of new sanctions, showed a clear intent to influence Russia's risk–benefit calculus and offer Russia a route to a better and less fraught relationship with the US and the West more broadly.

Russia's immediate and emphatic rejection of this offer means that the relationship seems to have returned to its usual unstable path. That said, in one respect the relationship with Russia *is* predictable: the analyses presented in this report strongly suggest that Russia, for the foreseeable future, will continue to trample on internationally accepted principles of behaviour and commit further aggressions undeterred, using some of the myths below as justification.

The Russian leadership will, of course, also continue its efforts to redefine the balance of global power and negotiate with Washington in a context more favourable to Russia. For US policymakers and their allies, as well as their respective publics, unravelling myth from reality in dealing with Russia has arguably never been more important.

The myths

Myth 01: 'Russia and the West are as "bad" as each other'

This pervasive view ignores significant differences in policy and conduct. 'The West' is a community of shared interests and values; NATO and EU enlargements have been demand-driven. Russia instead seeks to impose 'firm good neighbourliness' on other states whether they agree or not, and regards a 'sphere of privileged interests' as an entitlement. Controversies over Western military interventions bear no comparison to the duplicity, the absence of diplomacy and the wholesale abrogation of treaties that preceded Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. The West requires greater clarity in presenting its own policies, but there is no equivalence to acknowledge.

Myth 02: 'Russia and the West want the same thing'

Western policies that aim to engage with Russia fail if they are founded on the notion that at some level Russian and Western interests must align or at least overlap. The drive to normalize relations without addressing the fundamental causes of discord makes things worse not better. Both strategically and in detail on specific issues, Russian objectives and underlying assumptions about relations between states are incompatible with what Western states and societies find acceptable. Recognizing that Western and Russian values and interests are not reconcilable, and adjusting for that reality in the long-term conduct of the relationship, is key to managing these conflicts and contradictions.

Myth 03: 'Russia was promised that NATO would not enlarge'

Contrary to the betrayal narrative cultivated by Russia today, the USSR was never offered a formal guarantee on the limits of NATO expansion post-1990. Moscow merely distorts history to help preserve an anti-Western consensus at home. In 1990, when Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to a united Germany's incorporation into NATO, he neither asked for nor received any formal guarantees that there would be no further expansion of NATO beyond the territory of a united Germany. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the USSR transformed the security situation in Europe. Russia's new leaders did

not question the principle that countries in Europe were completely free to make their own security arrangements. Similarly, the NATO–Russia Founding Act signed in 1997 recognized the 'inherent right' of all states 'to choose the means to ensure their own security'.

Myth 04: 'Russia is not in a conflict with the West'

Euro-Atlantic policymakers may be reluctant to admit it, but Moscow's natural state is one of confrontation with the West. A key feature of the conflict is the use of unconventional hostile measures that remain above the threshold of accepted peacetime activities but below that of warfare. The Kremlin seeks to undermine Western interests through a well-established toolkit, such as election interference, targeted state-sanctioned assassinations, and information warfare. Crucially, unconventional hostile measures and indirect actions are not just *features* of this conflict, but contribute to the (mistaken) perception of there being no conflict.

Myth 05: 'We need a new pan-European security architecture that includes Russia'

Russian leaders advocate a treaty-based and continent-wide European security system that would replace existing 'Euro-Atlantic' structures, particularly NATO. This proposal is problematic: it ignores basic differences between Russia and Western countries over the issue of sovereignty. Russia wants 'great power' privileges for itself, limits on the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, and agreement that states should not be criticized if they run their domestic affairs in ways inconsistent with the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This perspective clashes with core Western interests and values. As such, even if a new pan-European security architecture were to be established, the fundamental differences in outlook between the two sides would stop such a system from functioning. Western policymakers should be clear that disagreements with Russia over the European security architecture are profound and unlikely to be reconciled soon.

Myth 06: 'We must improve the relationship with Russia, even without Russian concessions, as it is too important'

This myth rests on the premise that a combination of supposedly self-evident geopolitical weight, mutual economic interests and compensation for losing the Cold War are overriding imperatives for a successful reset with Russia – leading to a necessarily fully functional relationship. That this may leave 'lesser powers' more vulnerable to intimidation or influence is, according to those who subscribe to the myth, an unfortunate side effect and/or a price worth paying. Yet quite apart from the deep ethical ambiguities such an accommodation implies, the arrangement simply would not work.

Partly, this is because the presentation of the West, and the US in particular, as a threat to 'Fortress Russia' is an essential support to the Kremlin's increasingly authoritarian domestic rule. Few areas show promise for cooperation with Russia. Efforts in those most frequently mooted – cybersecurity, the Middle East and

North Africa, trade – have all failed so far because of Russia's illiberal approach to each subject. It is also worth remembering that Moscow itself is not putting forward cooperation wishlists; they are invariably the work of Western politicians and diplomats. Western policymakers must expect that the Kremlin's vision of Russia as a fortress entitled to a commanding role in the world yet threatened by outside powers, and by the US in particular, will remain at the heart of its beliefs.

Myth 07: 'Russia is entitled to a defensive perimeter – a sphere of "privileged interests" including the territory of other states'

The idea that Russia should be entitled to an exclusive sphere of influence in other states, notably in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, is deeply problematic. It is incompatible with professed Euro-Atlantic values around states' sovereignty and rights to self-determination. It is detrimental to geopolitical order and international security, as it implicitly gives licence to Russian actions – territorial aggression, annexation, even outright war – that risk creating instability in Russia's neighbours and Europe more widely. It effectively entitles Russia to dominate neighbouring states and violate their territorial integrity. And it misconstrues contemporary geopolitical realities, such as Russia's grudging acceptance of a second player in its vicinity – China (specifically, in relation to the expansion of China's influence in Central Asia). Betrayal aside, it is doubtful that it is even within the gift of the West to concede a sphere of influence to Russia – or that such an understanding would work if somehow established. Failure to critically re-examine geopolitical doctrines on this subject risks reproducing reductive Cold War-era postures. And while some post-Soviet and Eastern European states – and even their populations – may desire closer relations with Russia, none of them want to sacrifice their sovereign rights.

Myth 08: 'We must drive a wedge between Russia and China to impede their ability to act in tandem against Western interests'

The notion that the West can exploit tensions between Russia and China both misunderstands the nature of the relationship between the two countries and overestimates its susceptibility to external leverage. A corollary of the myth is the assumption that Russia and China form a single strategic entity that was somehow 'allowed' to develop by negligent Western policymakers. Yet just as the West did not join Russia and China together, it cannot put them asunder. The two powers have a natural ideological compatibility as well as complementary economies and interests in a range of spheres, including technology, cyber cooperation and defence. At the same time, the myth distorts the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship by ascribing to it a behavioural convergence and a grand conspiratorial character, while overlooking each state's commanding imperative to retain full autonomy in decision-making. Given that the two powers currently have more to gain from cooperation than competition, both Russia and China have chosen to push their differences to the background for the foreseeable future. But latent bilateral tensions could come to the fore in the future as China's ascendancy continues. The emergence of an 'axis of authoritarianism' is thus not in prospect.

Myth 09: 'The West's relations with Russia must be normalized in order to counter the rise of China'

Rapprochement with Russia as a strategic means of countering China would likely take place on the Kremlin's terms, and would mean sacrificing the hard-won sovereignty of other post-Soviet states. Moreover, to subscribe to this myth is to assume that the Kremlin even wants normalized relations with the West, and to forget that a better relationship with Russia, whatever its price, would do little to prevent China's reach and capabilities from continuing to grow. Most importantly, while China's transgressions of international law and violations of human rights are no more to be excused than those of Russia, an alliance with the Kremlin implicitly removes the possibility of China and the West having sustainable relations in the longer term. Western nations do not have the luxury of focusing solely on the challenges posed by China while somehow glossing over Russia's aggressive behaviour.

Myth 10: 'The Eurasian Economic Union is a genuine and meaningful counterpart to the EU'

Russia presents the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a partner for the EU in a proposed free-trade area stretching 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok'. In reality, the EAEU is a political project lacking the features of a true common market. Russia disregards the rules of the very organization through which it seeks to reassert its power, and with which it wants the EU to cooperate. Trade policy does not constitute a separate, non-politicized track in Russia's foreign policy; it is subordinated to it. Due to this instrumental use and deep politicization of economic diplomacy, the EAEU is functionally unable to act as an integration body in Eurasia, not least because Russia has no economic interest in comprehensive trade liberalization either inside the EAEU or via a free-trade area with the EU.

Myth 11: 'The peoples of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are one nation'

The Kremlin misrepresents the region's history in order to legitimize the idea that Ukraine and Belarus are part of Russia's 'natural' sphere of influence. In fact, both countries have stronger European roots than the Kremlin cares to admit. It is historically inaccurate to claim that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus ever formed a single *national* entity (indeed, the latter two countries also have political and cultural roots in intrinsically *European* structures such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). The Kremlin's narrative, which served to justify Russia's claim to the status of *primus inter pares* among post-Soviet republics, acknowledges Russia's right to interfere in the internal affairs of its neighbours to this day. The idea of a 'triune' Russian nation downgrades the uniqueness of historic indigenous cultures. Moreover, in questioning the authenticity of Ukrainian identity and the viability of 'Belarusianness' as national building-blocks, it seeks to entrench in international public opinion stereotypes that would make it harder for the two countries to pursue greater integration with Europe.

Myth 12: 'Crimea was always Russian'

The Kremlin propagates the fiction that Crimea legitimately and willingly 'seceded' from Ukraine and 'rejoined' Russia in 2014. If unchallenged, this myth risks further undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity and encouraging expansionist powers elsewhere. The subsequent drastic militarization of Crimea by Russia, and the latter's unlawful restrictions on navigation in the Sea of Azov, increase the vulnerability both of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to Russian security threats.

Yet the reality is that Crimea has been in Russian hands for only a fraction of its history. Historically (before 2014), Crimea belonged to Russia for a total of only 168 years, or less than 6 per cent of its written history. Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, no major separatist movement has existed in Crimea. Ukrainians, Russians and Crimean Tatars co-existed peacefully, with wide-ranging autonomy provided by the constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The 'referendum' organized by Russia and held under duress on 16 March 2014 was in fact merely a smokescreen to formalize Russia's military takeover of the peninsula.

Myth 13: 'Liberal market reform in the 1990s was bad for Russia'

The myth is that in Russia in the 1990s liberal market reform created a prolonged recession. It is true that liberal reform was attempted and that output fell heavily over six years, but the former did not cause the latter. Liberal reform as originally conceived was never fully or adequately implemented in Russia. In Poland, in contrast, where reform *was* carried out, the decline in output was brief and modest. In Russia, politically weak authorities failed to follow through on stabilizing the economy (including getting inflation under control and managing the public finances), while another key strand of reform, privatization, was marred by corruption. The false belief that a well-functioning market economy is somehow incompatible with Russia weakens Western policy.

Myth 14: 'Sanctions are the wrong approach'

Economic sanctions have already demonstrated practical and normative value as responses to unacceptable Russian behaviour – but they need to be allowed time to work, and their effectiveness should not be judged against impossible tests. Despite claims to the contrary, sanctions have influenced Russian actions and have taken effect despite the challenges of their use on a large and resilient target. Sanctions also demonstratively condemn unacceptable behaviour and reaffirm collective commitment to the norms and principles of international order.

Myth 15: 'It's all about Putin – Russia is a manually run, centralized autocracy'

Governance in Russia is not a one-man show. Contrary to widespread thinking, many different actors and institutions can play a meaningful role in decision-making and policy implementation in the country. The president's personal role is often exaggerated, with external observers overlooking or

misunderstanding the roles of collective bodies (for example, the Presidential Administration and the Security Council), overestimating the degree of managerial competence and discipline (presidential orders are, for instance, frequently not fulfilled), or failing to take into account the self-interested behaviour of actors beyond Putin. Although Putin may have the *ability* to intervene in all types of decision-making, that does not mean that he always does or wants to. To understand how governance actually works in the country, we need to take into account the power and complexity of the Russian bureaucracy – which will only continue to grow in importance.

Myth 16: 'What comes after Putin must be better than Putin'

This myth again reflects the triumph of hope over experience and analysis. Russia has structural issues that go beyond the difficulties associated with Putin's rule. As a result, the likelihood of a post-Putin Russia building a viable democratic political system is now lower than it was during the 1990s. In particular, the country will need a new professional cadre of elite bureaucrats and policymakers if it is to deliver accountable and effective governance. Yet conditions for the cultivation of such a cadre do not exist in today's Russia. Irrespective of who eventually succeeds Putin, Russia's political culture is certain to continue to impede the development of more constructive relations with the West.

Recommendations

Each of the authors in this volume has accompanied their analysis of a particular myth with recommendations for better policy that is more grounded in reality. These recommendations make full use of the combined decades of experience of the analysts represented here – experience which, unlike that of politicians, has not been limited or constrained by electoral terms or the cycles of political fashion. For ease of presentation, the collected recommendations are distilled here, and grouped by theme. (A condensed set of 10 principles for dealing more effectively and rationally with Russia, drawing on a selection of the authors' specific recommendations and the points below, is also presented in the 'Conclusion' chapter of this report.)

The authors offer the following advice to Western policymakers:

First principles: understanding the relationship

— Understand that Russia is not currently a partner of the West, and recognize the reality of disagreement. There are good reasons why attempts to find common ground with Russia have consistently failed over the past 25 years: **the strategic interests of Moscow and the West are at present incompatible.**

— **Do not assume by default that Russia is interested in cooperation to reduce tensions,** or that Western countries can persuade the Russian leadership to change its position. Confrontation with the West currently helps the Kremlin to consolidate its rule at home.

— Accept that **a poor relationship with Russia is not a tragedy if there are currently no means to improve it.** Diplomatic tensions are an inevitable result of properly recognizing the nature of the Russian system in its current form.

Dealing with Russia's leaders

— **Identify what a realistic desired state of relations with Russia should be** – what should the West expect *from* Russia, and what can and can't it live with? **Define actions that are 'unacceptable'** and ensure there are meaningful consequences for Russian transgressions of international law and norms.

— **Acknowledge the role of people and institutions beyond Putin in decision-making.** The limits of Putin's power, as well as the importance of many actors who enable him and at times constrain him, must be recognized.

— At the same time, **do not posit policy on an anticipated improvement in Russia after the current leadership departs.** Putin and his entourage subscribe to long-standing Russian policy principles, and their disruptive foreign policy should not automatically be considered as an anomaly.

Supporting Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space

— **Insist that Russia is not entitled to an exclusive sphere of influence** at the expense of the sovereignty of its neighbours. A Russian veto on the foreign and security policies of independent countries around its periphery should be publicly deemed unacceptable, not only because it is antithetical to Western values and priorities but because it is destabilizing for the security of Europe.

— **Reject the concept of a single Russian nation encompassing Ukraine and Belarus.** Russia's contention that the core Slavic nations are 'one people' is an attempted legitimating device for intervention in those nations' affairs. The idea must be contested because it is a serious obstacle to both countries' stable development.

— **Maintain commitment to the sovereignty,** independence and territorial integrity of Russia's neighbours, including Ukraine, **and clearly communicate this to Russia.** The illegality of the occupation and annexation of Crimea must not be glossed over or no longer discussed simply because it is inconvenient to do so.

— **Build on the success of NATO security programmes** in the Baltic Sea region by expanding these to the Black Sea. Such measures should include a reinforced forward presence in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, and should also utilize the new Enhanced Opportunities Programme for Ukraine as a vehicle to increase Black Sea security.

International security

- **Systematically expose, attribute and discredit Russian hostile actions.** This must continue to be a multinational effort, demonstrating and confirming international solidarity.
- **Keep calm.** Russian policymakers will keep trying to unnerve Western audiences and weaken their support for European security institutions, for example by overhyping the dangers of instability and war. Russia wants its adversaries to fear escalation.
- **Recognize that history matters,** and that Russia manipulates the facts for a purpose. This requires senior Western officials not just to be well briefed and confident of the facts, but ready also to challenge Russian interlocutors when they present false narratives.

Russia and China

- Recognize that, under current circumstances, **efforts to divide Russia and China will be futile and counterproductive.** Nurturing more effective alliances with multilateral or regional organizations would be a better way for Western governments and institutions to counter any regional influence the two countries are accruing, whether individually or jointly.
- Rather than ascribing a grand conspiratorial character to the Sino-Russian relationship, **prioritize specific threats and challenges** that can be successfully countered by the West. Focusing on the two countries' putative partnership obscures more relevant questions such as how Russia is able to pose challenges as a lone actor.
- Ensure that Western nations **remain able to address challenges on more than one front.** Placing a foreign policy focus on China should not equate with Russia being ignored.

Sanctions

- **Maintain the use of sanctions** as the West's most potent instrument. Sanctions can be a precision tool, targeting individuals and sectors with little impact on the wider population, especially compared to domestic structural factors. The West enjoys escalation dominance here, and can apply more severe measures in the event of further unacceptable Russian behaviour.
- **Do not hold sanctions to impossible tests they will inevitably fail.** Sanctions on their own may not cause Russia to reverse the most important actions it has taken. But no foreign policy instrument achieves all its goals. Sanctions influence Russian capacities and choices, and have discouraged the regime from escalating its actions on specific occasions.

The business community and the Russian economy

— **Do not allow Russia to use Western business interests to undermine policy principles.** The debacle over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is a classic example of how a 'business first' approach to interstate relations conflicts with political objectives and weakens solidarity.

— **Emphatically counter the notion that Western ideas are responsible for Russia's economic problems.** The Russian narrative of 'humiliation' and 'exploitation' by the West in the post-Soviet period is persuasive but pernicious, and must be resisted for the sake of sound policy in the future.

— Given Russia's instrumental use of trade diplomacy, **limit EU engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union to ongoing technical dialogue.** Any such engagement should be premised on Russia meeting clear preconditions, for example with regard to its actions in Ukraine and its commitments as a member of the World Trade Organization.

Addressing Western fallibility

— **Insist on transparency.** Not only must Western countries continue to publicize Russian hostile actions in order that their politicians and publics are sufficiently well informed to debate appropriate policy responses, but those responses must be publicly explained and justifiable. Explaining policy is part of making policy.

— **Do more to pre-empt Russian accusations of hypocrisy.** By acting more often in accordance with their proclaimed values, Western governments would enhance their authority, be heard with greater respect and, consequently, be able to defend and promote their interests more effectively.

— **Invest in Russia expertise.** Above all, this volume demonstrates the continuing critical importance of well-informed analysis of Russia. Investment in a cadre of Russia specialists across a broad range of areas is an investment in effective Russia policy, and hence in the future security of Europe and North America.

Introduction

Western policy towards Russia all too often reflects incorrect assumptions about the Kremlin's strategic agenda, and even about its basic approach to foreign relations.

James Nixey

> If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinize it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slightest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way.
>
> **Bertrand Russell**

Why do we think about Russia the way we do? What affects our inclination to regard its politics and foreign policy with broad approval, distaste, or anything in between? While there is a wide range of explanations for different and sharply contrasting opinions on the country, this report concerns the persistence of ideas that contradict or misconstrue the factual evidence. Simply put, a lot of views on Russia lack foundation and are plain wrong. For example, 'Russia and the West are as "bad" as each other' in asserting power extraterritorially and/or violating international law. 'Economic sanctions don't work, so it is pointless to pursue them in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.' Such views not only are common in the media, but have been encountered by the authors of this volume in countless discussions over the years with policymakers and government officials. This report challenges the most entrenched and persistent myths and misconceptions about the Russian state's agenda, and presents ideas to inform sounder decision-making.

Perfect objectivity is no more possible in analysing Russia than it is in the case of any other subject. We are all prone to some degree of prejudice or preconception, and the factors informing particular views naturally include personal politics, experiences and upbringing – as well as received wisdom from intellectual mentors, influential commentators and the media more broadly. Specific prejudices, whether favourable or unfavourable, towards Russia can also arise because they fit a particular worldview, or because it is politically or financially advantageous for an individual or institution to take certain positions. These pre-existing mindsets and ingrained convictions are often augmented, amplified or activated by propaganda or disinformation emanating from Russia itself. Combined with today's international media environment in which the sheer volume of information circulating allows unreliable ideas to escape scrutiny easily, myths can become a more powerful driver of action than the facts.

When this happens in the case of foreign relations, the consequence is bad policy that can be detrimental to international security. The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan observed that 'a point of view can be a dangerous luxury when substituted for insight and understanding'. In the third decade of the 21st century, nobody should need to be persuaded that relying on second-hand and misguided standpoints and dogma as a replacement for understanding Russia is dangerous for us all. So, for example, when representatives of Western countries have taken their seats at the negotiating table after Russian interventions in Georgia, Syria or Ukraine, they have invariably accepted the false premise that Russia – like the West – is looking to end the conflict. In fact, Russia's overriding motive for talks in such cases is usually to secure a better position for itself, and in some cases simply to freeze the conflict. Sadly, lives have been lost from underestimating the lengths to which Russia is prepared to go to defend and promote what it sees as its interests. In the case of the conflict in Donbas that Russia has studiously cultivated as a tool to weaken Ukraine's independence, there is an assumption in the West that a happy medium must exist that solves the underlying problem and satisfies all parties more or less equally. At the same time, France and Germany have tolerated Russia's participation in peace negotiations legitimizing its claim to be a facilitator of peace rather than a party to the conflict.

Misinformation and disinformation play a crucial role in maintaining the power of Russia in the world, and that of its political elite at home. Myths about Russia, its history and above all its relations with the West are therefore carefully protected and nurtured by the Russian authorities.

Yet we should remember that when myths about Russia are repeated, it is not always with malign intent. As McLuhan's American contemporary, Will Durant, observed, 'the trouble with most people is they think with their hopes or their fears or their wishes, not with their minds'. The compilation of mistaken ideas about Russia in this volume is not intended to disparage the motives of all who give credence to them – and who in some cases repeat them with damaging effect – but merely to illustrate that these views are indeed popularly held.

For the Kremlin, of course, the prevalence of such myths in Western discourse is not just convenient, it furthers Russian goals. Their powerful grip on Western and Russian minds distorts perceptions, impairing recognition of Russia's hostile actions against its neighbours and its own population, and constraining appropriate policy responses. If illusions about Russia were less prevalent, the world – and especially Russia's neighbours – would have fewer problems to deal with. Misinformation and disinformation play a crucial role in maintaining the power of Russia in the world, and that of its political elite at home. Myths about Russia, its history and above all its relations with the West are therefore carefully protected and nurtured by the Russian authorities.

One ubiquitous myth not covered in this compilation is that of 'Russophobia'. It is a charge routinely levelled at non-Russians (and sometimes even at Russians themselves) who disapprove of what the Russian state does. But claims of Russophobia rely for their effect on the suggestion that to criticize unacceptable actions by the state – again, whether abroad or at home – amounts to racial discrimination against the Russian people. This is self-evident nonsense. The Russian state is not synonymous with the Russian people. Nor, it must be said, is the Putin regime entirely the same as the Russian state.

Most Western specialists on Russia would like to see the country prosper as a responsible member of the international community. But when this wish incorporates a desire for Russia to become a less authoritarian country –

one that observes international obligations to respect the sovereignty of its neighbours and the human rights of its citizens – 'accommodationists' and Russian nationalists alike characterize the position as 'anti-Russian'. Like much of the invective levelled at those who wish for a better future for Russia, this flies in the face of reason. Besides the fact that two of the authors of this volume are Russian themselves, all of them have devoted their professional lives to studying the complexities of Russia and the former Soviet states. It would be perverse if that choice were born from innate prejudice. Instead, their analyses reflect their professional assessments and their personal concern at the distortion of facts.

The evidence submitted in the 16 principal chapters that follow is intended to encourage the questioning of many widely held assumptions about Russia. To quote the British economist John Maynard Keynes, 'When the facts change, I change my mind – what do you do, sir?'

About this report

Each chapter follows a uniform structure and is necessarily concise – varying between around 1,500 and 3,500 words in length and addressing the same five questions (or variants thereon): What is the myth? Who advocates or subscribes to it? Why is it wrong? What is its impact on policy? What would good policy look like? A concluding chapter draws out the key lessons from the authors' puncturing of the myths outlined in the report, and suggests guiding principles for more rational and informed Western policymaking towards Russia.

A few caveats are necessary:

First, we have used a wide definition of the term 'myth'. Some of the essays debunk factual inaccuracies. It is simply incorrect, for example, to claim that the relationship between Russia and the West soured solely because of NATO enlargement;[1] or that the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are all one nation.[2] Other essays, however, highlight incorrect reasoning rather than outright errors of fact. Put another way, point 'A' may well be true, or at least not verifiably untrue, but that doesn't make point 'B' the correct conclusion to draw from it. For example, Russia's geopolitical importance does not automatically justify Western attempts to improve the relationship in the absence of concessions from Moscow on key issues.[3]

Second, 'Russia' is sometimes referred to as a single homogeneous entity: 'Russia says', 'Russia does', and so on. This is, of course, an oversimplification that masks enormous diversity. While convenience and readability dictate the term's frequent use as a shorthand, where possible the authors refer to 'the Kremlin', 'the Russian leadership' or 'Moscow' to articulate policy action or ambition emanating from

1 Myth 3: 'Russia was promised that NATO would not enlarge'.
2 Myth 11: 'The peoples of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are one nation'.
3 Myth 6: 'We must improve the relationship with Russia, even without Russian concessions, as it is too important'.

the central government (although these wordings, too, generalize to one degree or another). We do not, as a rule, use the term 'Russia' to mean the country in its entirety or all of Russia's 146 million citizens.

Third and finally, 'the West', too, is a shorthand label, covering a variety of national and institutional approaches to Russia. There is no convenient way, for example, to capture in a word the different respective approaches of Australia, Estonia, Japan and the US (especially the approach adopted by the previous US administration, under Donald Trump). 'Western nations' and 'rules-based international order' are also equally unsatisfactory terms in their own ways. Nonetheless, one vital interest that is common to almost all actors in the West, regardless of the term's definition, is preventing the current state of confrontation with Russia from spilling over into open hostilities.[4]

The myths exposed in this report – selected from a depressingly longer list of qualifying entries – are those that the authors believe to be the most pernicious and damaging in terms of developing effective policy towards Russia. The aim of institutions such as Chatham House is to have a positive impact on policy, reflecting, in our case, the aspiration for 'a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world'. This report represents an attempt to do just that.

4 With thanks to Keir Giles and the Brookings Institution, these two paragraphs are adapted by permission from Giles, K. (2019), *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs and Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/01/moscow-rules-what-drives-russia-confront-west.

Myth 01
‘Russia and the West are as “bad” as each other’

To argue that Russia merely acts like other great powers abroad is to ignore its peremptory and coercive approach to relations with neighbouring states and its cynical disregard for international laws and norms.

James Sherr

What is the myth?

This myth can be encapsulated as follows:

The foreign policy of Russia is open to criticism, even to censure. But Russia behaves as great powers behave. The West has been no more observant than Russia of international law, and has flouted its own professed normative standards. Since the disappearance of the USSR, the US has viewed a unipolar world as an entitlement. Not only does the US violate international law, it regards itself as above it. NATO’s military intervention in Yugoslavia was no different in nature from that of Russia in Ukraine. A US still guided by the Monroe Doctrine – which defined the intervention of outside powers in the Americas as a threat to the US – has no business lecturing Russia about a sphere of influence in the former USSR. The EU is an empire in all but name.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

In the titular ‘West’ (members of NATO and the EU),[5] the case for equivalence has been put from two countervailing perspectives. The ‘realist’ case, advanced most epigrammatically by John Mearsheimer, postulates that ‘power maximization’ motivates all states.[6] Towards Ukraine, Russia[7] has acted as any great power would in response to a rival ‘moving into [its] backyard and threatening its core strategic

5 ‘The West’ is a political, not a legal term, and hence there are different definitions of it. Many would include members of the ‘Five Eyes’ grouping (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US), which have an intimate intelligence relationship. Some would include Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.
6 Schaffner, T. (2019), ‘John Mearsheimer on Russia: Insights and Recommendations’, *Russia Matters*, 26 September 2019, https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/john-mearsheimer-russia-insights-and-recommendations (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
7 Here, ‘Russia’ refers to the state leadership, as well as the defence, security and foreign policy establishments that answer to it.

interests'.[8] The prolific conservative commentator, Peter Hitchens, scornful of the role of values in Western policy, not only shares this view of Russian policy, but views the EU as a presumptive hegemon, 'a continuation of Germany in all but name' and an aggressive liberal-internationalist force.[9] This view is shared by many staunch proponents of Brexit, by Eurosceptic constituencies in the EU, and by those Europhiles who resent perceived German dominance.

In contrast, others more mindful of legitimacy and international norms have condemned the cultural ignorance, the 'crusader mentality' and the double standards that inform Western policy, or at least the Anglo-American wing of it. Both Richard Sakwa and Anatol Lieven argue that domestic factors have at least as great an influence on the US's Russia policy as Russia's actions do. In Sakwa's view, the 'effective convergence of Clintonite liberal internationalists and neo-con global interventionists' fuelled 'prejudice' and 'paranoia' towards Russia.[10] Lieven draws attention to the interaction of two traditions in US policy: the 'messianic' ('go out and turn the world into America') and the chauvinistic. Both come together in the neo-conservative belief in 'unilateral world domination through absolute military superiority'. He also assails the hypocrisy of those who ignore the fact that 'America does after all have its own sphere of influence in Central America and the Caribbean'.[11] The distinguished historian, Victor Bulmer-Thomas,[12] goes further and describes the US as an imperial project in essence. From its incorporation of Louisiana, Texas and the southwest, it became a 'territorial empire' that eventually expanded overseas. In the 20th century it enlarged its writ through the international institutions it created.[13]

The Russian state leadership indirectly reinforces the myth – not by emphasizing the equivalence outlined above but by underlining, instead, the West's transgressions of international norms. The official basis of Russian foreign policy is the UN Charter (which, of course, affords it a Security Council veto), international law and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. In its view, the West pursues a policy based on 'US diktat', democracy promotion, military intervention and regime change.[14] Without any hint of contradiction, Russia also claims a right to a 'sphere of privileged interests' and the 'right to defend compatriots wherever they live'. From Moscow's perspective, Russia's policies and the West's policies are divergent; they are not equivalent. So while it is not explicitly cultivating the 'bad as each other' myth, Russia in effect enables it to flourish by claiming that the West acts unacceptably.

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8 Mearsheimer, J. (2014), 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2014, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
9 Maitra, S. (2017), '"The EU is Essentially a German Empire": Peter Hitchens on Geopolitics and the Future of Europe', Quillette, 19 May 2017, https://quillette.com/2017/05/19/eu-essentially-german-empire-peter-hitchens-geopolitics-future-europe (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
10 Sakwa, R. (2017), 'Clinton and Russia: Who is Ms Hillary?', Valdai Discussion Club, 9 October 2017, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/clinton-and-russia-who-is-ms-hillary (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
11 Asia Society (2004), 'America and the Imperial Project: A Talk with Anatol Lieven', https://asiasociety.org/america-and-imperial-project-talk-anatol-lieven (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
12 Also a former director of Chatham House (2001–06).
13 Lockhart, J. (2018), 'Lockhart on Bulmer-Thomas, 'Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present, and Future of the United States", H-Diplo, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/2279827/lockhart-bulmer-thomas-empire-retreat-past-present-and-future-united (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
14 See, for example, Vladimir Putin's speech to the 9th session of the Valdai Club: Kremlin.ru (2014), 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', 24 October 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860 (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).

Why is it wrong?

If the EU is an empire, it is one by invitation. NATO enlargement has been no less demand-driven. It is outsiders who seek inclusion; insiders who impose 'conditionality'. In contrast, Russia's integration projects are schemes for imposing 'firm good neighbourliness' on other states.

Many of these critiques contain important truths. The West is not an embodiment of virtue. The US-led war in Iraq (opposed, it must be said, by several Western governments) did not have the endorsement of the UN Security Council (UNSC), thereby leading many to argue that it was a violation of international law. Some have gone further and laid its more negative humanitarian and geopolitical consequences at the door of the US. Yet neither the UNSC nor the UN General Assembly ever condemned Operation Iraqi Freedom. Moreover, it is highly debatable that most of its consequences have been negative. Although Russia's support of Syria's recognized government does not violate international law in itself, the UN has accused Russia of war crimes, and the humanitarian consequences of this ongoing conflict surpass those in Iraq.[15] 'Who is worse' is a matter of judgment. In that limited sense, there is no myth to deconstruct here.

But this misses the broader picture. In fact, a comparison of Europe and the US to Russia highlights key differences. First, if the EU is an empire, it is one by invitation. NATO enlargement also has been no less demand-driven. It is outsiders who seek inclusion; insiders who impose 'conditionality'. In contrast, Russia's integration projects are schemes for imposing 'firm good neighbourliness' on other states, many of which have incurred serious costs (and in Ukraine's case, war) by opposing these initiatives. Some countries that have freely chosen integration with Russia (e.g. Belarus and Armenia) have subsequently come under brutal pressure to cede more sovereignty than they intended. When, in 2010, Ukraine's then-president, Viktor Yanukovych, abandoned integration with NATO in deference to Russia, Russia immediately focused its ire on the proposed EU Association Agreement, which President Yanukovych finally abandoned in 2013 under extreme duress.

Second, not all great power is alike. It can arouse dread or provide comfort. Poland, the Baltic states and Romania would like to see more US military power in east-central Europe, not less. The principal worry, even among France's Gaullists, is not that the US is overbearing, but that it will not be there when needed. They might ridicule the principle of consensus inside NATO, but they have made better use of it than anyone. If NATO were run by US diktat, France and Germany would not have been able to block Membership Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia in 2008, and the war in Iraq would have been a NATO operation, rather than one prosecuted by a US-led coalition.[16]

The case for describing the EU as a 'German empire' is no more credible. Germany accounts for 25 per cent of the EU's GDP, even after the UK's departure. (In contrast, Russia's share of the Eurasian Economic Union's GDP is 87 per cent.)[17]

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15 Syria's prewar population was 22 million; in 2020 it was 17.5 million. There are some 5 million refugees (3.5 million in Turkey). More than 6 million are internally displaced. USA for UNHCR (2021), 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained', 5 February 2021, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained (accessed 10 Mar. 2021); and Borger, J. (2020), 'Russia committed war crimes in Syria, finds UN report', *Guardian*, 2 March 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/russia-committed-war-crimes-in-syria-finds-un-report (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).
16 At its height, the US-led coalition compromised 23 states, including 16 NATO members.
17 Data on the EU from Eurostat (2021), 'GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income)', https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=nama_10_gdp&lang=en (accessed 25 Mar. 2021); data on the EAEU from World Bank (2021), 'GDP (current US$) – Russian Federation, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic', World Bank Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU-AM-BY-KZ-KG (accessed 7 Mar. 2021).

Having had its very survival as a nation tested by a pitiless, genocidal German empire, why was Poland so keen to join the EU? Why doesn't it follow the UK's example and leave? Why don't other countries with equally proud histories (e.g. Sweden, Finland and Greece) do so as well?

Third, historical analogies are more easily made than substantiated. It would be difficult to find a more misplaced analogy than that drawn between Russia's presumptive sphere of influence in the former USSR and the alleged US sphere of influence in Latin America. The Americas never were a single jurisdiction, and the US never sought to create one. In contrast, the USSR was a jurisdiction unlike any other. Although the Russian Federation disavows responsibility for the bloodier features of the Soviet and imperial legacies, it upholds the 'common history' of the peoples who comprised it, defends the legality of Soviet annexations and treats criticisms of the USSR as anti-Russian.

It would be difficult to find a more misplaced analogy than that drawn between Russia's presumptive sphere of influence in the former USSR and the alleged US sphere of influence in Latin America. The Americas never were a single jurisdiction, and the US never sought to create one.

Finally, not all transgressions of international law are equally egregious. Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, compares Russia's annexation of Crimea to NATO's 1999 intervention in Yugoslavia, which took place in apparent contravention of articles 42 and 53 of the UN Charter. Yet intensive diplomatic efforts preceded Operation Allied Force, and Russia played a central role in them. The 1999 intervention also followed three UNSC resolutions strongly critical of Belgrade, as well as the displacement of over 230,000 people. In these respects, there is no comparison to Russia's Crimea operation. For 17 years, from the signing of the Russia–Ukraine State Treaty of May 1997 to Yanukovych's fall from power in February 2014, Russia lodged no official complaint against Ukraine with respect to the latter's treatment of Russian 'compatriots', despite presenting this ostensible justification for war. There was no diplomatic process preceding the annexation of Crimea. It was occupied swiftly and surreptitiously. In the months following the annexation, Russia repudiated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 1997 Russia–Ukraine Interstate Treaty, as well as the 1997 Black Sea Fleet agreements. It also overturned the Kharkiv agreements, concluded between Ukraine's President Yanukovych and Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, and it has effectively abrogated the 2003 Treaty of Cooperation on the Azov Sea and Kerch Strait. Only five UN member states recognized the legality of Russia's annexation of Crimea, whereas 97 recognized Kosovo's statehood.[18]

What is its impact on policy?

On the surface, very little. EU and NATO governments are not inclined to indict themselves for double standards, hypocrisy and transgressions of international law. Disunity over sanctions or 'engagement' with Russia arises for other reasons – e.g. economic interest, the conviction that compromise must be found, the need to address 'bigger' priorities, 'Ukraine fatigue' and guilt over Russia's 'humiliation' in the 1990s. These are reflections of other myths, not this one.

18 Three other states, Afghanistan, Armenia and Venezuela, have expressed either 'support for Russia's position' or 'respect' for the referendum without endorsing its legality.

But in parts of academia, think-tanks, the media, the arts and national parliaments, 'moral equivalence' is almost an orthodoxy. It is also prevalent among the avowedly liberal circles whose members might run Russia one day: people who condemn Vladimir Putin's regime for its cynicism, but who will not accept that US or EU foreign policy is fundamentally different. Taking these factors in the round, the myth is more influential than appearances suggest.

What would good policy look like?

The myth of equivalence will persist for as long as a case can be made that the West does not adhere to the standards it demands of others. Over the years, EU and NATO governments have assumed that others accept their good intentions at face value. They do not. To address this challenge, the West will have to put as much effort into explaining policy as in making it. Russia has invested considerable effort in creating policy narratives. Western governments should be unsparing in disputing these narratives when they are distorted or mendacious. At the same time, they should be clear in presenting their own objectives, as well as the trade-offs and dilemmas they face. As Germany's then foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, famously said to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the eve of the 2003 Iraq war, 'in a democracy, you have to make the case'.[19]

Finally, the West should not apologize for the fact that it is a community defined by rules and values. It has a responsibility to behave like one.

19 Fraser, N. (2003), 'The many faces of Joschka Fischer', BBC, 10 February 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2926157.stm (accessed 15 Sep. 2020).

Myth 02
‘Russia and the West want the same thing’

Those who aspire to better relations with Russia often fail to recognize that the leadership’s values and interests are not reconcilable with those of the West. Russian foreign policy is by its nature adversarial, not cooperative.

Keir Giles

What is the myth?

One of the most damaging and dangerous misconceptions about Russia commonly held by Western policymakers is that at some deep level Russian and Western interests must align or at least overlap, and that it must be possible to find common ground on serious issues because the two sides must fundamentally desire the same kind of relationship – one founded in mutual respect and peaceful cooperation for the common good.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Western leaders routinely enter office with the ambition of improving relations with Russia. They continue to seek to normalize relations, in part by forgiving Moscow its sins. But doing so without addressing the fundamental causes of discord is highly damaging, as its sole effect is to confirm to Russia that its combative policies will be not only forgiven but rewarded. Time and again, Russia has shown that it is not inclined to reciprocate the good faith shown.[20] Groundless optimism maintained in the face of consistently contrary evidence leads to recurrent ‘resets’ and consequent repeated disappointment. The result of each cycle of reset followed by disappointment is an even deeper crisis.

In December 2017 Boris Johnson, then the UK’s foreign secretary, went to Moscow looking for a reset. He told his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, that the UK and Russia had ‘substantial interests in common’. By mid-September 2018, he described this as the biggest mistake of his career and a ‘fool’s errand’.

20 Jankowski, D. (2019), ‘With Russia, Transparency No Silver Bullet’, *Berlin Policy Journal*, 4 September 2019, https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/with-russia-transparency-no-silver-bullet (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

The current champion of resets is Emmanuel Macron, the French president. One must hope that his inevitable disillusion will not come at too high a cost for European security.[21]

Why is it wrong?

Both at a strategic level and in detail on specific issues, Russian objectives and even the underlying assumptions about the nature of relations between states are entirely incompatible with what Western states and societies want, need, and find acceptable. A multitude of examples show how Russia has only limited consonance with Europe in basic assumptions on morals, values or ethics.[22] As throughout its history, Russia measures its security and status in terms of raw military power. It is still pouring vast funds into the development of high-technology missiles, prioritizing the capability to destroy cities on the other side of the world over investment in paved roads and indoor sanitation for its own citizens.[23]

Russian objectives and even the underlying assumptions about the nature of relations between states are entirely incompatible with what Western states and societies want, need, and find acceptable.

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to seek means of damaging or outmanoeuvring its adversaries in conflicts that those adversaries may not even recognize are under way.[24] 'Normal' relations with Russia include fending off a wide range of hostile actions from Moscow; this has been the default state throughout Russia's history. But still, destructive Russian handiwork – be it subversion, murders and assassinations, undisguised electronic warfare or false-flag cyberattacks – causes surprise every time it happens.[25]

Perhaps the most dangerous dissonance lies in Russian and Western notions of sovereignty. The key difference is the Russian presumption that only great powers can be fully sovereign; and that smaller, less powerful states like Ukraine or, say, the UK are simply objects of different degrees of influence wielded by powers like Russia and the US. As such, Russia consistently demands to be involved in the foreign policy decisions of countries beyond its borders,[26] in a manner entirely incompatible with Euro-Atlantic values, which hold that small states should be

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21 Nixey, J. and Boulègue, M. (2019), 'On Russia, Macron Is Mistaken', Chatham House Expert Comment, 5 September 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-macron-mistaken (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
22 A recent example is a long and fierce controversy in Russia over whether a proposed law prohibiting domestic violence is a good thing or a bad thing. Mukhamedzhanov, B. (2020), 'The ongoing fight for protection from domestic violence in Russia', Riddle Russia, 15 January 2020, https://www.ridl.io/en/the-ongoing-fight-for-protection-from-domestic-violence-in-russia (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
23 *Moscow Times* (2019), 'Indoor Plumbing Still a Pipe Dream for 20% of Russian Households, Reports Say', 2 April 2019, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/02/indoor-plumbing-still-a-pipe-dream-for-20-of-russian-households-reports-say-a65049 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
24 Jonsson, O. (2019), *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
25 For all her experience of dealing with Russia and its leadership, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is still hurt and outraged when, as she says, 'on the one hand, I try to improve relations with Russia on a daily basis, and when then, on the other hand, we see that there is hard evidence that Russian forces are operating in such a way'. Von der Burchard, H. (2020), 'Merkel blames Russia for 'outrageous' cyberattack on German parliament', Politico, 13 May 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-blames-russia-for-outrageous-cyber-attack-on-german-parliament (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
26 Hill, F. and Jewett, P. (1994), *Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy toward Russia*, Occasional Paper, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Back%20in%20the%20USSR%201994.pdf (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

sovereign and independent. In short, while the West wants an international order based on respect for state sovereignty, Russia wants and expects to be allowed to limit the sovereignty of its neighbours.

The most immediate expression of this incompatibility remains the front-line states in Europe. When Russia insists it is entitled to a sphere of legitimate interests, the problem arises when these other countries do not wish to be within that sphere. The danger of precipitate action by Russia will persist for as long as the West supports the independence and unqualified sovereignty of those countries that Russia perceives as its fiefdom.

Russia has no interest in accepting an international order founded on principles and institutions established in the West, and which it sees as favouring Western interests. In particular, Moscow holds that it has been denied a role in the architecture of European security by Western states and organizations, especially NATO. To the extent that this is correct, it is because that is precisely NATO's role: to protect its members from the kind of action that Russia would undertake in exercising what it sees as its rights. In other words, there can be either a European security order that respects the rights of all European nations, or one that grants Russia privileges; but not both at the same time.

What is its impact on policy?

Failure to understand that Russia's decision-making framework is bounded by an entirely different understanding of history, geography, social policy and relations between countries means that Moscow's decisions routinely surprise and dismay the West.

Failure to understand that Russia's decision-making framework is bounded by an entirely different understanding of history, geography, social policy and relations between countries means that Moscow's decisions routinely surprise and dismay the West. This leads not only to occasional panic over what Russian strategic intentions may be, but also, when crises deteriorate to the point of armed conflict, the repeated imposition by Western powers of ceasefire terms (drafted in Moscow) on the victims of Russian aggression. Whether in respect of Georgia in 2008, or Ukraine and Syria in more recent years, the West insists on terms that constrain the victim while allowing the aggressor, Russia, continued freedom of action (and, in the case of Ukraine, even denying that Russia is a party to the conflict at all). This results from a basic mismatch of objectives: the West wants to stop the fighting, while Russia wants to win the war. A particularly vivid case is the widespread assertion in the West that the best resolution for the war in Ukraine would be for Ukraine to make concessions, rather than for Russia to cease its aggression.[27]

The search for consensus or appeasement has other pernicious consequences. The moral equivalence that is implied in discreetly ignoring hostile Russian actions is inimical to the values and ethics that have historically defined the West, since to reach a consensus with those who seek to undermine democratic and liberal values does their work for them. In addition, repeated failure despite best intentions leads

27 Atlantic Council (2020), 'Flawed peace plan for Ukraine doesn't pass muster', 14 February 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/flawed-peace-plan-for-ukraine-doesnt-pass-muster (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

to a search for blame, which sometimes mistakenly finds the roots of the failure in past and present Western actions rather than in any fundamental contradiction, or indeed in Russian behaviour.

Russia is guided by its own understanding of how the world works, rather than by what a Western liberal democracy would consider rational. For instance, this understanding causes Russia to claim (or perhaps even sincerely believe) that countries join NATO or the EU because they are forced or induced to do so by Washington or Brussels, rather than because it serves their own interests. This extends to the inability to agree on basic facts of recent and more distant history. There is no prospect of reconciling Russia's assertion that NATO committed in 1990 not to accept new member states in Eastern Europe with NATO's position that no such commitment was ever given. And the campaign to enforce a Soviet view of history on Russians has intensified, and is now reaching well beyond Russia. In addition to the restoration of previously debunked Soviet myths about the Second World War, Russia has reverted to denial of the USSR's role both in cooperating with Nazi Germany to divide Eastern Europe between them in 1939–40, and in brutally repressing the independence of those same states in the post-war period. This process has seen the former victim states of Soviet aggression and occupation throughout Northern and Central Europe subjected to a sustained information barrage seeking to excuse Moscow's conduct, and to shift blame for both the war and its aftermath to those same victims.

If, in addition, those who argue that President Vladimir Putin needs to legitimize himself through foreign adventures are right, then an essential prerequisite for stability within Russia is the creation of still more instability abroad. As a result, Europe as a whole has become the scene of an unresolved conflict.

What would good policy look like?

Assumptions that Russia was a partner to the West and shared its interests prevailed for more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. It is essential that these assumptions now be discarded and the reality of disagreement recognized. But this in itself should not lead inevitably to outright hostility. One lesson of the Cold War is that coexistence is possible while accepting that the strategic interests of Moscow and the West are incompatible.

Meanwhile, well-intentioned suggestions for calming relations with Russia abound.[28] Where they founder is in the fact that, in order for them to work, they need Moscow on board as well. It is a fundamental mistake to assume by default that Russia is interested in cooperation on reducing tensions, or that Western states and institutions can improve the situation without such cooperation. The Russian leadership instead sees concessions and compromise as weakness to be exploited. Preventing dangerous incidents between Russian and NATO aircraft and warships does not require negotiation of a new agreement; it only requires Russia to abide by existing safety rules. Similarly, proposals for arms control agreements to replace

28 Notably, for example, from the European Leadership Network, 'Euro-Atlantic Security' programme page, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/programmes/euro-atlantic-security.

those that have become void in recent years will go nowhere if they disregard the fact that Russia has stepped away from the previous agreements deliberately and for clearly defined security aims.[29] Cooperation against terrorism, too, sounds attractive – until Russia demonstrates in Chechnya and Syria that its methods for what it calls counterterrorist operations are entirely unpalatable to the West.[30]

Western policymakers, politicians and populations need to be constantly reminded not only that the people who run Russia are not like them, do not like them and do not wish to be like them, but also that there are good reasons why attempts to find common ground with Russia consistently fail. Recognizing that Western values and interests are not reconcilable with those of Russia, and adjusting for that reality in the long-term conduct of the relationship, will be key to managing conflicts and contradictions rather than wishing them away. This in turn will be an essential foundation not only for understanding Russian statements and actions, but also for ensuring future European peace and stability.

29 UK Parliament (2019), *Missile Misdemeanours: Russia and the INF Treaty: Government response to the Committee's Fifteenth Report of Session 2017-19*, London: UK Parliament, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmdfence/2464/246402.htm (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
30 Benjamin, D. (2017), 'Russia is a Terrible Ally Against Terrorism', *New York Times*, 23 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/opinion/russia-is-a-terrible-ally-against-terrorism.html (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

Myth 03
‘Russia was promised that NATO would not enlarge’

Contrary to the betrayal narrative cultivated by Russia today, the USSR was never offered a formal guarantee on the limits of NATO expansion post-1990. Moscow merely distorts history to help preserve an anti-Western consensus at home.

John Lough

What is the myth?

This particular myth argues that the West deceived Russia by reneging on its promises at the end of the Cold War not to enlarge NATO – that it chose to pass up the opportunity to integrate Russia into a new European security framework and instead encouraged Moscow back on to a path of confrontation with the US and its allies. This narrative of Western deceit towards Russia confuses the debate in NATO countries. It plays into Moscow’s hands in terms of Russian efforts to persuade public opinion in key NATO member states that Russia is the victim of unfair treatment.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, stated during a discussion with President Vladimir Putin at the 2018 St Petersburg International Economic Forum:

> I think that the mistake that was made in the last 20 years was that we in NATO failed to fully comply with all the obligations we had taken on, and this caused certain fears, quite reasonable ones. And we did not have the trust that Russia rightfully expected.[31]

The US scholar Michael Mandelbaum argued in 2016 that:

> The expansion of NATO over their objections taught Russians two lessons that it was not remotely in the American interest for them to learn: that American promises were not to be trusted; and that the West would take advantage of a weak and accommodating Russia.[32]

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31 Kremlin.ru (2018), ‘St Petersburg International Economic Forum plenary session’, 25 May 2018, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57556 (accessed 11 Sep. 2020).
32 Mandelbaum, M. (2016), *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 73.

Referring to the original decision to enlarge NATO, the prominent German journalist and author, Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, claimed in 2015 that failing 'to treat Russia as a fully fledged partner' had hindered 'normalization processes' in the country.

In 2014 a US academic, John Mearsheimer, traced Russia's aggression in Ukraine back to the Clinton administration's drive to enlarge NATO. Mearsheimer repeated the argument of opponents of the policy at the time: there was no need to contain 'a declining great power with an aging population and a one-dimensional economy'.[33] The inference is that NATO countries unnecessarily provoked Moscow and that it would otherwise have behaved benignly towards its neighbours.

Why is it wrong?

In July 1990 the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, agreed to a united Germany's incorporation into NATO. The US secretary of state at the time, James Baker, had previously told Gorbachev that NATO's jurisdiction would not move beyond the inner German border, but Washington retreated from this position after examining the practicalities of part of Germany being outside the Alliance. As part of the deal reached by Gorbachev and the West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, no forces of other NATO countries could be deployed on former German Democratic Republic (GDR) territory until after Soviet forces had left, and then only temporarily. There would also be no deployment of nuclear weapons. Moscow also received financial sweeteners, including 12 billion Deutschmarks to resettle returning troops.

However, Gorbachev neither asked for nor was given any formal guarantees that there would be no further expansion of NATO beyond the territory of a united Germany.[34] The issue was not even under discussion at NATO at the time, since the Warsaw Pact and the USSR were both still in existence. Even if the Warsaw Pact's days were clearly numbered, there was no expectation in Western capitals in the autumn of 1990 that the USSR would collapse a year later.

The disappearance of the USSR created an entirely different geopolitical reality that quickly exposed differences between Western countries and Russia on how to manage European security and, in particular, on the role of NATO. From the end of 1993, Russian diplomacy voiced increasing opposition to NATO's further enlargement, but accepted that it could not stop the process. Its chief lament was that several leaders of NATO countries in early 1990 had ruled out the possibility of NATO enlargement, and that the West had misled Russia. As Russia's former foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, noted later with regret, there was no legal force to the statements by Western leaders even though, in his view, legally based commitments would have been possible at the time.[35]

The NATO enlargement myth also contains an important distortion of fact: while the Russian Federation became the *de facto* legal successor to the USSR after the latter's collapse, Russia existed in different borders and its security interests were

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33 Mearsheimer, J. (2014), 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5): p. 83.
34 Sarotte, M. (2014), 'A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion', *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5): p. 96.
35 Primakov, Ye.M. (1999), *Годы в Большой Политике* [Years in Big Politics], Издательство "Совершенно секретно" [Publishing House "Top Secret"], p. 234.

not synonymous with those of the USSR. Indeed, Russian leaders at the time did not want the West to regard the new Russia as a truncated form of the USSR, but rather as a country that had regained its sovereignty and was returning to its European roots after the tragedy of Bolshevism. In addition, the USSR signed the Charter of Paris in November 1990 with the commitment to 'fully recognize the freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements'. The NATO–Russia Founding Act, signed in 1997, similarly pledged respect for the 'inherent right' of all states 'to choose the means to ensure their own security'.

NATO's Kosovo campaign in 1999 did far more to shape anti-Western attitudes in Russia than NATO enlargement did. Coinciding with a period of extreme weakness in Russia, it represented a crushing defeat for Russian diplomacy.

Moreover, NATO's Kosovo campaign in 1999 did far more to shape anti-Western attitudes in Russia than NATO enlargement did. Coinciding with a period of extreme weakness in Russia, it represented a crushing defeat for Russian diplomacy, which had persuaded the Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milošević, that Russia could protect Serbia, a supposedly traditional ally, from NATO. Russia's leaders chose to use the episode as evidence of a revived threat to Russia from the West – but were careful to distinguish NATO from the EU. Friendly relations with the EU offered the prospect of weakening the transatlantic relationship. However, despite the debacle of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and growing difficulties in Washington's relations with Europe, the EU did not embrace Russia.

At the NATO summit in 2008, Moscow could see clearly that France and Germany, among others, restrained Washington's effort to put Georgia and Ukraine on a path to membership of the Alliance. Despite NATO's ill-advised assurance to both countries in the summit communiqué that they would join NATO, there was in reality no prospect of this ever happening without Moscow's *de facto* consent. Yet despite their efforts to avoid a crisis over enlargement, Paris and Berlin then saw Russia invade Georgia in 2008 and cut off gas to Europe in 2009 because of a dispute with Ukraine. If Moscow wanted to demonstrate that it could be a reliable security partner for the EU, this was not the way to do so.

By 2013, Russia had shifted to conservative nationalism. It viewed itself as the guardian of European values of a different era, and was hostile not just to NATO but to the EU as well. The EU's Third Energy Package, which came into force in 2009, and its anti-trust investigation of Gazprom in 2011 had changed the tone in relations with Brussels. This was the backdrop for Russia's reckoning with Ukraine, and provided the ultimate proof that Russia did not regard its neighbour as a fully sovereign country (in this case, with the right to determine its own relations with the EU). Russia still bore the features that Mearsheimer had highlighted from the 1990s. Yet these weaknesses did not stop Russia from rebuilding its military capabilities and its confidence to enforce its writ in a major country neighbouring the EU.

History over centuries points to the fact that Russia generates its security by exerting influence over neighbouring states. Its military establishment has imbibed the lesson that Russia should always fight defensive wars beyond its own territory. There is no evidence that, in the absence of EU and NATO enlargement, Russia would have suspended its traditional security thinking. At the same time, without the enlargement of both organizations, Europe would once again have struggled to remain stable. Germany and its Central European neighbours would have found themselves pulled in two directions, with serious consequences for the wider

region. Russian policymakers who argue that NATO enlargement damaged Russia's security interests disregard the fact that an unstable Europe would have increased rather than mitigated Russia's security problems.

Despite his public opposition to enlargement at the time, Andrey Kozyrev (Russia's foreign minister after the collapse of the USSR until 1996) recently stated: 'The United States and NATO were on the right side of history by admitting new democracies to the Alliance and being willing to find an accommodation with Russia. It was Moscow that returned to its antagonism toward NATO.'[36]

What is its impact on policy?

Repeated references to the West's alleged breach of faith towards Russia help preserve an anti-Western consensus in Russia. Meanwhile, timid responses by NATO leaders over the years have allowed myth to become supposed 'fact'.

This passivity was visible in a general tendency up to 2014 to shy away from confrontation with Russia, in the belief that NATO enlargement had been hard for Moscow to accept and that there was no point in rubbing salt into old wounds. This failure to speak openly with Moscow was at odds with the emphasis placed by Germany and others on dialogue with Russia as a confidence-building measure.

The narrative of Western deceit towards Russia sits alongside what Moscow describes as the West's 'anti-Russian' sanctions as an example of how Western policies towards Russia are presented as unfair and counterproductive. The purpose is to convince the European members of NATO that a good relationship with Moscow is worth more in security terms than standing up for what Russia regards as the outdated security principles of the 1990s. Germany's pursuit of direct gas supplies from Russia in the face of strong opposition from its allies in Central Europe is a case in point. President Macron's desire to 'ease and clarify' Europe's relations with Russia is another.

What would good policy look like?

Russian policymakers are more conscious of history than their Western counterparts are, in part because they understand the power of owning a historical narrative and deploying it to gain advantage. For example, in recent months Moscow has been spinning a heavily biased interpretation of why Stalin entered into a non-aggression pact with Hitler in 1939.[37] Its purpose is to blame others for the start of the Second World War – in particular Poland, whose historical narrative of that period challenges Russia's.

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36 Kozyrev, A. (2019), 'Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider's Account', in Hamilton, D. S. and Spohr, K. (eds) (2019), *Open Door NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Institute.
37 For example, Putin, V. (2020), 'The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II', *The National Interest*, 18 June 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

Governments of NATO countries need to recognize that history matters, and that Russia is manipulating the facts about NATO for a purpose. Calling out the myth would be a good place to start. This requires senior officials not just to be well briefed and confident of the facts but ready also to challenge their Russian interlocutors when they present false narratives. At the same time, NATO member states need to educate opinion leaders in their own countries rather than relying on NATO to do the job for them. Defence against disinformation begins at home.

Myth 04
‘Russia is not in a conflict with the West’

Moscow’s natural state is one of confrontation with the West. A key feature of this conflict is the use of unconventional hostile measures that remain above the threshold of accepted peacetime activities but below that of warfare.

Mathieu Boulègue

What is the myth?

From a Western standpoint, relations with Russia are often described as a ‘challenge’,[38] but European and North American policymakers are reluctant to recognize the existence of a conflict as such. However, the current leadership in the Kremlin clearly sees itself as in a state of conflict with the Western-led, rules-based liberal world order.[39] This confrontation is protracted, political and moral – and indeed perhaps even civilizational. Although Russia is not openly at war with Western nations, its actions fall within a broad definition of conflict, which is waged through various means, and against a wide range of targets, to achieve Moscow’s foreign policy aims.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

It is often said, even in policy discussions, that ‘Western actions are provoking the Kremlin’, that ‘Moscow is only legitimately defending itself against Western encroachment’, that ‘the West is responsible for making Russia insecure’, or that Russian hostile measures are comparable with similar Western actions.[40]

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38 Wemer, D. A. (2019), ‘Don’t be fooled: Russia is still NATO’s greatest challenge’, Atlantic Council, 3 December 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/dont-be-fooled-russia-is-still-natos-greatest-challenge (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
39 Russian citizens do not always share this feeling, and they do not construct the West as an ‘enemy’ *per se*: Levada-Center (2020), ‘Отношение к странам’ [Attitude To Countries], https://www.levada.ru/2020/02/18/otnoshenie-k-stranam-6 (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
40 See, for instance, Taylor, E. (2020), ‘Defender of Europe 2020: a Dangerous Provocation on Russia’s Border’, CounterPunch, 9 March 2020, https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/03/09/defender-of-europe-2020-a-dangerous-provocation-on-russias-border (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).

These myths are entertained by a wide range of individuals, including specifically: those who misunderstand the Russian security debate;[41] accommodationists who argue that Russia should be entitled to a 'sphere of influence';[42] well-known politicians willing to trade Ukrainian energy security for the construction of a pipeline;[43] and members of parliament in European countries who make politically motivated visits to occupied Crimea.[44] Governments in Europe and North America cyclically seek 'dialogue' with the Kremlin as an end in itself.[45]

Why is it wrong?

Russia is not simply another 'challenge' to the rules-based liberal world order. Moscow is in a natural state of prolonged hostility and confrontation with the West. The Kremlin believes that the West, embodied by the transatlantic alliance, embarked on a new phase of conflict as early as the end of the Cold War. Russia's assumption was that this conflict would be waged with the help of information and influence operations, as well as through the spread of 'colour revolutions' at Russia's periphery aimed at regime change – in other words, via a vast US-led 'Trojan horse' operation seeking to destroy Russia from within.[46]

The current Russian leadership sees it as beneficial to attack the West. As a UK parliamentary report on Russia in July 2020 put it, the Kremlin's view is that 'any actions it can take which damage the West are fundamentally good for Russia'.[47] The situation is compounded by two mutually reinforcing factors: Russia's perception of itself as a 'besieged fortress'; and the imperative of regime survival, especially as President Vladimir Putin prepares potentially to remain in power after 2024. Indeed, the Kremlin has been repeating the same security and political grievances against the West since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin's strategic goals are unchanging. It seeks recognition for Russia as a great power and control in its self-designated 'near abroad' in the form of a sphere of influence. What has changed since the late 2000s is the Kremlin's ability to make its intentions a reality. Moscow is now openly on a destructive path aimed

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41 Foy, H. (2017), 'Valery Gerasimov, the general with a doctrine for Russia', *Financial Times*, 15 September 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/7e14a438-989b-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b (accessed 17 Sep. 2020); and McKew, M. K. (2017), 'The Gerasimov Doctrine: It's Russia's new chaos theory of political warfare. And it's probably being used on you', *Politico*, September/October 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538 (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
42 This argument is debunked in Myth 7: 'Russia is entitled to a defensive perimeter – a sphere of "privileged interests" including the territory of other states'.
43 *The Economist* (2019), 'The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is a Russian trap', 16 February 2019, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/02/16/the-nord-stream-2-gas-pipeline-is-a-russian-trap (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
44 Goncharenko, R. (2016), 'Controversial visit to Crimea by French politicians', Deutsche Welle, 28 July 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/controversial-visit-to-crimea-by-french-politicians/a-19433406 (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
45 Nixey, J. and Boulègue, M. (2019), 'On Russia, Macron Is Mistaken', Chatham House Expert Comment, 5 September 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-macron-mistaken (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
46 Sviridova, A. (2019), 'Векторы развития военной стратегии' [Vectors of military strategy development], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 4 March 2019, http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii (accessed 17 Sep. 2020); and Eckel, M. (2020), 'Putin Opens The Door – Wide – To Staying On As President Past 2024', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 March 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-opens-the-door----wide----to-staying-on-as-president-past-2024/30480215.html (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
47 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, London: Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, p. 1, https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

at disrupting, perhaps even overturning, the established international order. The oft-cited speech by President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference should have been a wake-up call to the West that Russian intentions towards this order are anything but benign.[48]

Moscow's siege mentality also feeds internal politics and regime survival imperatives as a means to boost popular support. Russia can only look strong if its enemies are weaker. Moscow seeks to constrain Western influence and perceived NATO encroachment, which is presented as a threat to national security. Defining the West as morally corrupt and antagonistic to Russia's stated vital interests also reinforces the narrative of national survival.

The use of unconventional or indirect measures is not just a *feature* of Russia's conflict with the West, but actually contributes to the perception of there being no conflict.

The Kremlin seeks to undermine Western interests through a well-established toolkit of unconventional hostile measures and indirect action that remain above the threshold of accepted peacetime activities but below that of warfare.[49] These methods range from election interference in foreign countries to targeted, state-sanctioned assassinations. Information warfare forms a large part of these activities, with the goal of reshaping psychological and behavioural environments to Russia's advantage in peacetime. Through ambiguity and action that is deniable, whether plausibly or implausibly, these tools seek to soften Western resolve and subvert political and diplomatic decision-making processes – and ultimately change perceptions regarding the nature of Russian intentions.

Crucially, the use of unconventional or indirect measures is not just a *feature* of Russia's conflict with the West, but actually contributes to the perception of there being no conflict.

What is its impact on policy?

Many in the West see accepting the proposition that a conflict exists with the Kremlin as dangerous and unpalatable. Yet failure to recognize conflict as a fact fuels misconceptions regarding Russian intentions towards the West among policymakers and the wider public. This also limits the ability of governments to push back and deter Russian hostile action. Cases of Western self-restraint in addressing such action abound – as evidenced, for example, by the weak response following Alexander Litvinenko's assassination in 2006.[50]

The underpinnings of Russia's strategy against the West are well understood at the expert level but often disregarded by policymakers – even though Russian hostile action has severe consequences for Western security and internal resilience. This failure is causing policy to be misdirected. One fundamental mistake in this regard is to assume that the Kremlin is interested in cooperation. It is not. Moscow equates respect and status with power, not with cooperation. Western

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48 Kremlin.ru (2007), 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', 10 February 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034 (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
49 Giles, K. (2016), *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
50 Crace, J. (2016), 'Theresa May pulls all punches with Putin over Litvinenko killing', *Guardian*, 21 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/21/theresa-may-pulls-all-punches-with-putin-over-litvinenko-killing (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).

policymakers generally fall into a cyclical trap of making overtures to, and being disappointed by, the Kremlin.[51] The US-led 'reset' in relations with Moscow in 2009, a few months after Russian tanks rolled into Georgia, did not subsequently prevent the Kremlin from annexing Crimea in 2014. 'Dialogue' with Moscow for its own sake often leads to compromising on values and democratic principles in order to accommodate the Kremlin.

Finally, skewed threat assessments regarding the Kremlin's intentions increase the risk of miscalculation. This ranges from simple conceptual misunderstandings and inaccurate security perceptions to the possibility of unintended military escalation. Moscow's militarily assertive behaviour increases the risk of tactical errors. The numerous air and sea incidents that have occurred with Russia are the result not of misunderstandings between military personnel but of deliberate Russian provocations designed to extort concessions from the West and demonstrate presence. By engaging in such brinkmanship, Russia learns Western responses. This is worrying, as Russian destabilization efforts often fall beneath the Western threshold for response and classic deterrence.

What would good policy look like?

Responding to the Kremlin's actions should not be thought of as escalatory or damaging. The aim must be to re-establish Western credibility.

The West is unlikely to be able to change Moscow's behaviour – not least because Western actions are understood in the Kremlin as evidence of double standards, and are therefore used to vindicate Russia's worldview and its behaviour. Instead, Western policymakers must change their way of thinking and recognize the implications of being in a state of protracted conflict with Russia. This should not lead to undue self-restraint: responding to the Kremlin's actions should not be thought of as escalatory or damaging. The aim must be to re-establish Western credibility.

European governments and NATO members should strengthen their resolve in responding to hostile Russian actions. At the policy level, this can be done by decisively and systematically exposing, attributing and discrediting Russian hostile actions. Expressions of outrage are not enough.[52] By contrast, the recent publication of a UK parliamentary report on Russia, in which Putin's Russia is classed as an 'established' security threat,[53] is a first step in the right direction.

Sensible policy should seek to diminish Moscow's capability to act disruptively. Otherwise, there is a risk that the Kremlin might increase its hostile activities against the West even further. It is a risk that Western policymakers must recognize and mitigate.

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51 Giles, K. (2019), *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press and London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
52 Examples of declaratory politics against Russian hostile actions are numerous, from UK Prime Minister Theresa May's 'we know what you are doing' uproar to French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks critical of President Putin in Versailles over foreign media influence. Mason, R. (2017), 'Theresa May accuses Russia of interfering in elections and fake news', *Guardian*, 14 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/13/theresa-may-accuses-russia-of-interfering-in-elections-and-fake-news (accessed 17 Sep. 2020); and Serhan, Y. (2017), 'Macron, Standing Alongside Putin, Says Russian Media Spread 'Falsehoods'', *The Atlantic*, 30 May 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/05/macron-rt-supnik-are-agents-of-influence/528480 (accessed 17 Sep. 2020).
53 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*.

Raising the cost of Russian action should go hand in hand with careful engagement. This must come with the caveat that it is a means to an end, not a simple box-ticking exercise. It must also be understood that the West should never make concessions at the expense of its values and principles.

Another useful starting point would be to identify what a desired reasonable state of relations with Russia should be – namely what should the West expect *from* Russia? It follows that policies aimed at achieving a manageable Russia are needed. And whatever the West wants to achieve with the current and future Kremlin leaderships, the only way to do it is through consistency and unity in understanding the 'Russia challenge' – and primarily the fact that the Kremlin will remain locked in an adversarial and conflictual relationship with the West for the foreseeable future. The best that policymakers can hope for (and achieve) is damage control.

Myth 05
‘We need a new pan-European security architecture that includes Russia’

Russia claims that the existing security architecture creates geopolitical difficulties and should be replaced by a continent-wide system. In reality, the difficulties are caused by radically discordant views that would stop this new system from functioning.

Duncan Allan

What is the myth?

Since the end of the Cold War,[54] successive Russian leaders and senior officials have argued that the institutional elements of the European security architecture – particularly NATO but also the EU, which has built an increasingly strong profile in Central and Eastern Europe – exclusively serve the interests of the leading Western countries. Their argument is that:

- By marginalizing Russia and ignoring its concerns, these ‘Euro-Atlanticist’ structures perpetuate a dangerous and unstable geopolitical division of Europe.
- These structures should be superseded by a treaty-based and continent-wide arrangement that integrates Russia and takes full account of its vital interests.
- By creating an inclusive and cooperative relationship with Russia, this would lay the foundations for long-term stability and security in Europe.

54 Echoes of contemporary Russian thinking can be detected in a string of Soviet-era initiatives, one example being Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov’s draft ‘Treaty on Collective Security in Europe’ of 10 February 1954. For the text, see Baehler, D., Bernbaum, J. and Sampson, C. (eds) (1986), ‘Proposal of the Soviet Delegation. General European Treaty on Collective Security in Europe’, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Germany and Austria, Volume VII, Part 1*, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, Document 517, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v07p1/d517 (accessed 31 Mar. 2020).

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

In the 1990s the Kremlin called for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to be transformed into Europe's pre-eminent security institution.[55] In 2008–09, President Dmitry Medvedev proposed a pan-European treaty that would inaugurate a new regional system of collective security.[56] Since then, senior Russian officials have continued to attack the alleged Western-centrism and anti-Russian orientation of Europe's security architecture.[57]

Although Western decision-makers have rejected calls to overhaul existing European security institutions, parts of Russia's narrative have still found favour in certain quarters. Thus, some observers and policymakers in Berlin and Paris were sympathetic to Medvedev's draft European security treaty,[58] even though this more positive response partly reflected German and French opposition at the time to the US-led push to grant NATO Membership Action Plans to Ukraine and Georgia. Similarly, in 2019 President Emmanuel Macron of France called for 'a new architecture based on trust and security in Europe' as part of a strategic rapprochement with Russia.[59]

Why is it wrong?

Russia's calls for a pan-European security system ignore basic differences between Russia and Western countries over the issue of sovereignty.

Russia's calls for a pan-European security system are problematic for three reasons. First, they ignore basic differences between Russia and Western countries over the issue of sovereignty. Russia's understanding of sovereignty is rooted in an earlier epoch. It envisages a special position for itself (and other 'great powers') in a reformed architecture. This would give Russia a veto, entitling it to block initiatives that it disapproved of (for example, further NATO enlargement). It would limit the rights of smaller adjacent countries (for example, by stopping them from joining NATO or obstructing their integration with the EU). By sanctifying the principle of non-interference in states' domestic affairs, Russia's view of sovereignty also lacks a normative dimension. By contrast, established Western thinking about European security does not grant great powers privileged rights, rules out 'spheres of influence' and – despite inconsistent application – attaches considerable importance to the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.[60]

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55 Hill, W. (2018), *No Place for Russia. European Security Institutions Since 1989*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 153–57.
56 Website of the President of the Russian Federation (2009), 'Проект Договора о европейской безопасности' [Draft treaty on European security], 29 November 2009, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152 (accessed 31 Mar. 2020).
57 For example, the article by Russia's current foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov. See Lavrov, S. (2016), 'Историческая перспектива внешней политики России' [A historical perspective on Russian foreign policy], *Россия в глобальной политике [Russia in Global Affairs]*, 2, March/April 2016, https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/istoricheskaya-perspektiva-vneshnej-politiki-rossii-2 (accessed 31 Mar. 2020).
58 Hill (2018), *No Place for Russia*, p. 288.
59 Website of the President of the Republic of France (2019), 'Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs' [Speech by the President of the Republic to the conference of ambassadors], 27 August 2019, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1 (accessed 31 Mar. 2020).
60 For example, as set out in the 1990 Paris Charter. OSCE (1990), 'Charter of Paris for a New Europe', 21 November 1990, https://www.osce.org/mc/39516 (accessed 31 Mar. 2020).

Second, Russia's proposals for pan-European security are illogical. They suggest that an inclusive, continent-wide security system would erase current geopolitical difficulties. In reality, these difficulties are caused by radically discordant views of European security that would stop such a system from functioning.

Third, the detail of Russian proposals for pan-European security has frequently been vague. Besides making it difficult to engage meaningfully with them, this has prompted suspicion among Western policymakers that Russia is concerned less with agreeing new rules of the game than with breaking down existing ones by dividing Western-led organizations – and paralysing NATO, in particular.

What is its impact on policy?

Generally speaking, Western policymakers have been sceptical of Russian demands for a pan-European security architecture.[61] Nonetheless, the central proposition underpinning Russian proposals – that a new security system would eliminate geopolitical divisions in Europe – remains seductive. As noted, it has in the past struck a sympathetic chord with certain Western decision-makers, who are understandably concerned about the damage and potential dangers that poor relations with Russia cause. Because the current stand-off with Russia has unpalatable policy implications, calls for a pan-European security system can encourage lingering hopes in Western capitals that a significantly more cooperative relationship with Russia might yet be built. The effect is to obscure how dissimilar Russian and established Western approaches to European security really are. Consequently, the myth could distract Western decision-makers from developing or implementing the difficult policies that are needed in responding to the Russian challenge.

What would good policy look like?

First, policymakers need to be clear that disagreements with Russia over the European security architecture stem from fundamental differences over the question of sovereignty. Russia wants privileges for itself, limits on the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, and agreement that states should not be criticized if they run their domestic affairs in ways inconsistent with the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This essentially 19th-century perspective is at odds with core Western interests and values.

Second, Western diplomats and politicians should understand that when engaging with Russia over European security, the policy challenge is to manage these divergent worldviews, not design new institutions that might, in ways that no one has ever explained, dissolve them. The former is difficult but realistic and achievable; the latter is tantamount to chasing a chimera.

61 Thus, Western countries neutralized Medvedev's draft European security treaty in 2008–09 by diverting discussion of it into the OSCE-led 'Corfu Process', a forum with zero practical clout.

Third, while recognizing that differences with Russia over European security are profound and unlikely to be reconciled, Western governments should make concerted attempts to manage these differences in ways consistent with their interests (e.g. practical confidence-building measures, resumption of arms control initiatives, focused political dialogue) – to the extent that this is possible. Even if it only clarified disagreements with Russia, such activity would be helpful. Reducing the risk of misperception, misunderstanding and miscalculation is better than pretending that significant differences do not exist or can be papered over; the latter would simply result in policymakers deceiving themselves about the prospects for cooperation, and would risk persuading Russian leaders that Western governments are more receptive to such thinking than is really the case.

Fourth, Western politicians and stakeholders need to keep calm. Russian policymakers will keep trying to unnerve Western audiences and shake the latter's support for existing European security institutions by amplifying the dangers of instability and war to which such structures allegedly give rise. In itself, a bad relationship with Russia is no tragedy; nor does it necessarily undermine Western interests. It is simply a reminder that those interests clash with Russia's – and that the friction that this generates needs to be acknowledged openly and addressed soberly.

Russian policymakers will keep trying to unnerve Western audiences and shake the latter's support for existing European security institutions by amplifying the dangers of instability and war to which such structures allegedly give rise.

Fifth, the West needs to 'do better'. As noted, certain values are central to Western thinking about security in Europe. Russian policymakers have never taken this seriously enough – partly because their outlook is different, but partly too because Western countries often do not live by their word. It is unrealistic to expect that interests and values can be completely aligned. But it is still important that Western countries at least eliminate the more egregious and obvious discrepancies – for example, championing the rule of law and human rights while engaging in, or facilitating, 'extraordinary rendition' (in plain English: kidnap and torture) – so as to blunt the accusations of hypocrisy and double standards that weaken their international standing. By acting more often in accordance with their proclaimed values, Western governments would enhance their authority, be heard with greater respect and, consequently, be able to defend and promote their interests more effectively.

Lastly, Western governments should be prepared for further friction over the issue. It is likely that Russia will again table proposals for far-reaching reform of the European security architecture. The largely unchanging nature of Russian thinking suggests that, when this happens, the issue of sovereignty will once more provoke sharp disagreements. That will again prompt some uncomfortable policy choices, but so be it. Western governments should deal with Russia as it is, not as they might like it to be.

Myth 06

‘We must improve the relationship with Russia, even without Russian concessions, as it is too important’

Russia’s confrontational policies towards Western countries and the growing domestic repression which is linked to them make it distinctly improbable that Putin’s Kremlin will react constructively to attempts by transatlantic powers, whether individually or collectively, to look for a more cooperative relationship with Moscow.

Andrew Wood

What is the myth?

Western leaders at intervals have declared an ambition to rebuild a cooperative relationship with Russia, given its intrinsic importance, and despite the way that Russia has developed over recent decades. The result, however, has been a cycle from hope to disappointment, then back again.

The case for Western leaders to return again and again to the quest for a mutually constructive relationship with President Vladimir Putin’s Russia rests on various debatable assumptions:

- That Russia’s geopolitical weight is such that Western countries need to respect what its present political leaders see as their country’s national interests. This includes putting such interests above those of Russia’s less powerful neighbours. The underlying assumption is that all would benefit from the mutual trust and security that would result.
- That Russia and the West have common economic and political interests to pursue.[62]

62 See also Myth 2: ‘Russia and the West want the same thing’.

— That Russian mistrust of the West stems from Moscow's past humiliation by the West.

— That Russia's present system of top-down government is natural to it, and will endure.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Such sentiments are all the more seductive to those Western political figures and observers so inclined because they match propositions embedded in Russian government circles too. The axiom becomes that we must show respect for Russia and its rulers, and that building trust between Russia and the West has to be a central aim in developing a new and safer relationship. The theory is that success in particular matters can build common understanding. So, perhaps, it could – but that is easier said than done.

The most recent hopeful innovator was the French president, Emmanuel Macron, arguing that the EU as well as France should reach out to Russia.[63] Before him, US President Barack Obama sought a 'reset' on similarly generalized grounds. He secured the signature of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, on 8 April 2010, but no wider steps towards a fuller relationship with Russia. President Donald Trump wanted a close personal but unspecified relationship with President Putin. None of these approaches, nor others by earlier Western political figures, have had more than a transient effect on the evolution of Russian international or domestic policies.[64] Nor have they prevented a steady deterioration in Europe-wide security. While the new US president, Joe Biden, wishes to extend the START arms controls agreed with Russia in 2010, he has nonetheless taken a tougher line with Russia in accordance with that reality.

Why is it wrong?

It is true in principle that both Russia and the rest of Europe would benefit from more assured security structures and the understandings that might underpin them. It is also the case that there was progress, punctuated by crises, towards such instruments becoming established during the Cold War. But the uneasy balance that existed between the Soviet and Western blocs until the collapse of the Warsaw Pact is no more. The security structures and understandings that then existed have been eroded over time in consequence.

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63 Macron's discussion with Putin at Fort de Brégançon before the August 2019 G7 summit in France was a notable instance. See Mallet, V., Shotter, J. and Peel, M. (2019), 'Emmanuel Macron's pivot to Russia sparks EU unease', *Financial Times*, 11 September 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/00ac54f4-d30f-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77 (accessed 29 Mar. 2021).
64 Vershbow, A. and Fried, D. (2020), 'How the West should deal with Russia', Atlantic Council, 23 November 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russia-in-the-world/#h-what-went-wrong-russia-s-dilemma (accessed 9 Apr. 2021); and Bond, I. (2020), 'Will Courting Putin Always End in Tears?', Centre for European Reform, 3 March 2020, https://www.cer.eu/insights/will-courting-putin-always-end-tears (accessed 9 Apr. 2021).

There can be no security in Europe while Russia demands, under the rubric of its claim to be a great power, the right to control the destiny of lesser powers in its neighbourhood, and to enforce this by the threat or use of military power. The argument that Russia needs such a zone to defend itself[65] against the West depends on the beliefs that international relations necessarily rely on force, and that Western powers look in the first place to military power to govern their geopolitical balance with Russia. The presentation of the West, and the US in particular, as a threat to 'Fortress Russia' is also an essential support to domestic authoritarian rule from the Kremlin.

The list of apparently plausible common interests for Western interlocutors to draw upon in building a new relationship with their Russian counterparts is painfully thin.

The list of apparently plausible common interests for Western interlocutors to draw upon in building a new relationship with their Russian counterparts is painfully thin. Macron has, like others before him, mentioned common action to curb terrorism. Tackling cybercrime is also a favoured subject. Most Western leaders would in principle like to encourage trade and investment. The difficulty is that as soon as an area for discussion is suggested, however tentatively, its practical boundaries in relation to contemporary realities become obvious. Russia, too, denounces terrorism, but shares no common definition with possible partners of exactly what this is or who might be responsible for the threats it poses. Russia is close to Iran, the West is not. Russia has military forces in Ukraine, Libya and even parts of sub-Saharan Africa whose connections with the central government in Moscow are denied. Russia and the West share no common definition of cybercrime. Economic relations with Russia are complicated by sanctions, by the corruption – whether official or unofficial – that cripples the Russian economy, and by the lack of judicial independence.

It is worth noting that Moscow has not itself suggested meetings with Western leaders seriously to explore new ways of managing these sorts of issues. US and European relationships with Russia in the 1990s, and as the Putin era opened, involved transatlantic non-governmental as well as state-supported bodies being tasked to work with their Russian counterparts on a wide range of social and economic issues. These initiatives have since been shut down, for the most part by the Russian authorities. During the Medvedev presidency, the US government proposed that a social dialogue be included as a significant part of the reset.[66] Nothing useful resulted.[67] Russia has taken no considered position even on cooperative measures that would seem to be in its natural interest, such as avoiding military accidents or reducing risk by promoting mutual understanding of the reasons behind military stationing and exercises.

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65 See also Myth 7: 'Russia is entitled to a defensive perimeter – a sphere of "privileged interests" including the territory of other states'.
66 Rojansky, M. (2010), 'INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTIONS: The Obama-Medvedev Commission and Five Decades of U.S.-Russia Dialogue', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 January 2010, p. 33, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/indispensable_institutions.pdf (accessed 9 Apr. 2021).
67 Schreck, C. (2014), 'Freeze Settles On U.S.-Russia Commission Amid Ukraine Standoff', RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 28 March 2014, https://www.rferl.org/a/us-russia-commission/25312837.html (accessed 9 Apr. 2014).

What are the present implications for Western policy?

Western hopes of realizing a more balanced and constructive relationship with Putin's Russia have been further compromised by the radical shift over the last year and a quarter in its governance. The constitutional amendments forced through by Putin and his administration on 1 July 2020 by a highly questionable 'popular vote', subsequently built up further by repressive measures passed by Russia's state Duma (parliament), were designed to achieve a number of regime aims: to reduce future elections in Russia – whether federal, regional or municipal – to formalities controlled by Moscow; to prevent public protests or even discussion of political alternatives to what might be favoured by those around Putin; to put Russian 'law' above the country's obligations under existing international agreements; and to allow for Putin to return to the Kremlin for two further six-year presidential terms in 2024.

This latter prospect alone – of Putin remaining in power until 2036 – makes it even more implausible for individual transatlantic leaders or organizations to hope that to reach out to Moscow in a search for a new and mutually cooperative agreement on the management of future relationships would achieve something truly bankable. The brutal suppression of Russia-wide protests in January 2021, sparked by opposition figure Alexei Navalny's arrest on his return to Moscow after his recovery in Berlin from a failed assassination attempt in Russia, only underlined the nature of the regime that the West would have to negotiate with. Navalny's treatment as he began his prison sentence, and the refusal of adequate medical attention as his condition deteriorated, added to the lesson.

The Kremlin's dependence on powerful security and military forces to retain its control over Russia will continue to inform the country's international relationships, as witnessed by Russia's present pressure on Ukraine and Georgia, as well as by its support for the discredited President Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus. Critically essential decision-making in Russia is determined by a small and hermetic group centred on Putin.[68] Its habits and ideas have inevitably become engrained. Outside this circle, the system is naturally favoured by those who have profited from it or those who depend on it for their survival. Polling is an uncertain measure in Russia, at best. Putin's present support in the polls of around 65 per cent is balanced by scores of 30 per cent or less when it comes to trust in him.[69] Fear and uncertainty of who or what might replace him is a factor in his favour. So is the fact that the regime has ensured that no authorized and credible alternative to Putin can be put before voters. So far, so good, depending on your point of view, but the outcome is that no one knows how or when he will go, or what will happen when he does. The Levada poll readings for March 2021 record 48 per cent of Russians believing that their country is moving in the right direction, 42 per cent in the wrong one and 10 per cent uncertain. There is good evidence of a widespread and strong wish for generalized change, particularly among younger and middle-aged citizens, but less clarity as to what exactly that would entail or how it would best be achieved.

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68 For more on Putin and political decision-making in Russia, see Myth 15: 'It's all about Putin – Russia is a manually run, centralized autocracy'.
69 Balforth, T. (2021), 'Putin's approval rating holds steady despite Navalny crackdown: poll', Reuters, 4 February 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-navalny-idUSKBN2A429G (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

The prospect facing Western policymakers is consequently one of already personalized autocratic rule being further reinforced by those now in power and likely to remain so for the immediately predictable future. Accordingly, Western policymakers must expect that the Kremlin's vision of Russia as a fortress entitled to a commanding role in the world yet threatened by outside powers, and by the US in particular, will remain at the heart of its beliefs.

What would good policy look like?

The options facing transatlantic policymakers are therefore narrow. That is not to exclude the possibility of addressing particular issues with Russia as opportunity may offer, but Russia's objective in responding to individual approaches of a broader nature would not be to promote a better security system to reduce transatlantic tensions, but to divide the country in question from NATO allies or the rest of the EU. Much the same might well apply to more focused approaches. There is no present prospect of Putin's Russia abandoning its ambition to establish dominance over neighbouring states, and Ukraine in particular, or relaxing its efforts to encourage division among Western countries more generally. To do otherwise would require the Kremlin to retreat from its great-power ambitions and to contemplate a return to a relatively liberal path domestically.

Foreign governments need to nurture the respect of the Russian public by commitment at home and abroad, whether in Russia or its neighbours, to the principles behind popularly accountable and law-based governance.

Western policymakers must also take account of how the Russian people will judge what Western powers may do. Foreign governments have to deal, like it or not, with those in command of the states before them. But there is a reason why Putin and his cohort now see a paramount need to control Russia's peoples still more vigilantly, by violence if need be. Western policymakers and analysts must take full account of the continuing, and probably increasing, divide between Russia's rulers and their subjects.

Grand gestures intended to reinvent a close relationship with a Russia as we might wish it to be, but not as it really is, would run counter to that requirement. Foreign governments need to nurture the respect of the Russian public by commitment at home and abroad, whether in Russia or its neighbours, to the principles behind popularly accountable and law-based governance – including, not least, support for such principles in respect of Ukraine.

Myth 07

‘Russia is entitled to a defensive perimeter – a sphere of “privileged interests” including the territory of other states’

The idea of Russia needing an exclusive sphere of influence in neighbouring states reproduces reductive Cold War-era postures and ignores smaller states’ multifaceted motivations for engagement with Russia.

Kate Mallinson

What is the myth?

Senior US and European foreign policy analysts have pushed the misconception that Russia is entitled to its own sphere of influence, an entitlement that the Russian leadership appears genuinely to believe in. The endorsement from Euro-Atlantic policymakers furthers the idea that enduring peace in Europe can only be achieved by acknowledging as legitimate Russia’s efforts to establish a defensive perimeter of buffer states.

Yet not only does invoking the concept of spheres of influence without clearly defining the term risk flawed policymaking – and a return to geopolitical approaches reminiscent of the Cold War – but it also has potentially deeply negative implications for the security of states such as Ukraine, whose sovereign independence and territorial integrity are threatened by this outdated model of great-power relations.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The myth has found traction among a range of analysts and policymakers at different research institutes. Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute (which was founded by the Republican-leaning Koch Foundation), stated in May 2019 that ‘Washington would be willing to respect a Russian sphere

of influence in that region [Eastern Europe and the Black Sea]'.[70] Benn Steil, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, argued in February 2018 that the Marshall Plan, the US's post-Second World War development aid initiative to European countries, 'worked because the United States accepted the reality of a Russian sphere of influence into which it could not penetrate'.[71]

Why is it wrong?

There are three principal flaws in the reasoning that informs this myth. First, thinking in terms of exclusive spheres of influence over a group of states is incompatible with Euro-Atlantic values. To concede that Russia's 'defensive perimeter' argument entitles it to dominate and/or encroach territorially on states in Central and Eastern Europe deprives those states of agency and ignores their own interests. Such thinking is to deny smaller states or entire regions the sovereign right to self-determination. (A similar logic, it should be added, would apply to any attempt on the part of Euro-Atlantic powers to force post-Soviet states out of their natural 'habitat' into alignment with the West, in denial of the possibility that some might regard their relationship with Moscow as beneficial – certain residual forms of Russian influence notwithstanding.)

The assumption that Russia should have a defensive perimeter, a sphere of influence in its immediate neighbourhood that precludes the presence of any other non-regional power, is stuck in a neocolonialist view of the world.

Russian policymakers like to argue that NATO's enlargement after the disintegration of the communist bloc was a unilateral decision by Brussels against the will of parts of the populations in the Soviet Union's former satellite states. However, this assertion disregards the fact that the countries in the Visegrad Group[72] were sovereign states that were already integrating into European institutions in the 1990s, and that had explicitly expressed their intention to join an alliance of democratic states. Moreover, as the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region has demonstrated over the past seven years, invoking the concept of spheres of influence can have real and devastating consequences. Ukraine has lost territory to Russia, has suffered enormous damage from the military conflict, and has had its very survival as a state threatened.

A second, broader problem is that the myth fundamentally oversimplifies and misconstrues past and present geopolitical dynamics. The Steil comment cited above is not only historically inaccurate,[73] but betrays a common misbelief that Cold War stability was contingent on the mutual recognition of spheres of influence by the US and the Soviet Union. Moreover, while it is true that a bipolarity of great-power politics was more tenable then, such a construct no longer provides a viable framework for conceptualizing relations in an increasingly multipolar world.[74] The assumption that Russia should have a defensive perimeter, a sphere of influence in its immediate neighbourhood that precludes the presence of any other non-regional power, is stuck in a neocolonialist view of the world.

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70 Carpenter, T. G. (2019), 'Striking a Deal with Russia on Spheres of Influence', Commentary, Cato Institute, 12 May 2019, https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/striking-deal-russia-spheres-influence (accessed 29 Jun. 2020).
71 Steil, B. (2018), *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
72 The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.
73 Washington did invite all European countries, as well as the Soviet Union, to participate in the Marshall Plan. This was only rejected by Poland and Czechoslovakia after Stalin's intervention.
74 Walt, S. M. (2017), 'Great Powers Are Defined by Their Great Wars', *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/21/great-powers-are-defined-by-their-great-wars (accessed 29 Jun. 2020).

Finally, China's ever greater economic and, increasingly, military influence in formerly Soviet Central Asia has underlined that Moscow is in fact prepared, albeit reluctantly, to accept a second player in its backyard. Russia's tolerance of China's expansion into Central Asia is rooted in the two countries' political interdependence in their efforts to undermine the US-dominated Bretton Woods institutional architecture that survived the Cold War. This demonstration of Russian consideration for Chinese interests in a shared neighbourhood undermines Moscow's claim to an exclusive sphere of influence.

What is its impact on policy?

Although senior Western officials have not directly conceded a sphere of influence to Russia, the mere invocation of the term without clarifying its meaning has contributed to the reproduction of the misbelief that spheres of influence have somehow 'returned' to international politics. This assumes, of course, that they ever went away. While, as mentioned, the idea of carving up the world bilaterally between East and West is now obsolete, we should understand that in some form or other spheres of influence have dominated great-power politics for more than two millennia. Without attempting to define the term to account for new realities of multipolarity, polycentrism, cyberwarfare and digital globalization, policymakers run the risk of reproducing Cold War-era confrontational attitudes.

A further problem is that realist political doctrines often fail to account for economic and cultural exertions of power. Countries in the shared neighbourhood of Russia and the EU are not only interested in, but dependent on, cooperation with both sides, whether for economic or security reasons or because of sociocultural heritage. For instance, Berlin has an assertive stance towards energy security that is independent of Brussels, and geared towards Russia's direct supply of gas to Germany through the Gazprom-operated Nord Stream 2 pipeline. This stance, which is supported both by Germany's federal and regional governments, ignores the grievances such an arrangement creates in neighbours to the east.

What would good policy look like?

Any unilateral projection of the Kremlin's illiberal governance model on its neighbours should not be acceptable to European policymakers, most of whom are still guided by liberal values.

A more sober look at the circumstances would contribute to a more constructive debate on Russian foreign policy. Any unilateral projection of the Kremlin's illiberal governance model on its neighbours should not be acceptable to European policymakers, most of whom are still guided by liberal values.

However, a principled stance is not incompatible with an understanding that Russian policymakers are driven by an inherent feeling of mistrust and insecurity. As George Kennan recognized in his 'Long Telegram' from February 1946: 'At [the] bottom of [the] Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is [a] traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.' The West can acknowledge such concerns without appeasing Russia or allowing it to trample on the rights of neighbouring states. Instead, the diplomatic debate should recognize differences between

the drivers of the Russian and Western agendas, publicly state these differences rather than pretend they don't exist, and seek to mitigate them, ultimately to mutual advantage.

More generally, thinking on spheres of influence should be revisited and updated to move the concept away from outdated models of realpolitik. Instead, spheres of influence should be regarded as social structures in which the rules of the relationship are constantly renegotiated and challenged. Such structures have evolved along with global politics, away from a mere material supremacy over a region into negotiations between states. As currently often understood, the term 'sphere of influence' implies that smaller states do not have agency; however, the governing elites of such states might actually be receptive towards a hierarchical relationship with a larger state if it were beneficial to the junior partner's economic or political stability. An asymmetric relationship between two states does not solely have to be defined by the assertion of control and exclusivity; it can also reflect a mutually advantageous partnership.

American academics and policymakers warned in July 2019 that spheres-of-influence thinking in relation to China might create a self-fulfilling prophecy. A similar realization is required for foreign policymakers dealing with Russia. Falling back into Cold War modes of understanding relations between states impairs more constructive dialogue and reflection on Western policies. We need a new approach that:

1. Enhances the security of states in Central and Eastern Europe, in a way that falls short of constituting a military alliance at the present time;
2. Avoids half-hearted pledges of membership in EU or NATO; and
3. Protects all national options that any sovereign state should enjoy.

Russia is not entitled to an exclusive sphere of influence in the territories of other sovereign states. However, we should not assume that Russian foreign policy towards its neighbours is always against the will of the latter *per se*. Accepting the agency of smaller states in foreign policy decisions, as well as Russia's natural scepticism towards Western policymaking, will contribute to a more constructive debate around Moscow's foreign policy motives.

Myth 08

‘We must drive a wedge between Russia and China to impede their ability to act in tandem against Western interests’

The notion that the West can exploit tensions between Russia and China both misunderstands the nature of the relationship between the two countries and overestimates its susceptibility to Western leverage.

Annette Bohr

What is the myth?

This myth holds that it is possible for Western policymakers to set Russia and China against each other to impede their capacity to work in tandem to undermine the interests and values of the US and its allies. A corollary of the myth is the notion that Russia and China form a single strategic entity that was ‘allowed’ to develop by negligent Western policymakers.[75]

Just as it overstates the role of the West in bringing Moscow and Beijing together, this ‘divide and rule’ narrative similarly exaggerates the West’s ability to pull the two powers apart, misunderstanding in the process the natural symbiosis that underpins the Sino-Russian relationship as well as the factors that constrain it.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

A succession of recent US presidential administrations has tried to halt the growth of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation by attempting to drive a wedge between

75 The following statement is illustrative of the notion put forth by proponents of the myth that the West bears responsibility for China and Russia’s deepening relationship: ‘Allowing Russia to drift fully into China’s strategic embrace over the last decade will go down as the single greatest geostrategic error of successive US administrations.’ Anonymous (2021), *The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy*, Atlantic Council Strategy Papers, p. 10, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf.

Russia and China.[76] President George W. Bush assured Moscow in 2001 that his missile defence scheme was not directed against the Kremlin, while failing to give comparable assurances to Beijing.[77] President Barack Obama's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, launched a 'reset' in relations with Russia (even using a big red button for symbolism) in 2009. In 2020, President Donald Trump extended an olive branch to the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, by calling for Russia to rejoin the G7 (previously the G8, until Russia's suspension from the grouping in 2014) in order to discuss China's future.[78]

Under President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken has declared that the US 'will deter, and impose costs for, Mr. Putin's meddling and aggression', while nonetheless suggesting that the Biden administration could use the increasing asymmetry between Russia and China – and Moscow's growing dependency on Beijing, in particular – to create a rift.[79] Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Biden's initial choice for National Security Council senior director for Russia and Central Asia, has acknowledged that the US has little leverage to exacerbate the tensions between Russia and China, yet still advocates 'the goal of driving such mini-wedges' between Moscow and Beijing in order to 'sow doubt in their relationship'.[80]

A recent strategy report by the US-based Atlantic Council declared: 'Dividing Russia from China in the future is [critical].'[81] This anonymously published report, entitled *The Longer Telegram*, sought to replicate George Kennan's famous 'long telegram' – published in 1947 under the pseudonym 'X' – that came to form the basis for the West's policy of containment of the USSR. Numerous policymakers and commentators, primarily in the US, have warned that the West ignores the Russia–China revisionist axis of authoritarianism 'at its peril',[82] urging Washington to act 'before it's too late'.[83]

Why is it wrong?

Just as the West did not join Russia and China together, it cannot put them asunder. The 'wedge-driving' narrative gives rise to the false notion that Washington and its allies have the leverage and capacity to split the Russia–China entente apart, despite numerous failed attempts in the past and the Kremlin's unequivocally adversarial stance towards the West.

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76 The Clinton administration was the exception to this rule in so far as it did not have faith that Russia and China would form an anti-US alliance. The idea of driving a wedge between Russia and China is primarily a US-led policy debate, although it has gained some traction in France and Australia. See Myth 9: 'The West's relations with Russia must be normalized in order to counter the rise of China'.
77 See Galen-Carpenter, T. (2001), 'Bush Tries to Drive a Wedge Between Russia and China', Cato Institute, 3 August 2001, https://www.cato.org/commentary/bush-tries-drive-wedge-between-russia-china.
78 Haberman, M. (2020), 'Trump Postpones G7 Summit and Calls for Russia to Attend', *New York Times*, 30 May 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/us/politics/trump-g7-russia.html.
79 Blinken said that 'there's a flip side' to dealing with Moscow in so far as President Putin is 'looking to relieve Russia's growing dependence on China', which has put him in 'not a very comfortable position'. Sanger, D. E. (2020), 'The End of 'America First': How Biden Says He Will Re-engage With the World', *New York Times*, 9 November 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/us/politics/biden-foreign-policy.html.
80 Kendall-Taylor, A. and Shullman, D. (2021), *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*, Center for a New American Security, 14 January 2021, p. 30, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership.
81 Anonymous (2021), *The Longer Telegram*, p. 10.
82 Anderlini, J. (2018), 'China and Russia's dangerous liaison', *Financial Times*, 9 August 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/1b4e6d78-9973-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d.
83 Kendall-Taylor, A. and Shullman, D. (2019), 'A Russian-Chinese Partnership is a Threat to U.S. Interests: Can Washington Act Before It's Too Late?', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 May 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-05-14/russian-chinese-partnership-threat-us-interests.

Far from being the product of failed Western policy, the Russia–China partnership is a complex one, with its own rationale based on a natural symbiosis. While it is true that Moscow's deteriorating relations with the West have catalysed the Sino-Russian partnership in certain areas,[84] most aspects of cooperation are the natural outcomes of shared interests and geography. Relations between Moscow and Beijing began to normalize in the 1980s, decades before the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the consequent imposition of Western sanctions on Russia. The *de facto* non-aggression pact that Putin and President Xi Jinping of China have established in recent years constitutes part of the bedrock of each country's foreign policy, standing in stark contrast to the fraught period of the Cold War when the Sino-Soviet split required the USSR to maintain nearly 40 army divisions along its 4,200-kilometre border with China.

Far from being the product of failed Western policy, the Russia–China partnership is a complex one, with its own rationale based on a natural symbiosis.

The two powers also have complementary economies and interests in the spheres of technology, cyber cooperation and defence. For its part, Moscow is in a hurry to close deals on the sale of sensitive military and other technologies to China before Beijing's own research and development advances make such purchases obsolete. According to one of Russia's leading sinologists, Alexander Gabuev, Moscow understands that this is its 'last chance to make money off the remains of the Soviet legacy', given that 'the number of technologies that are of interest to China diminishes with every passing year'.[85]

Not least, Russia and China enjoy a natural ideological compatibility, and an interest in eroding universal human rights and undermining US global dominance. Partnering with China dovetails perfectly with Russia's quest to restore a measure of international prominence during its twilight years as a leading global power. China finds utility in Russian efforts to bring down a US-led international order,[86] although it is less concerned with forming a fully fledged partnership with Russia than it is with ensuring that Moscow does not impede its own upward global trajectory.

Another way in which the myth distorts the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship is by ascribing to it a behavioural convergence and a grand conspiratorial character,[87] while overlooking each state's commanding imperative to retain full autonomy in decision-making.[88] In addition, while Russia seeks a new global order in which it is on an equal footing with the US and China, the Chinese increasingly characterize

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84 In particular, souring relations with the West have accelerated Moscow's overreliance on Beijing in the energy sphere. After years of difficult negotiations, in 2014 – only weeks after the annexation of Crimea – Russia and China signed a $400 billion deal, under very favourable terms for Beijing, to build the Power of Siberia gas pipeline. The pipeline was commissioned in December 2019. Similarly, an inability to access Western financing helped induce Russia to accept China as an Arctic player. Perovic, J. and Zogg, B. (2019), 'Russia and China: The Potential of Their Partnership', CSS Analyses in Security Policy, Center for Security Studies, 2 October 2019, https://css.ethz.ch/en/center/CSS-news/2019/10/russland-und-china-potenzial-der-partnerschaft.html.
85 Gabuev, A. (2019), 'Дружба на расстояние руки' [Friendship at arm's length], *Kommersant*, 31 May 2019, p. 19, https://kommersant.ru/archive/online/57.
86 In March 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asserted that 'the US-led international order does not represent the will of the international community'. Kendall-Taylor, A. and Shullman, D. (2021), 'Russia and China's Convergence: How to Counter an Emerging Partnership', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-03/china-and-russias-dangerous-convergence?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=China%20and%20Russia's%20Dangerous%20Convergence&utm_content=20210503&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017.
87 Lo, B. (2020), *Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West*, Sydney: Lowy Institute, July 2020, p. 16, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/global_order_coronavirus_lo.pdf.
88 Lo, B. (2020), 'The Sino-Russian partnership and global order', *China International Strategy Review*, The Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University, 8 December 2020, 2, p. 307, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s42533-020-00063-7.pdf.

Russia in private as a country in long-term decline with mounting corruption and a shrinking population.[89] China's relatively quick economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will reinforce its position as the principal driver of economic growth within the relationship, putting Moscow at risk of economic and political dependency on Beijing. According to some estimates, between 2014 and 2019 a mere 2 per cent of Chinese foreign direct investment went to Russia, in large part owing to the country's risky business environment.[90] Furthermore, Beijing's distaste for Moscow's foreign adventurism acts as a major disincentive for the establishment of a formal strategic alliance: China is averse to the possibility of becoming embroiled in paramilitary or military interventions in Ukraine and the Middle East, for example, and Beijing has yet to formally recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea.

However, given that the two powers currently have more to gain from cooperation than competition, both Russia and China have chosen to push their differences to the background for the foreseeable future. Moscow, in particular, does not aim to throw down the gauntlet to Beijing in a contest for supremacy that it ultimately cannot hope to win. This dynamic of accommodation is currently being played out in Central Asia, often cited by observers and specialists alike as perhaps the region in which rivalry between Beijing and Moscow is most likely to manifest itself, given the default assumption that both Russia and China cannot claim the same sphere of influence. Yet for more than three years it has been evident that the Kremlin has chosen to adapt to China's growing influence in Central Asia rather than struggle to counterbalance it, even though only a few years earlier the consensus was that Russia would strongly object to Beijing making too many inroads into its 'backyard'.

While the current Sino-Russian partnership has proven highly durable, in the longer term the widening gap in the two states' capacities is likely to be a game-changer that presages a fundamental shift in the relationship, once the current dynamic of accommodation has run its course. As China's ascendancy continues, the latent tensions and clashes of interests between Moscow and Beijing could come to the fore, particularly if Russia is no longer seen as a valuable counterweight to US hegemony.[91]

What is its impact on policy?

In addition to glossing over the partnership's complexity, the myth risks obscuring the relevant questions for Western policymakers. Does Russia really pose more of a threat to Western interests in alliance with China than it does alone? And, if so, is the West really in a position to slow Sino-Russian cooperation in areas that it has deemed detrimental to its interests, much less drive a wedge into the partnership? Does the growing asymmetry between Moscow and Beijing presage change within the relationship in the longer term?

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89 Gabuev, A. (2020), 'The Pandemic Could Tighten China's Grip on Eurasia', *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2020.
90 Gabuev, A. (2019), 'Ложное множество' [False multitude], *Kommersant*, 7 June 2019, p. 7, https://kommersant.ru/daily/118142.
91 As one analyst has written: 'Why should China go to any trouble to massage the vanity of a fading Great Power?' Shevtsova, L. (2018), 'The Russian Myth Machine', *The American Interest*, 13 June 2018, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/06/13/the-russian-myth-machine.

Overselling Moscow and Beijing's relationship and its capacity to upend Western norms and values leads to knee-jerk policymaking, whereby Western governments could perceive that every joint Sino-Russian action needs to be countered, even if that action has no substantive implications for Western policymakers. In addition, adherence to the myth increases the risk that policymakers, when formulating strategy, will fail to differentiate sufficiently between the two powers by overstating the unity of the two states' positions. For example, the narrative engenders the false assumption that Russia would automatically involve itself in a conflict between the US and China, even if it were not in Moscow's direct interests to do so.

Not least, by embellishing the degree to which Russia's behaviour in the international arena is influenced by China, the myth soft-pedals the risks to Western interests posed by Russia acting on its own. While Russia's partnership with China enhances its great-power identity, it is the disjoint between Moscow's aspirations and its ability to achieve them that primarily fuels Russia's high-risk foreign policy strategy, often dubbed as seeking to 'punch above its weight'.

As a lone actor, Russia has shown itself expert at identifying power vacuums to undercut existing systems of order, and at using cyber and disinformation capabilities to disrupt critical infrastructure and influence public opinion.

As a lone actor, Russia has shown itself expert at identifying power vacuums to undercut existing systems of order, and at using cyber and disinformation capabilities to disrupt critical infrastructure and influence public opinion. China played no role in Russia's annexation of Crimea, its war in Ukraine, or its actions to support the survival of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. As regards specific threats to US security, Kendall-Taylor has argued that it is imperative to focus on the actions of Russia and China in combination, given that 'analysts understand well the challenges that Russia and China each pose to the United States'.[92] Yet, to cite just one example of unforeseen and highly damaging operations by a single country, the SolarWinds cybersecurity attack in 2020, which was believed to have been perpetrated by Russia, blindsided the US Cyber Command and was one of the largest breaches in recent memory.[93]

The myth's downplaying of tensions within the Sino-Russian partnership, coupled with its depiction of the relationship as a grand alliance against the West, allows Beijing and Moscow to use the spectre of coordinated action – particularly in the military sphere – to spook Western policymakers. The successful use of scaremongering tactics and the presentation of an ostensibly united front enhance the strategic leverage of Beijing and Moscow *vis-à-vis* the US and its allies.

What would good policy look like?

First and foremost, good policy calls for the prioritization of specific threats and challenges posed by the Russia–China partnership that can be met with concrete measures. Western governments should adjust notions of great-power

92 Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021), *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*, p. 1.
93 Jibilian, I. and Canales, K. (2021), 'Here's a simple explanation of how the massive SolarWinds hack happened and why it's such a big deal', Business Insider, 25 February 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/solarwinds-hack-explained-government-agencies-cyber-security-2020-12?r=US&IR=T.

competition[94] in order to pragmatically target the areas where joint actions by Moscow and Beijing both (a) have real implications for Western security and (b) can be countered successfully.

Military resourcing is also a factor behind this imperative. Washington's aim to retain global primacy carries the requirement to achieve a state of battle readiness in a large number of theatres internationally, potentially leading to classic strategic overreach at a time when the US defence budget is already under strain. Indeed, when discussing hypothetical grey-zone operations that could be launched concurrently by Russia and China in the Baltic region and the South China Sea, Kendall-Taylor has noted that 'U.S. forces would be hard-pressed to respond to both threats' and that 'the resources required to fight in either theater are costly'.[95] It is conceivable that Western officials could plan for coordinated Russian and Chinese action regardless of the likelihood of it occurring, which is not conducive to efficient or effective foreign policy.

Second, Western policymakers must fully recognize that they lack the leverage to craft policies that could dramatically alter the Sino-Russian partnership. Even the 'mini-wedges' set out by Biden's policymakers that are designed 'to pull at the seams in Russia-China relations'[96] are bound to have limited utility in exploiting areas of friction.

Third, the West should counterbalance the Sino-Russian partnership by nurturing more effective alliances with multilateral and regional organizations. Stronger alliances with key partners such as India, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam should also be cultivated.

Efforts to pry Russia apart from China have proved futile. The Western construct of a Sino-Russian revisionist alliance that threatens to completely upend 'the world system, and American influence in it'[97] plays into Russian and Chinese views of the US as a declining power seeking to reassert its dominance with limited advantage.

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94 Lo (2020), *Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus*, pp. 23–24.
95 Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021), *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*, p. 24.
96 Ibid, p. 2.
97 US Department of Defense (2019), *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, May 2019, p. iv, https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fdf908e00001 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

Myth 09

‘The West’s relations with Russia must be normalized in order to counter the rise of China’

An alliance with Russia to balance the perceived threat from China would undermine Western values and would, in any event, not find a reliable partner in Moscow. Such an approach also risks underestimating the challenge that Russia on its own presents to international stability.

James Nixey

What is the myth?

The premise is superficially attractive: if China is the oncoming storm, then Western powers must make an ally of Russia to help combat or at least weather it. As China’s power as a global actor grows, there is understandable apprehension over its capabilities and agenda. As a consequence, in some circles the argument now holds that China poses a far greater long-term systemic challenge by comparison to Russia, that dealing with the former should be prioritized by Western policymakers, and that Russia’s existing relationship with China and potentially slightly greater biddability as a declining power should be leveraged to this end. While the scale of the Chinese challenge is not disputed here, the conclusions that Euro-Atlantic politicians and policymakers sometimes draw from that point – in particular, in respect of cooperating with Russia in the short term – are incorrect.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The presentation of a choice between allying with Russia or enabling Chinese dominance is recurrent in the pronouncements and writings of prominent figures in the field of international relations, especially adherents to the ‘realist’ doctrine

who do not study Russia closely but claim to see the big picture.[98] Thus, for example, this myth (or variations of it) is commonly repeated by generalist heads of think-tanks, as well as by business leaders for whom Russia is an important source of income. In the latter case, the motivations for promoting an alignment of convenience with Moscow sometimes seem questionable.

A number of politicians and influential foreign policy consultants have also found the argument for alliance persuasive over the years, and the trend continues to this day. Perhaps most prominently, Henry Kissinger has long been principally concerned about the threat from Beijing,[99] and has favoured a so-called 'pragmatic' approach towards Moscow. In recent years, the essence of his argument has been that the Cold War is over and it is China that will overtake the US. This is particularly salient given the continuing influence of Kissinger's foreign policy thinking through multiple US administrations.

As other chapters in this report have noted, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, has advocated bringing Russia closer into the European family while arguably overlooking the darker side of Russian foreign policy. Macron appears also to see Russia's international transgressions, at least in part, as having their origins in supposed Western provocation. He is not only the most vocal Western European leader to put hope before experience in calling for cooperation with Russia, but also, crucially, neglects to elaborate what this would mean for Russia's vulnerable neighbours. The French president's contention is not so much about relative threat perception or immediacy, but that Russia's true place is in Europe, and that it should not be pushed into a more problematic alliance with China.[100]

Why is it wrong?

The challenge from Russia to the rules-based international order is older than that presented by modern China, but age does not diminish the former's substance or importance.[101] Rather, Western policymakers are arguably guilty of comparative

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98 Two articles from Australia in June and July 2020 offer good examples of support for normalization. See Dal Santo, M. (2020), 'Yes, to balance China, let's bring Russia in from the cold', The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, 7 July 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/yes-balance-china-bring-russia-in-from-cold (accessed 17 Feb. 2021); and Sharma, D. (2020), 'Reach out to Russia to manage the rise of China', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/reach-out-to-russia-to-manage-the-rise-of-china-20200612-p551xr.html (accessed 17 Feb. 2021). And perhaps most recently at the time of writing, from the US: Schake, K. (2021), 'The U.S. Doesn't Know How to Treat Its Allies', *The Atlantic*, 28 March 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/the-us-doesnt-know-how-to-treat-its-allies/618441 (accessed 3 Apr. 2021).
99 'I think in 20 years your successor, if he's as wise as you, will wind up leaning towards the Russians against the Chinese. For the next 15 years we have to lean towards the Chinese against the Russians. We have to play this balance of power game totally unemotionally. Right now, we need the Chinese to correct the Russians and to discipline the Russians.' Kissinger, H. (1972), '192. Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs' in Keefer, C. E. and Phillips, E. (eds) (2006), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, VOLUME XVII, CHINA, 1969–1972*, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d192 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
100 Momtaz, R. (2020), 'Emmanuel Macron's Russian roulette', Politico, 14 February 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-russian-roulette-vladimir-putin-security-partner (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
101 For example, in the UK government's March 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, China is described as a 'systemic competitor' while Russia is the most 'acute threat'. In other words, they are both problematic in their separate ways. See HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, policy paper, 16 March 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy (accessed 3 Apr. 2021).

complacency given the temptation to focus on the emerging political, economic, security and international governance issues associated with China.

It can certainly be argued that China presents a systemic, long-term challenge to international order that is ultimately on a different scale to that associated with Russia's disruptive actions – which in part are a response to the latter's decline as a major power. And it is also the case that China's rise may well prove not to be peaceful, especially given Beijing's new assertiveness in the COVID-19 and new Hong Kong eras. One cannot dismiss its efforts to annex territory in the South China Sea or to claim areas – small and large – held by India and Japan. Nor can one excuse the kidnapping and incarceration of politically inconvenient individuals, Beijing's muzzling of Hong Kong, or the propping up of a succession of North Korean dynastic leaders. It is neither necessary nor right to downplay these issues. But the threat remains different from that posed by Russia right now, and recognition of the former does not unequivocally justify a softer line on Moscow.

In considering the twin challenges posed by China and Russia, in other words, it is a mistake to believe that the West has the luxury of addressing one and ignoring the other. Specifically, there are at least four problems with the 'unite against China' argument. First, it underestimates Russia and the damage it can do even as the country slides into deeper socio-economic and political turmoil. Although China is no paragon of virtue, the proposition that it is a greater long-term danger than Russia to regional or international stability – and the accompanying assumption that the Kremlin must therefore be cultivated at almost any cost as a potential ally against that danger – should not be an excuse to overlook the egregious nature of Russia's documented contraventions of international rules and norms.

Although the situation may change in the future, currently China is *not* crossing international borders in anger to annex or destabilize its neighbours (as Russia has done in Ukraine). The current Chinese government's uncompromising foreign policy has partly relied in recent years on the explicit or implicit threat – rather than the outright use on any significant scale – of military force. Nor has China, unlike Russia, been proven to have assassinated (or tried to assassinate) its own citizens or others abroad. China has shown little interest in manipulating election results beyond its own borders[102] – again, unlike Russia, which has sought to do so in locations as diverse as the US, Madagascar and Montenegro. And China is not as heavily invested in propping up dictators, which again Russia continues to do in Belarus, Syria and Venezuela, among other countries.[103]

A second flaw with seeking to use Russia as a balance against China is that this prematurely dismisses the prospect for sustainable interactions between Western countries and China. The West and China will almost certainly continue to clash on many issues, perhaps severely, but that does not automatically mean that cooperation in good faith on issues such as climate change, the development of Global South economies or even, for that matter, dealing with Moscow is fundamentally beyond Beijing.

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102 Taiwan is conceivably an exception to this – although this is in territory which China claims as its own.
103 In terms of domestic politics, however, the contrast between Russia's behaviour and that of China is far less discernible, considering China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

A third mistake is quite simply that the grand bargain is unlikely to work. A tenable alliance with the current regime led by Vladimir Putin has proven impossible, and will continue to elude Western diplomats and governments for the foreseeable future – as other chapters of this report argue on multiple fronts. Regardless of whether ceding a sphere of influence to Russia is even within the gift of the West, where is the evidence that Russia would be a reliable partner – and become a less disruptive international actor – if accommodated as some suggest? And where is the evidence that a better relationship with Russia would help address the challenges from China or deter China from acting in a particular way – for example, in asserting itself territorially in the South China Sea or in relation to Taiwan?

Russia is in any event inclined to attempt to align itself with China on specific issues, such as human rights, given the two countries' similarities as fellow autocracies. Consider, for example, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Mariya Zakharova's reproach in June 2020 that the rest of the world must not interfere in China's 'internal affairs' over Hong Kong. Admittedly, China does not endorse Russia's annexation of Crimea, but this is to avoid undermining Beijing's stance on territorial integrity – Russia understands why China's agenda on Xinjiang and Tibet forces it to take this position. But the two countries will not call each other out on human rights abuses, such as China's treatment of its Uighur population in Xinjiang, or Russia's conduct towards protesters following Alexei Navalny's return to Russia and arrest in January 2021, for example.

In the light of China's potential exposure to international opprobrium as the origin point of COVID-19, the Chinese leadership is unlikely to decide that its best move is a significantly closer relationship with a pariah state such as Russia.

A fourth and final error is to assume that normalization of ties with Moscow is needed to prevent the development of a Russia–China axis that, perhaps indirectly, could reinforce China's growing reach and capabilities. But such an axis is less plausible a prospect than is sometimes assumed.[104] Although Russia and China work together in multilateral institutions such as the UN on issues such as cyber governance and human rights,[105] it is not axiomatic that the two countries will draw closer together in a broad strategic relationship if the former is strategically pushed away by the West through criticism and economic sanctions. In the light of China's potential exposure to international opprobrium as the origin point of COVID-19, the Chinese leadership is unlikely to decide that its best move is a significantly closer relationship with a pariah state such as Russia. Western fears about 'losing' Russia to China are largely driven by Russia's perceived 'pivot' to the east since 2014. But it is questionable whether such a pivot ever indeed occurred. Although Russia's relations with China have been strengthening since the 1980s, the concept of a pivot is a recent one. It is primarily a construction used by Russia to unnerve Western audiences, and to give the impression that it has strategic options. The reality is that Russia's elites remain overwhelmingly Western-centric in their identification of foreign policy risks and opportunities.

104 See Myth 8: 'We must drive a wedge between Russia and China to impede their ability to act in tandem against Western interests'.
105 For example, in the UN Human Rights Council, both countries are pushing resolutions that undermine traditional human rights language in favour of President Xi Jinping's state-centric 'win-win' approach. This suits Russia. On cyber governance, Russia and China were architects of a proposal to the UN on new rules, in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's 'Draft Code of Conduct for Information Security' (submitted to the UN General Assembly in 2011 and again in 2015). The draft code has not gained much traction, but the two countries continue to work together in various forums to downplay the human rights element of cyber governance in favour of cybersecurity (including promoting a vision of 'cyber sovereignty' that emphasizes state control of the internet, etc.).

At the same time, politics and protocol in Moscow obscure Russia's own significant reservations about closer ties with China. Russia is as aware as any other government of China's power. The Kremlin's caution reflects a variety of factors that include asymmetry in bilateral trade negotiations and age-old fears about the consequences of population disparity on either side of the China–Russia border.[106] Russia's security service culture and mindset apply strongly to eastern as well as western neighbours: for example, what does the FSB (Federal Security Service) make of Russia being forced to use 5G telecoms hardware from China's Huawei, since Russia cannot produce equipment of sufficient quality on its own, given the cybersecurity concerns in many countries over the embedding of Huawei technology in the next generation of advanced networks?

What is its impact on policy?

Accommodating Russia would involve tolerating policies that contravene Western stated principles and that imply potentially grave harm (conflict casualties, loss of territory etc.) in other countries. Russia demands control in sovereign states that have been independent for some 30 years, and to which (despite its cultivation of other myths explored in this report) it has no justifiable claim. To borrow a historical analogy, it almost seems as if Moscow wants another 'Yalta Conference' to validate the carving up of neighbouring territory to its advantage. But for the West to effectively hand over Ukraine, for instance, as the price for cooperation against China would not only be a huge betrayal of Ukraine but would critically undermine Western credibility in other theatres in the future. The Soviet Union joined the Allies in the Second World War as a common enemy was (eventually) agreed on;[107] the long-term effects for Eastern Europe were disastrous. A modern-day alliance with Russia against China *might* be appropriate if Western countries were at war with China, or even at a point-of-no-return stand-off. But that is not yet the case.

Supporters of normalizing relations tend to desire a return to something akin to the geopolitics of the 19th century, in which the exercise of power involves constant shifts in alignment and alliances without reference to values. It follows that the effect of this myth on policy would be the abandonment of the West's stated norms, alongside the encouragement of Russia that rule-breaking gets results. Western states would suffer a far greater erosion of values than is already in evidence. So if the West did reach out to Russia, it is more likely that this would simply confirm the Russian leadership's belief in its country as a geopolitical 'balancer' between East and West.

The West's great strength is its democratic system, tattered as this is. Russia knows this. Compromising principles, as would be necessary in an alignment of convenience with Russia, would eliminate what remains of that strength. In doing so, we would disarm and weaken ourselves.

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106 The population of Russia's Far East Federal District is just over 800,000. The population of China's neighbouring Heilongjiang Province is approximately 28.3 million.
107 The Soviet Union was allied with the Nazi regime until it switched sides in 1941, after it was attacked by Germany. Winston Churchill effectively called the alliance with the Soviet Union a deal with the devil.

What would better policy look like?

As so often, better policy would involve recognizing the evidence before us and acting on it. The record shows that Russia is seeking to undermine Western norms and values in aggressive ways; this needs to be countered with actions, not just words. Currently this is being done primarily through sanctions – the most useful non-violent tool for expressing disapproval. But however it is done, the point is to respond, and not to simply accept transgressions as 'typical' or 'unfortunate', lest they are understood by the Kremlin as acceptable – and therefore repeatable.

The previous chapter has shown that attempting to drive wedges between Russia and China will not work. Logic then suggests that the countries need to be addressed on their individual merits and misdemeanours.

Although much of the world has woken up to the challenge posed by Russia, policymakers need constant reminding of this fact. Responding to China's rise is admittedly complicated. Western policymakers should realize this, but not overreact and lose the chance to establish a sustainable relationship.

It should be self-evident that China's increasing global footprint and diplomatic assertiveness present multiple international concerns requiring prioritization and the ability to address challenges on more than one front. This does not change the logic that, whatever China is becoming, it is of little relevance to what Russia is doing.

Myth 10
‘The Eurasian Economic Union is a genuine and meaningful counterpart to the EU’

Russia bills the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a partner for the EU in a proposed free-trade area stretching ‘from Lisbon to Vladivostok’. In reality, the EAEU is a political project lacking the institutional robustness of a true common market.

Kataryna Wolczuk

What is the myth?

Russia promotes the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)[108] as a meaningful economic integration project, on a par with the EU and offering a potential vehicle for cooperation between the EAEU’s five member states and the EU. The essence of this claim is that the EAEU is a sort of Eurasian counterpart to the EU – the ‘gold standard’ of deep economic integration – but without the EU’s flaws.[109] In order to gain recognition for this project, the EAEU (in practice, Russia) has sought closer relations with the EU. To further its claim of equivalence, Russia has touted a ‘Lisbon-to-Vladivostok’ free-trade agreement (FTA).

The myth has several aspects. One is that the EAEU is even capable of driving regional economic integration in the post-Soviet space. Another is that its supposed equivalency with the EU *de facto* makes engagement with the EAEU a worthwhile enterprise. The myth’s final aspect stems from the first two: that if the EU

108 The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established in January 2015. It consists of Russia, the main driver of the project, along with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The EAEU claims a common market of 180 million people and is promoted as a ‘demand-driven’ organization effective in regional economic governance. On the origins of Eurasian integration, see Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (eds) (2013), *Eurasian Economic Integration: Law, Policy and Politics*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
109 For more on this comparison, see Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2015), ‘EU Emulation in the Design of Eurasian Integration’, in Lane, D. and Samokhvalov, V. (eds) (2015), *The Eurasian Project and Europe: Regional Discontinuities and Geopolitics*, Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 135–52.

engages with the EAEU as an equal, Russia will not only pursue substantive trade liberalization through the above-mentioned transcontinental FTA, but will also become a more benevolent partner for the EU and its member states.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Key players in the West appear to believe that strengthening the EU's direct relations with the EAEU and creating a free-trade zone combining the two blocs will dissipate geopolitical tensions. Such thinking has been evident in a number of approaches to dealings with Russia since 2014. Following the latter's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity in that year, the deterioration in EU–Russia relations presented a conundrum for EU policymakers in terms of whether – or how best – to engage with Moscow. Many EU leaders and experts seem to have seen economic cooperation as a means of 'squaring the circle', a pragmatic route to reducing tensions despite the fact that it was Russian aggression towards Ukraine that triggered the tensions.

In 2015, the European External Action Service prepared a paper that suggested a dialogue with the EAEU as part of a package to secure Russia's commitment to implementation of the Minsk agreements on ending the fighting in eastern Ukraine.[110] Support for economic cooperation has subsequently been encouraged by concerns in some quarters that insufficient engagement with Russia could open the door to greater Chinese influence in the region. In September 2019, Markus Ederer, the EU's ambassador to Russia, was reported as calling for a sweeping expansion of engagement and 'enhanced coordination' with Russia and the EAEU as a means of combating 'Eurasian competition' from China.[111]

Germany has been particularly active in advocating economic linkages. Since 2014 the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has favoured 'talks between the EAEU and the EU on trade issues' potentially leading to an inter-bloc FTA, giving credence to the idea of a common economic space.[112] Also in Germany, an initiative led by the German–Russian business community, including companies such as Germany's Siemens and Russia's Severstal, has lobbied for talks between the EU and the EAEU on an eventual FTA.[113] France has also offered encouragement: in 2019 President Emmanuel Macron, a new champion of normalizing relations with Moscow, discussed the inter-bloc trade agenda during a meeting with President Vladimir Putin.[114] In addition to top-level political support for trade integration, similar

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110 Foreign Affairs Council (2015), 'Issues Paper on Relations with Russia', https://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog/files/2015/01/Russia.pdf (accessed 16 Feb. 2021). See also Liik, K. (2015), 'The real problem with Mogherini's Russia paper', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 20 January 2015, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_real_problem_with_mogherinis_russia_paper402 (accessed 8 Apr. 2021).
111 Peel, M. (2019), 'EU envoy urges bloc to engage more with Russia over 5G and data', *Financial Times*, 13 September 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/725aa5b6-d5f7-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77.
112 Wagstyl, S. and Khalaf, R. (2014), 'Merkel offers Russia trade talks olive branch', *Financial Times*, 26 November 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/93e5e066-757a-11e4-b1bf-00144feabdc0.
113 Kluge, J. and Richter, M. (2020), 'The Lisbon-Vladivostok Illusion', Riddle, 23 March 2020, https://www.ridl.io/en/the-lisbon-vladivostok-illusion (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
114 However, it is not clear to what extent his ideas are shared by French civil servants and diplomats. See Gressel, G., Liik, K., Shapiro, J. and Varma, T. (2019), 'Emmanuel Macron's very big idea on Russia', Commentary, ECFR, 25 September 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_emmanuel_macrons_very_big_idea_on_russia (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

ideas are advocated by experts and scholars as a way out of the crisis in EU–Russia relations and the increasingly intractable security dilemma.[115]

Why is it wrong?

A 'Lisbon-to-Vladivostok' FTA is unlikely to address the real problems between Russia and Europe, which are that Russian objectives in the post-Soviet space are simply incompatible with those of the West (see Myth 2: 'Russia and the West want the same thing'). Indeed, by pursuing closer economic relations, Germany and France appear oblivious to the nature of the EAEU and misunderstand Moscow's intentions. In 2011–15, Russia proposed an 'integration of integrations',[116] in effect a process of combining the two unions into a free-trade area. Yet as of 2021, it is clear that Russia's true aims are merely to entice the EU to lift economic sanctions.

The EAEU is not a Eurasian version of the EU, and Russia's 'equivalency' argument is flawed. Unlike the EU, the EAEU is not governed by strong common institutions capable of devising and enforcing a corpus of common rules.

Moscow's rhetoric is also at odds with reality: the EAEU is not a Eurasian version of the EU, and Russia's 'equivalency' argument is flawed. Unlike the EU, the EAEU is not governed by strong common institutions capable of devising and enforcing a corpus of common rules. Russia also fails to uphold regional trade liberalization within the EAEU. In other words, the EAEU is not an authentic project in economic integration, and the idea that there can be free trade from 'Lisbon to Vladivostok' is illusory.

At the root of the problem is the fact that, from the outset, Moscow created the EAEU as a vehicle to reverse Russia's loss of power in the region following the demise of the Soviet Union, rather than to pursue deep economic integration with smaller states (which matter little for Russia's economic development).[117] Even though the EAEU is billed as a common market and presented as a rules-based body, throughout the bloc's existence Russia has resorted to power-based interactions with other member states. As Russia seeks to promote the EAEU, it is essential for Western policymakers to recognize that its main benefits for Russia are political.[118] The EAEU is a vehicle for Russia to influence the foreign policy choices of other states. It provides a form of 'soft' hegemony through which Russia, while not controlling the domestic institutions and policies of other member states, can still ensure that their foreign policies are aligned with its own interests. This enables Russia to act as a strategic 'gatekeeper' to Eurasia.

The two sections below explore in more detail how the project's design and functioning, and Russia's politicization of trade policy, fundamentally undermine the EAEU's credibility as a multilateral organization:

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115 See, for example, Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2014), 'The New European Disorder', ECFR, November 2014, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117_TheNewEuropeanDisorder_ESSAY.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung has been notably active in promoting EU engagement with the EAEU: for example, Dienes, A. (2020), *Time to let down the drawbridge: Why engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union is in the EU's best interest*, FES Perspective Paper, Vienna: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/15966.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
116 van der Togt, T. (2017), *The "Belarus Factor": From Balancing to Bridging Geopolitical Dividing Lines in Europe?*, Clingendael Institute, pp. 5–13, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05463.5 (accessed 18 Mar. 2021).
117 Russia's original plan for integration was a more political union. However, Belarus and Kazakhstan insisted on limiting the EAEU's scope to economic integration, namely better access to the Russian market.
118 See Vinokurov, Ye. (2016), 'Евразийский экономический союз без эмоций' [Eurasian Economic Union without emotion], *Voprosy Ekonomiky* (12): pp. 43—60.

The EAEU's design and functioning

The creation of any common market is premised on strong supranational and domestic institutions: 'institutions stronger than those of any of its member states', according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).[119] A high level of cooperation and commitment by the member states is also required. Superficially, the EAEU is endowed with such institutions, and its members have ostensibly committed to a series of obligations (the nature of which varies greatly across different areas of integration). In reality, no meaningful institutions and commitments are found either in the EAEU as a whole or its member states. One illustration of this is the lack of formally binding provisions in EAEU agreements and commitments, which means that integration extends only to the least contentious, 'easy' policy areas (such as free movement of labour). Furthermore, integration is contingent on deals struck between the member states, each of which has sought room for manoeuvre in the more contentious areas (such as the creation of an EAEU-wide energy market).[120]

Even when common rules are adopted, compliance is patchy. This explains why, when trade conflicts break out, they tend to be resolved through bilateral negotiations rather than within the forum provided by the EAEU itself. The Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), the common permanent body of the EAEU, does not drive the agenda and is easily marginalized by member states, especially Russia.[121]

Data on intra-EAEU trade confirm that, with the exception of the more established relationship between Russia and Belarus, meaningful economic integration is yet to be achieved. Indeed, trade within the EAEU has actually *fallen* since the formation of the bloc, indicating that most members have pursued trade diversification rather than integration. Russia's trade with other EAEU members is minuscule relative, for example, to its trade with China or the EU.[122] And over 80 per cent of the EAEU's trade is with external partners rather than between member states; in contrast, only one-third of the EU's trade is with external partners.

A key structural flaw is Russia's overwhelming economic dominance of the EAEU, and its corresponding reluctance to be constrained by it. Russia's GDP in 2019 accounted for around 87 per cent of the EAEU's combined GDP[123] (in contrast, Germany and France, now the two largest EU economies, accounted for 25 per cent and 17 per cent respectively of EU 27 GDP in 2019, indicating

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119 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (2012), *Transition Report 2012: Integration Across Borders*, London: EBRD, p. 65, https://www.ebrd.com/downloads/research/transition/tr12.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
120 For a detailed overview of the scope and depth of integration, see Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2017), *The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/05/eurasian-economic-union (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
121 The commission's autonomy is compromised by the right of every member state to call for the repeal of any decisions that contradict its interests. The primacy of member states, mainly Russia, in decision-making renders the EEC and the EAEU's other common institutions too weak to drive integration.
122 Over 60 per cent of internal EAEU trade is conducted between Russia and Belarus. In contrast, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia account for 3.4 per cent, 0.4 per cent and 0.3 per cent of Russia's exports respectively. See Giucci, R. (2018), 'The Eurasian Economic Union. Analysis from a trade policy perspective', presentation, https://berlin-economics.com/wp-content/uploads/2018-05-29_Presentation-EAEU_Moscow.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
123 World Bank (2021), 'GDP (current US$) – Russian Federation, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic', World Bank Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU-AM-BY-KZ-KG (accessed 5 Mar. 2021).

a far more balanced distribution of economic power among member states).[124] This asymmetry is also evident in the fact that most bilateral intra-EAEU trade is conducted with Russia, even though the country remains the least dependent on the bloc. The discrepancy in economic size, as well as political and military factors, means that Russia has the ability to take unilateral actions within the EAEU without significant costs and consequences to itself.[125]

Russian trade policy within the EAEU

Russia disregards the rules of the very organization through which it seeks to reassert its power, and with which it wants the EU to cooperate.

Since the EAEU's launch, Russia has used trade policy without regard for the bloc's rules (which in any event, as mentioned, are seldom binding). On occasion, Russia has chosen to ignore the costs of unilateral actions for other member states and the EAEU as a whole. This behaviour is not unprecedented: Russia's trade policy has long been notoriously politicized and disrespectful towards international legal commitments, including those under the World Trade Organization (WTO).[126] In 2014, for example, Russia blocked agricultural imports from the EU and trade with Ukraine, in retaliation for the imposition of Western financial and economic sanctions (interestingly, the other members of the then fledgling EAEU refused to follow suit, despite Russian pressure to do so).[127]

In other words, Russia disregards the rules of the very organization through which it seeks to reassert its power, and with which it wants the EU to cooperate.[128] Trade policy does not constitute a separate, non-politicized track in Russia's foreign policy; it is subordinated to it.[129] Despite investing considerable political capital in the union and being its prime promoter, Russia all too often takes actions that undermine it.[130]

Russia's tendency to use trade as a political tool makes any alignment between the EAEU and the EU highly problematic. There is little prospect that this will change under Russia's current, or even future, political leadership.[131] While the EU pursues multi-layered, differentiated economic integration with non-members, the EAEU is dominated by Russia's ad hoc trade policy, which involves offering favourable deals to loyal states while punishing disloyalty.[132] In addition to using the EAEU to help achieve its foreign policy objectives, Russia prevents the integration of other member states into global free-trade frameworks, thereby locking them into Russia-dominated trading arrangements.

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124 Eurostat (2021), 'GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income)', https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=nama_10_gdp&lang=en (accessed 25 Mar. 2021).
125 Buthia, S. (2019), 'Russia dominates Eurasian Union trade. Here are the numbers', Eurasianet, 18 October 2019, https://eurasianet.org/russia-dominates-eurasian-union-trade-here-are-the-numbers (accessed 17 Mar. 2021).
126 Dragneva and Wolczuk (2013), *Eurasian Economic Integration*.
127 Troitskiy, Ye. (2020), 'EEU: Ambitions larger than reality', Riddle, 9 March 2020, https://www.ridl.io/en/eeu-ambitions-larger-than-reality (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
128 The EEC's remit includes negotiations on trade in goods, but not trade in services or investment, yet even this is ignored by Russia in practice where it affects key foreign policy or geopolitical issues. See Giucci (2018), 'The Eurasian Economic Union'.
129 For the EAEU's external relations and how they relate to Russia's economic interests, see Dragneva, R. (2018), *The Eurasian Economic Union: Putin's Geopolitical Project*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/10/the-eurasian-economic-union-putins-geopolitical-project (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
130 Liik (2015), 'The real problem with Mogherini's Russia paper' (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
131 See Myth 16: 'What comes after Putin must be better than Putin'.
132 Russia shows no interest in lowering barriers with non-members and punishes those (such as Moldova and Ukraine) which deviate from its preferences. See Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2015), *Ukraine between the EU and Russia: The Integration Challenge*, Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

This instrumental use and deep politicization of the EAEU by Russia means, in short, that the EAEU is functionally unable to act as an integration body in Eurasia. The EAEU and the EU are fundamentally different and incompatible.

What is its impact on policy?

There is considerable disagreement among EU member states about the wisdom of using trade liberalization with Russia as a route out of sanctions. The mere existence of a debate on this subject is useful to Russia, allowing the Kremlin to benefit from 'divide and rule' tactics in provoking discord in Europe.[133]

A further problem is that efforts to promote EU–EAEU cooperation and trade liberalization tend to bypass the failures of the Eurasian project and focus instead on the benefits of normalizing relations.[134] Despite failed attempts to liberalize EU–Russia trade, the idea of a free-trade zone with the EAEU remains immensely appealing to some in the EU.[135] The risk is that policymaking will be less realistic as a result.

This is not to say that the EU has been entirely blind to the difficulties of economic integration with the EAEU. Russia's actions have forced the issue in some respects. For example, its military and economic response to the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement indicated how Moscow perceived trade liberalization and regulatory harmonization as threats to Russia. The collapse in December 2015 of trilateral talks on the association agreement confirmed the EU's view about Russia's lack of interest in functional solutions or trade liberalization; it was clear that Moscow was focused on geopolitical priorities rather than on seeking pragmatic solutions.[136] Since then, the EU has restricted itself to file-driven, technical and issue-specific interactions with the EEC and individual EAEU member states, justifiably doubtful as to whether the EAEU would liberalize trade and comply with the WTO-based multilateral order.[137]

If anything, the prospects for trade liberalization with Russia have become weaker since 2014. Russia has no economic interest in comprehensive trade liberalization with the EU, as it is unlikely to benefit from such liberalization: 82 per cent of Russia's exports are energy commodities, largely unaffected by

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133 See, for example, Trenin, D. (2018), 'Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors', Carnegie Moscow Center, 6 June 2018, https://carnegie.ru/2018/06/06/russia-and-germany-from-estranged-partners-to-good-neighbors-pub-76540 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
134 See, for example, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020), 'New publication: Time to let down the drawbridge: Why engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union is in the EU's best interest', 31 January 2020, https://www.fes-vienna.org/e/new-publication-time-to-let-down-the-drawbridge-why-engagement-with-the-eurasian-economic-union-is-in-the-eus-best-interest (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
135 The EU has a long history of attempts to engage with Russia on trade liberalization. These attempts have failed because the two sides' aims and preferences are incompatible, and because of Russia's lack of interest. The past record of failure includes the 'four spaces' negotiations between the EU and Russia, which explored opportunities for closer cooperation in several sectors, including trade, and those for a new EU–Russia agreement. Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012 raised EU expectations of trade liberalization, but instead the EU encountered Russian demands for measures that favoured domestic products and services – against the spirit and letter of WTO rules. See European Commission (2020), 'Countries and Regions: Russia', https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/index_en.htm (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
136 Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2015), 'No Economic Bright Spot in Tensions Between the EU, Ukraine and Russia', Chatham House Expert Comment, 17 December 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2015/12/no-economic-bright-spot-tensions-between-eu-ukraine-and-russia (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
137 An FTA between the EU and the EAEU would be a specific, advanced form of possible engagement. On progress and prospects for trade liberalization within the EAEU and beyond, see Dragneva, R. and Hartwell, C. (2020), 'The Eurasian Economic Union: Integration Without Liberalization?', *Post-Communist Economies*, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631377.2020.1793586 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

trade barriers. Other Russian sectors lack competitiveness, and would have to go through painful restructuring if exposed to international competition.[138] Trade liberalization is not offered in any economic agreement signed between the EAEU and third countries.[139]

Nonetheless, Russia continues to promise trade liberalization as an incentive to persuade the leaders of large EU member states to lift sanctions against it. Notwithstanding the pragmatic turn in EU policymaking outlined above, Moscow has still succeeded in enticing Germany and France into advocating for the European Commission to engage.

What would good policy look like?

Given Russia's instrumental use of trade liberalization, it makes sense for the EU to limit engagement to ongoing technical dialogue with the EAEU. The EU should recognize that its interest in trade cooperation is unlikely to coax Russia into changing other priorities, either in the post-Soviet space or *vis-à-vis* the EU. For this, change in Russia itself is needed.

Given the nature of the Eurasian project, any EU engagement with the EAEU will require the utmost caution. It will need to be premised on Russia meeting clear preconditions, for example with regard to its actions in Ukraine and its WTO commitments. At present, fulfilment of any such preconditions appears a long-term prospect at best.

In any dialogue, it will also be important to prevent Russia from monopolizing the EU's external agenda. Marginalization of the EU's eastern neighbours, both inside and outside the Eurasian bloc, must be avoided.[140] This is especially important given that some EU member states, such as Germany, remain keen on a 'business as usual' relationship with Russia and the EAEU with regard to economic ties.

In the short term, pragmatic engagement on issues such as trade facilitation – especially with regard to non-tariff barriers such as certificates, standards and regulation – is more likely to meet with success (however modest) than efforts at far-reaching structural integration.[141] The 'wait and see' strategy favoured by the European Commission *vis-à-vis* the EAEU remains the most reasonable policy.

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138 As summed up by Kluge and Richter: 'The current economic crisis and Western economic sanctions make it even less likely that Russia will bite the bullet and open up its economy.' Kluge and Richter (2020), 'The Lisbon-Vladivostok Illusion'.
139 See Dragneva and Hartwell (2020), 'The Eurasian Economic Union'. Since 2014, the securitization of trade has become even stronger, as evidenced by Russia's import-substitution efforts. The interplay between security interests, the socio-economic context and Russian elite interests militates against trade liberalization. The prospects for lowering trade barriers with the EU have, if anything, receded further.
140 Dragneva-Lewers, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2015), 'Trade and geopolitics: should the EU engage with the Eurasian Economic Union?', EPC Policy Brief, Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2 April 2015, https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Trade-and-geopolitics-should~252d94 (accessed 8 Apr. 2021).
141 Giucci (2018), 'The Eurasian Economic Union'. Ultimately, given the nature of the EAEU, the EEC cannot be regarded as a rightful counterpart for the European Commission.

Myth 11
‘The peoples of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are one nation’

The Kremlin misrepresents the region’s history in order to legitimize the idea that Ukraine and Belarus are part of Russia’s ‘natural’ sphere of influence. Yet both countries have stronger European roots than the Kremlin cares to admit.

Anaïs Marin

What is the myth?

The claim that the peoples of Ukraine and Belarus are sub-nations of a single community known as the ‘triune’ or all-Russian nation (триединый/общерусский народ) is an ideological construct dating back to imperial times. It builds on the idea that a pan-Russian nation with roots in the medieval Kievan Rus’, the cradle of Orthodox Christianity for Eastern Slavs, developed and flourished from the 14th century onwards around the principality of Muscovy. The problem with attributing an *exclusive* Kievan inheritance to the Muscovite princes – and thus giving credence to what is a founding myth of Russian statehood to this day – is that it distorts history and is used for justifying Russia’s current irredentist ambitions towards its western neighbours.

The myth has been almost unchallenged (see next section) in the Russian Federation, and has been actively promoted abroad since President Vladimir Putin fully embraced a neo-imperialist agenda towards the so-called ‘near abroad’. In Ukraine, in contrast, the denunciation of this myth has been a key driver of modern Ukrainian nationalism, as epitomized during the 2004 Orange Revolution. The revival of Belarusian nationhood over the past decade can be seen as illustrating a similar anti-colonial endeavour.[142]

142 Marin, A. (2019), ‘Belarusian nationalism in the 2010s, a case of anti-colonialism? Origins, features and outcomes of ongoing ‘Soft Belarusianisation”, *Journal of Belarusian Studies*, 9(1): 27–50.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The Russo-centric narrative of an all-Russian nation has been reactivated since the early 2000s as part of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign aimed at legitimizing the claim that Ukraine and Belarus are part of Russia's 'natural' sphere of influence, and thus unable to survive outside of Russia's embrace. While few, if any, Western officials openly support such a claim, the myth subconsciously remains rooted in public opinion in many Western countries. This subtly affects people's receptiveness to other misconceptions about the so-called 'Russian World', including the idea that Ukraine and Belarus belong to it.

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The myth continues to be reflected in the collective representations of many non-experts outside Eastern Europe. The underlying belief that Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are members of a single Russian nation has been popularized by school textbooks with ethnographic maps of the 19th and 20th centuries. It even survived in some university syllabuses in the West until the field of post-Soviet studies evolved into genuine 'Eurasian studies' – that is, taking account of the respective nation-building efforts of each successor state from the former USSR. In fact, the lack of narratives popularizing alternative representations of Ukraine, and especially Belarus, means that the triune-nation myth remains entrenched in the minds of many non-specialists even in the West. Hence it sporadically resurfaces in public discussion and in the media, albeit not articulated by officials.[143]

The assumption that Ukrainians and Belarusians are mere sub-groups of an all-Russian civilization also holds particular sway in at least two specific contexts. First, it appeals to the elites and populations of traditionally pro-Russian countries, where susceptibility to a one-nation myth is substantial. Sympathy for such views is notable in countries that share a sense of Slavic and/or Orthodox community with Russia, notably Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. Many people in self-proclaimed secessionist polities with an Orthodox Christian majority, such as Transnistria and Abkhazia, are also likely to accept the myth as a given. This in turn has been reflected in the stated intentions of their leaders, occasionally voiced throughout the 2000s, to join the Union State of Belarus and Russia, which was presented at the time as an embryonic format for the restoration of a pan-Slavic union.

Second, far-right movements and far-right political parties in Western Europe – including in Austria, France, Germany and Italy – have sometimes adhered to the myth of a Russian triune nation. In some cases, such a position has reflected the personal views of leaders of these movements or parties. In others, it has served the interests of particular groups in showcasing their trust for, and friendly relations with, Russia. In still other cases, the credence given to the myth is simply the result of the co-optation of far-right groups by Russian agents of influence.[144] Indeed, most far-right leaders in the West (and a number of far-left ideologists too) are convinced that Ukraine and Belarus are not standalone

143 As discussed in the section 'What is its impact on policy?', the myth also holds sway in some countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific.
144 Shekhovtsov, A. (2017), *Russia and the Western Far Right. Tango Noir*, Abingdon: Routledge.

nations. Adherents can also be found among the intellectual elites who admire 'eternal Russia' as a superior civilization, or among those who fall for related neo-Eurasianist ideologies.

Why is it wrong?

It is historically inaccurate to claim that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus ever formed a single *national* entity. After Kievan Rus' fell to the Mongol invasion in 1240, the Muscovite princes considered themselves the sole rightful heirs of the Kievan legacy. This perspective turned into an official ideology of the Russian Tsardom from the mid-1500s onwards, once it started expanding into a continental empire. One of the key premises of the triune-nation myth is that the people living on the territory of what Russian historiography would later call 'Little Russia' (Malorossiya) and 'White Russia' (Byelorussia) merely constituted ethnolinguistic sub-groups agglomerated around an imagined Greater Russia.

This amounts to denying that Litvins and Ruthenians in the western part of Kievan Rus' belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a powerful multinational state which, at its height in the 14th century, controlled most of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. The Grand Duchy declined and was gradually Polonized, however, as a result of matrimonial unification with the Polish Crown. This culminated in the establishment, in 1569, of a confederal Republic of Two Nations (also known as the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth), which was eventually partitioned by neighbouring empires 200 years later.

The triune-nation (mis)conception thus ignores the intrinsically *European* foundation on which the Ukrainian and Belarusian national self-identities have been built, before these 'lands in between' were conquered by Russia in the late 18th century, Russified in the 19th century and Sovietized in the 20th century. In spite of Moscow's attempts at cultural appropriation, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was in fact a more genuine inheritor of the former Kievan Rus', having transplanted the latter's legal code into Ukrainian and Belarusian societies, and having kept an old version of Belarusian as its official state language.

The idea of a triune Russian nation thus downgrades the uniqueness of the indigenous cultures which developed in the western reaches of the Tsarist empire, and notably overlooks their specific linguistic (Ruthenian) and religious (Catholic and Uniate) components.

The narrative of inherent Russianness is also misconceived because, apart from ardent advocates of Eastern Slavic unity, such as Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, few people in Ukraine or Belarus would likely validate it. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the notion of a triune Russian nation mostly served to justify Russia's claim to the status of *primus inter pares* among the post-Soviet republics.

What is its impact on policy?

Adherence to the myth of an all-Russian nation has several important policy implications to this day. First, it means that Ukraine and Belarus are viewed through a neo-imperial prism that effectively acknowledges Russia's claim to the right to interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring states – up to potentially legitimizing Russian irredentism, for example towards the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Those who affect erudition in recalling that Malorossiya, as Ukraine was formerly referred to, means 'Little Russia', or who keep calling Belarus 'Byelorussia' ('White Russia'), are indirectly denying these post-Soviet states the right to sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Second, the triune-nation myth usually goes hand in hand with other statements questioning the authenticity of Ukrainian identity and the viability of 'Belarusianness' as national building-blocks with roots in the wider European cultural edifice. These stereotypes are cultivated by Russophile propagandists whose end goal is not simply to win an ideological battle among historians, but to support a Russian geopolitical agenda with material, legal and security implications. This leads to the entrenchment in international public opinion of the mistaken belief that Ukraine and Belarus are not entitled to 'return' to Europe (on the grounds that they were never properly part of it in the first place), and that they should thus stay outside the EU, Schengen and NATO forever.

Ukraine and Belarus are viewed through a neo-imperial prism that effectively acknowledges Russia's claim to the right to interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring states – up to potentially legitimizing Russian irredentism, for example towards the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Supporters of the idea that in 2014 Crimea was duly 'returned' to its historical motherland justify their pro-Russian position with stereotypical claims that 'these are all the same people anyway'. Many far-right and far-left MPs in European national parliaments share this belief, and this affects how they frame other issues concerning the EU's policies towards its eastern neighbours and Russia. Adherents usually also accept Russia's false depiction of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as a civil war, the resolution of which would require the prior federalization of Ukraine. Of course, such a 'solution' would further weaken the power of Kyiv over the country's eastern borderlands.

In the case of Belarus, the myth that Belarusians are indiscernible from Russians is even more deeply entrenched in some circles. This, in turn, fuels the opinion that Belarus already is, or at least is in the process of being, fully subjugated by Russia. Given the effectiveness of Russia's propaganda in (and about) Belarus, the popularity of such discourses potentially limits the ability of defenders of a sovereign Belarus to gather foreign support for their country's independence, should Putin step up pressure for 'deeper integration' within the Union State of Belarus and Russia.[145]

Also, as mentioned in footnote 143, the myth tends to survive in a majority of small or developing countries that are further away from the Eurasian continent – in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands, for example. This matters as each of these countries has a seat at the UN General Assembly, where Russia has an opportunity to secure their votes on resolutions in line with its own geopolitical

145 International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSans, Minsk) (2019), 'Re-Building of the Empire: Behind the Facade of Russia-Belarus Union State', summary of analytical report, 19 December 2019, https://isans.org/en/re-building-of-the-empire-behind-the-facade-of-russia-belarus-union-state (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

interests. According to one Ukrainian diplomat, delegations from these countries appear nostalgic for the Soviet era, when centralization implied that they only needed to talk with Moscow. They also tend to consider the current Russian/Ukrainian conflict as something akin to a family feud.[146]

What would good policy look like?

Continued adherence to the belief that Ukraine and Belarus 'belong' to Russia rather than Europe unjustly undermines the European aspirations of a significant share of both countries' populations. Western policymakers and commentators should reject the concept of an all-Russian nation, and the misapprehensions that accompany it. Analysts and journalists should spare no effort in debunking these myths, and be more proactive in highlighting the socio-historical and linguistic uniqueness of the Ukrainian and Belarusian nations.

In addition, by upholding sanctions against Russia for as long as Ukraine's territorial integrity is being negated, Western democracies can signal to the world that Russia's revisionism is unacceptable.

One symbolic but important measure in support of Belarus's sovereignty would be to ban the term 'Byelorussia' (Biélorussie in French, Weißrussland in German, etc.) from official and diplomatic language. This reform is long overdue, as some European governments continue to ignore the recommendation of the IGU/ICA[147] Commission on Toponymy, which is to name the country Belarus – a request the Republic of Belarus made to the United Nations back in 1992.

146 Reply of H.E. Volodymyr Yelchenko, Ambassador of Ukraine to the United States, to the author's question 'Who falls for the triune-nation myth?' during a virtual roundtable ('The Fight for Freedom in Post-WWII Central and Eastern Europe') organized by the US-based Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) on 8 May 2020.
147 International Geographical Union/International Cartographic Association.

Myth 12
‘Crimea was always Russian’

Crimea has been in Russian hands for only a fraction of its history. If unchallenged, the Kremlin’s fiction that Crimea willingly and legitimately ‘rejoined’ Russia risks further undermining Ukraine’s territorial integrity and encouraging other expansionist powers.

Orysia Lutsevych

What is the myth?

This myth holds that Crimea was always Russian, and that its seizure by Russia in March 2014 simply rectified a historical injustice. As this myth also has it, reaccession into Russia was also a genuine act of self-determination on the part of the people of Crimea – who, after all, are majority ethnic Russian and Russian speakers – through a ‘referendum’.

From the outset, the Russian leadership portrayed the annexation of Crimea as the long-awaited and rightful ‘return’ of the peninsula to its proper home. According to the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, ‘… in the minds of people, Crimea has always been and still is an inseparable part of Russia’.[148] Although the referendum to legitimize Russia’s military intervention was in reality a token exercise conducted after the fact and under duress, Putin insisted: ‘We held a referendum in strict compliance with the UN charter and international legislation. For us, the case is closed.’[149]

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The narrative that Russia simply took back what was already its own captured the minds of many internationally – most prominently US President Donald Trump, who told G7 leaders in 2018 that ‘Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian’.[150] It was consistent with his previous statement

148 RT (2014), ‘Полный текст обращения Владимира Путина по Крыму’ [Full text of Vladimir Putin’s address on Crimea], 18 March 2014, https://russian.rt.com/article/24532 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
149 Litvinova, D. (2018), ‘Putin proposed eastern Ukraine vote to Trump in Helsinki – report’, *Guardian*, 20 July 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/20/putin-proposed-eastern-ukraine-vote-to-trump-in-helsinki-report (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
150 Nardelli, A. and Ioffe, J. (2018), ‘Trump Told G7 Leaders That Crimea Is Russian Because Everyone Speaks Russian In Crimea’, BuzzFeed.News, 14 June 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/trump-russia-crimea (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

that 'the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were'.[151]

Foreign policy analysts from the realist and 'grand bargain' schools suggest that the Russian violation of international law in Crimea should be forgiven as a goodwill gesture from the West in view of Crimea's special history and mostly Russian ethnic composition.

In Europe, too, a cohort of mostly right-wing populist parties and politicians with strong links to the Kremlin have pushed the 'Crimea is Russian' narrative. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) concurs with Putin that the move into Crimea was in response to 'the expression of genuine public will'. AfD representatives, including Bundestag members, visit Crimea regularly despite protests from the Ukrainian authorities.[152] In France Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally (formerly National Front) party, also recited from the Russian script when she said that 'Crimea was always Russian'.[153] Similar rhetoric came from Italy's then deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, who denied that the 2014 referendum was a sham and added that 'there are some historically Russian zones with Russian culture and traditions which legitimately belong to the Russian Federation'.[154]

In addition, foreign policy analysts from the realist and 'grand bargain' schools suggest that the Russian violation of international law in Crimea should be forgiven as a goodwill gesture from the West in view of Crimea's special history and mostly Russian ethnic composition.[155] Some writers openly suggest such a bargain given 'well-known sympathies on the peninsula itself'.[156]

Why is it wrong?

Less than 6 per cent of Crimea's written history (from the 9th century BC to date) belongs to the Russian chapter. Before 2014, Crimea was under Russian control for a total of only 168 years.[157] In fact, Russia is just one of several powers that have aimed to dominate the peninsula. At the dawn of its history, Crimea was a Greek land. It later developed at the intersection of different civilizations and empires. Until the mid-15th century, the peninsula was a space of unique cohabitation between the Khanate of Crimea, Genoese colonies on the coast and the Principality of Theodor (Byzantium) in the southwest. Thereafter, the khanate expanded and became, for over 300 years, a dominant power as a protectorate under the Ottoman Empire. Crimea was an Orient in miniature, with a Turkic-Muslim culture.

Russia invaded Crimea in 1783, as part of a westward expansion seeking control of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The ambition of Catherine the Great was to establish a new Byzantium in Constantinople, with her grandson

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151 Massie, C. and Kaczynski, A. (2016), 'Trump Called Russia's Invasion Of Ukraine "So Smart" In 2014', BuzzFeed.News, 1 August 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/christophermassie/trump-called-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-so-smart-in-2014 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
152 Röpcke, J. (2019), 'AfD-Abgeordnete zu „Putin-Kaffeefahrt" auf der Krim' [AfD MPs on "Putin's coffee trip" in Crimea], *Bild*, 20 April 2019, https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/privat-unterwegs-afd-hetzt-von-der-krim-gegen-deutschland-und-eu-61373546.bild.html (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
153 CNN (2017), 'Marine Le Pen: There was no invasion of Crimea', 1 February 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/02/01/france-intv-amanpour-marine-le-pen-b.cnn (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
154 Weymouth, L. (2018), ''Italy has done a lot — maybe too much'', *Washington Post*, 19 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/italy-has-done-a-lot--maybe-too-much/2018/07/19/dc81a292-8acf-11e8-8aea-86e88ae760d8_story.html (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
155 O'Hanlon, M. (2017), *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, https://www.brookings.edu/book/beyond-nato (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
156 Goldstein, L. J. (2019), 'The War in Ukraine Must End', *National Interest*, 24 November 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/war-ukraine-must-end-99022 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
157 Yermolenko, V. (ed.) (2019), *Re-Vision of History: Russian Historical Propaganda and Ukraine*, Kyiv: K.I.S, https://ukraineworld.org/storage/app/media/Re_vision_2019_block%20eng.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

Constantine as its emperor. Defeat in the Crimean War of 1853–56 temporarily halted Russia's continuing territorial aspirations in the region by leading to a ban on military arsenals in the Black Sea, although within 14 years Russia unilaterally abrogated this obligation and continued its military build-up.

Imperial Russia and later the Soviet Union were mistrustful of the indigenous population of Crimean Tatars. The Russian policy was one of forced displacements, colonization and Russification to enshrine dominance. The peninsula's demographics underwent change following the forced outward migration of Crimean Tatars after the annexation of 1783 and the Crimean War. A further major deportation in 1944 marked a continuation of the long-standing imperial practice of expelling native populations and taking over their lands. According to the last official Ukrainian census of 2001, 60 per cent of the population of Crimea consisted of ethnic Russians, while 24 per cent were Ukrainians and 10 per cent Crimean Tatars, the three most numerous groups.

Crimea was part of Soviet Ukraine for longer than it was part of Soviet Russia. Contrary to yet another popular myth – that the peninsula was a gift to Ukraine in 1954 to mark its 'union with Russia of 1654' – Crimea's transfer to Ukraine in that year aimed to improve the peninsula's economy, then in poor shape because of difficulties over water supply and a scarcity of farmers.

Crimea's final chapter before its 2014 annexation by Russia was as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC). A part of independent Ukraine and the only self-governing region within unitary Ukraine, the ARC had its own constitution, prime minister and parliament. Although the Crimean constitution protected the special status of the Russian language, the ARC supported Ukraine's independence (during the referendum of 1991 on Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union, 54 per cent of Crimea's residents had voted for an independent Ukraine, including 57 per cent in Sevastopol).

Since 1991, no major separatist movement has existed in Crimea. Periods of tensions between Kyiv and Simferopol were mostly related to curtailing the activity of criminal groups and to competition for economic control. Throughout that period, Russia sought to be involved in these dynamics, funding pro-Russian groups and politicians. One of the main drivers of Russia's policy was that it needed influence to protect its Sevastopol-based Black Sea Fleet, and in that it was successful.[158]

What happened in February–March 2014 was a full-spectrum military operation executed on land and at sea and supplemented by sustained and targeted anti-Ukraine information operations.[159] Finally, when a referendum was held –

158 At the time of the annexation, Russia had a valid agreement with Ukraine on stationing the Russian fleet in Crimea until 2042.

159 Russia struck Ukraine when it was at its most vulnerable, with a vacuum of power in Kyiv post-Euromaidan. The annexation strategy was three-pronged. First, Russia executed sustained and targeted information operations, which began after the Euromaidan revolution and continued all the way through the process of annexation. Russia spread anti-Ukrainian sentiment, sought to instill fear of the new government in Kyiv, and aimed to polarize Crimea's population by pitting Russian speakers against Crimean Tatars and anyone opposing Russia's takeover of the peninsula. Second, starting from 20 February 2014, it deployed both military and paramilitary units to capture administrative buildings. At different times, more than 30,000 military personnel were involved in the operation. Finally, on 16 March 2014 Russia forced the holding of a referendum to legitimize the takeover.

in effect at gunpoint – on 16 March 2014 to legitimize Russia's takeover of Crimea, the Kremlin hijacked the principle of self-determination. Public opinion polling prior to Russia's aggressive disinformation campaign spoke clearly in favour of Crimea remaining part of Ukraine.[160] Yet ahead of the vote, those who supported remaining within Ukraine could not campaign freely. The ballot also excluded the option for Crimea to remain part of Ukraine as an autonomous republic, i.e. according to the constitution in force. Furthermore, the Kremlin substantially inflated voter turnout. While it said that 82 per cent of voters had cast their ballots, a member of Russia's presidential Civil Society and Human Rights Council reported that turnout was likely to have totalled 30–50 per cent.[161] Election fraud such as multiple voting was also reported.

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe concluded that the referendum was illegal, as it violated the constitutions of both Ukraine and Crimea.[162] The process also failed to meet European democratic standards or provide for meaningful negotiations between the stakeholders. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent in no observers as it also found the referendum illegal.[163] A UN General Assembly resolution underscored the invalidity of the 16 March vote.[164]

What is its impact on policy?

The myth of a Russian Crimea has tempted some Western policymakers to advocate recognizing it as such, especially if this were to be part of a bigger bargain. To recognize Crimea as part of Russia was the solution reportedly advised to President Trump by Henry Kissinger.[165] In a similar vein, Trump's then National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, was pitched a 'peace plan' that would lease Crimea to Russia for a term of 50 or 100 years.[166]

Such moves, if realized, would further undermine the already fragile international rules-based order. The argument that Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia overlooks the grave violation of international law committed by Russia, while

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160 An opinion poll in May 2013 found that 53 per cent of respondents wanted to maintain the status quo and saw the peninsula as part of Ukraine. Only 23 per cent said they would vote for Crimea to be separated from Ukraine and united with Russia. International Republican Institute (2013), 'Public Opinion Survey Residents of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea May 16 – 30, 2013', https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013%20October%207%20Survey%20of%20Crimean%20Public%20Opinion,%20May%2016-30,%202013.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
161 Bobrov, Ye. (2014), 'Проблемы жителей Крыма' [Problems of residents of Crimea], Members' Blogs, Council under the President of the Russian Federation on Civil Society Development and Human Rights, 22 April 2014, http://president-sovet.ru/members/blogs/bobrov_e_a/problemy-zhiteley-kryma- (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
162 Venice Commission (2014), 'On "Whether The Decision Taken By The Supreme Council Of The Autonomous Republic Of Crimea In Ukraine To Organise A Referendum On Becoming A Constituent Territory Of The Russian Federation Or Restoring Crimea's 1992 Constitution Is Compatible With Constitutional Principles"', 21 March 2014, https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2014)002-e (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
163 OSCE (2014), 'OSCE Chair says Crimean referendum in its current form is illegal and calls for alternative ways to address the Crimean issue', 11 March 2014, https://www.osce.org/cio/116313 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
164 United Nations General Assembly (2014), 'General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region', 27 March 2014, https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
165 Buncombe, A. (2016), 'Henry Kissinger has 'advised Donald Trump to accept' Crimea as part of Russia', *Independent*, 27 December 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/henry-kissinger-russia-trump-crimea-advises-latest-ukraine-a7497646.html (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
166 Twohey, M. and Shane, S. (2017), 'A Back-Channel Plan for Ukraine and Russia, Courtesy of Trump Associates', *New York Times*, 19 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/19/us/politics/donald-trump-ukraine-russia.html?_r=0 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

opening a proverbial Pandora's box in terms of the revision of borders and possible conflicts in other parts of the world.[167] It also endorses a Russian neo-imperial outlook and the logic of 'spheres of influence', both of which wrongfully imply that Russia has the right to act as it sees fit in relation to smaller and weaker neighbours, especially where there is a significant ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking population.[168]

Accepting Russia's Crimean land grab means undermining the prospects for global nuclear non-proliferation.

To adhere to such views is to lose vigilance over the considerable security risk that the current Russian regime poses for Europe. It is to sustain the delusion that Putin's Russia could be an ally in countering rising Chinese power on the continent, or a constructive partner in counterterrorism. It also effectively excuses Russia's key role in five other frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region. Susceptibility to realpolitik-based arguments likely contributed to the country's reinstatement as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in June 2019, even though Russia had failed to reverse any of the violations of international law that led to the suspension of its membership in the first place. This illustration of the ability of Russia to act with impunity in turn undermines the mission and credibility of PACE, and the notion of multilateralism as a whole.

Proliferation of the myth also threatens the current sanctions regime, which was introduced after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and is renewed annually by the EU Council. Italy's former prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, had been openly working towards the objective of lifting sanctions[169] (the current prime minister, Mario Draghi, lowers the risk coming out of Italy, as he is more likely to align with the pro-sanctions core of the EU's leadership). Meanwhile, in Germany the forthcoming change of leadership that will follow the September 2021 federal election could make that country's government more receptive to removing sanctions against Russia. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has openly declared the EU's sanctions on Russia to be unreasonable.

Finally, accepting Russia's Crimean land grab means undermining the prospects for global nuclear non-proliferation. In 1994 Ukraine renounced its nuclear status. In exchange, the Budapest Memorandum provided assurances from the nuclear powers, notably Russia, the US and the UK (France and China were co-signatories), in relation to Ukraine's territorial integrity. These assurances were violated 20 years later. The failure of the international community to uphold the commitments it undertakes discredits the process.

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167 Many nations in Europe lost territory in the 20th century. Should Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland or Romania also try to reclaim their 'historical' lands? If Europe loses credibility in failing to defend the principle of territorial integrity at the heart of its own continent, what signal will this send out? China's leadership in Beijing is watching with fascination: what price will Russia pay for this land grab? Impunity over Crimea could inspire a more assertive move by China in the South China Sea, over Taiwan or potentially against Mongolia.
168 If Imperial Russia's borders were to serve as a guide to territorial entitlement for modern Russia, why should this stop at Crimea? The population of Narva, Estonia, is 80 per cent ethnic Russian. It used to form part of the St Petersburg Governorate. Or what about North Kazakhstan, whose population is around 50 per cent ethnic Russian? Militarily enforced plebiscites could give Russian territorial expansion an air of legitimacy and allow the narrative of self-determination to be exploited to the fullest.
169 Reuters (2019), 'Italy PM says is working to try to end sanctions against Russia', 8 March 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-conte-russia/italy-pm-says-is-working-to-try-to-end-sanctions-against-russia-idUSKCN1QP221 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

What would good policy look like?

It is essential that the EU and the US maintain their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and clearly communicate this to Russia. The illegality of the annexation must not be doubted. The global community of nations should maintain the policy of non-recognition of Crimea as part of the Russian Federation, similar to the non-recognition of Soviet control over the Baltic states after the Second World War. It took the Baltic states 50 years to reclaim their statehoods. A similarly long wait is very much conceivable in the case of Crimea.

It is unlikely that in the medium term a continuous policy of non-recognition will compel Russia to stop the militarization of Crimea and return the peninsula to its rightful status as part of sovereign Ukraine.[170] In the long term, however, such a policy will help the West collectively to uphold the foundational principles of the post-1945 world order and international law.[171]

Policymakers should refer to Russia as an occupying power in Crimea, a fact already recognized by the UN General Assembly,[172] PACE,[173] the International Criminal Court and other international organizations and states.[174]

Crimea-related sanctions against Russia should be maintained and properly enforced for as long as Russia continues with its occupation, and stepped up if the situation in the Black Sea deteriorates further. It was disappointing not to see a substantial expansion of European sanctions in response to the Russian capture of three Ukrainian naval vessels at the entrance to the Sea of Azov in 2018, or in response to the persistent disruption of commercial navigation and environmental damage caused by construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge. There has to be much stronger enforcement of the current sanctions regime, violated by many Russian, international and even Ukrainian companies.

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170 More than 20,000 internally displaced persons who fled Crimea should have the right to return home. The international community and Russia should recognize Crimean Tatars as an indigenous people and treat them accordingly, pursuant to this special status. Russia's institutionalized persecution of Crimean Tatars needs to stop. There should be more pressure on Russia to implement the order of the International Court of Justice to enable the functioning of the Crimean Tatar self-governing body, the Mejlis. International Court of Justice (ICJ) (2017), 'Application Of The International Convention For The Suppression Of The Financing Of Terrorism And Of The International Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination', para 106(1)(a), 19 April 2017, The Hague: ICJ, https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/166/166-20170419-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021); and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2019), *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 February to 15 May 2019*, para 103, New York, Geneva: OHCHR, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraine16Feb-15May2019_EN.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

171 The grave deterioration in civic, political, social, economic and cultural rights in the peninsula after its annexation has been recorded by many human rights groups. See, for example, Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2017), 'Crimean Tatars', 19 October 2017, https://unpo.org/members/7871. Russia should open up Crimea for access and scrutiny by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, PACE field missions and other credible human rights monitoring missions.

172 e.g. United Nations General Assembly (2019), 'Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov', resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 9 December 2019, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/17 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

173 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) (2018), 'Ukrainian citizens detained as political prisoners by the Russian Federation', Resolution 2231, 28 June 2018, http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=24994&lang=en (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

174 International Criminal Court (ICC) (2019), *Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2019*, para 270, 5 December 2019, The Hague: ICC, https://www.icc-cpi.int/itemsDocuments/191205-rep-otp-PE.pdf (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

Ukraine's security should be reinforced by improving its naval capabilities, logistics, cyber defence and secure communications. The drastic militarization of Crimea by Russia, and the latter's unlawful restrictions on navigation in the Sea of Azov, increase the vulnerability both of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to Russian security threats. Russia is investing in access-denial capabilities to create a zone of exclusion designed to restrain NATO's presence. Russia also uses the peninsula as a base for military operations in Syria. The number of military personnel in Crimea has increased almost threefold since 2013, and there are signs that Soviet-era nuclear infrastructure is being restored. NATO should consider a reinforced presence in the Black Sea and utilize its new Enhanced Opportunities Programme for Ukraine as a vehicle to increase Black Sea security. Ukraine could also be involved in operations under the EU's PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) scheme.

Myth 13
‘Liberal market reform in the 1990s was bad for Russia’

It wasn’t that liberalization was inherently beyond Russia, or that reforms caused its economic collapse – the real problem with the post-Soviet economic transition was that it was never allowed to run its full course.

Philip Hanson

What is the myth?

‘No rewriting of history can change the fact that neo-liberal reform produced undiluted economic decline [in Russia].’ That is the myth. Perhaps more consequential than anything else has been its wholesale adoption by all but a tiny minority of the Russian people. The Russian population’s aversion to the reformers of the 1990s lies behind the minuscule electoral support for their latter-day equivalents. The most successful opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, campaigned before his imprisonment against graft and corruption, not for free-market reform.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

The quote above is from a distinguished economist, the Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, writing in the *Guardian* in 2003.[175] Like many on the left in the West, he took a dim view of the Russian reformers’ policies in the first decade after the collapse of communism, linking those policies directly with the collapse of the Russian economy between 1989 and 1999.

This myth, that liberal reforms devastated Russia in the 1990s, appeals to some European policymakers. It appeals especially to those, on left or right, who take a benign view of Vladimir Putin’s regime. Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is an example.

175 Stiglitz, J. (2003), ‘The ruin of Russia’, *Guardian*, 9 April 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/09/russia.artsandhumanities (accessed 11 Sep. 2020).

Why is it wrong?

There is no getting away from the facts that (a) market reform was attempted in the 1990s and (b) the economy collapsed. But (b) was not caused by (a). The gap between the neoliberal – or, more precisely, liberal – agenda and what was actually done in the Russian economy was huge. The real problem, in other words, was that the reforms as initially envisaged were not implemented.

Western advice, channelled mainly through the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, was, very broadly speaking, based on the so-called Washington Consensus. According to this set of guidelines, ex-communist countries, so far as their economic transformation was concerned, needed to undertake liberalization, stabilization and privatization. That is, they had to free prices, including the exchange rate; they had to get inflation under control by managing the money supply and the public finances; and they had somehow to ensure that the bulk of productive assets passed from state to private ownership.

The failure to stabilize the economy was the most significant failure of the whole reform, and it happened contrary to the will of the reformers.

There was much debate about the desirable speed and sequencing of these measures. The majority view was that the whole suite of policies should be carried out as swiftly as was compatible with transparency and accountability: 'shock therapy'. And indeed, the countries that moved fast and in a more or less orderly fashion endured only rather short 'transition recessions' and went on to strong growth.

These key ingredients of economic transformation from communism to capitalism were on the agenda of Yegor Gaidar's government in 1992. But that government was too weak to push them through. Indeed, by speaking of themselves as only the reform 'wing' of the government, the 'young reformers' betrayed the constraints they were under. A hostile parliament ensured that Gaidar was only an acting prime minister, and he did not last the year.

The great bulk of prices were freed on 2 January 1992. Notoriously, by end-year the consumer price index had risen by 1,500 per cent.[176] If the government could have had its way, the result would have been a one-off increase of much smaller proportions. But the government did not control the central bank; the parliament did. It appointed a central bank head who pumped up the money supply. This not only increased and prolonged inflation; it delayed the shake-out of uncompetitive firms by providing credit where there would otherwise have been hard budget constraints on producers. A struggle over the money supply continued for several years. The inflation rate was reduced to 25 per cent only in 1996. The failure to stabilize the economy was the most significant failure of the whole reform, and it happened contrary to the will of the reformers.

The greatest attention, however, has been paid to the shortcomings of privatization. Here the political situation forced the reformers into damaging compromises. For the bulk of large-scale enterprises, the plan had been to follow the Czechoslovak model of mass privatization where citizens were issued with vouchers that could be used to purchase shares in any enterprise. Meanwhile,

176 Yasin, Ye. (2002), *Российская экономика* [The Russian Economy], Moscow: Higher School of Economics, p. 199.

Russian managers were grabbing control of enterprises and wanted the official privatization process to allow this to continue. Anatoli Chubais, who was in charge of mass privatization, was forced to allow an option whereby the workforce of an enterprise could vote to use its vouchers on its own workplace. This was popular. It mostly resulted in the Soviet-era bosses controlling the factories.

As a transitional arrangement, this might not have been too bad. What really destroyed the reputation of the Russian privatization process was the loans-for-shares auctions of a handful of giant oil and metals companies – the big earners of the economy (the gas ministry, spanning the whole gas industry, had turned itself into Gazprom). In rigged auctions with predetermined results, the likes of Yukos Oil and Norilsk Nickel were sold to the new banks for sums that seemed in retrospect tiny.[177]

Never mind that Chubais did not allow a second round of such auctions. Never mind that there was a risk that the Communists might be elected into government; already in 1995 they had won control of the parliament. The reputation of the Russian privatization process was ruined.

Liberalization was the only part of the reform agenda that was fulfilled. On its own, in the absence of stabilization, that was toxic. Privatization of a sort did go ahead, but in a way that distorted the reformers' original vision and left lasting problems. State capture by the oligarchs was made possible by the distortions in large-scale privatization.

One positive result of the changes that did occur is underappreciated. In the financial crisis that overtook Russia in 1998, the rouble was forced into a drastic devaluation: from six roubles to the US dollar very quickly to around 20. Import prices rocketed. There was an opportunity for Russian firms to step in and produce import substitutes. Would they take it? Many observers were doubtful. The old economy as it was at the beginning of 1992 had consisted of entities without the structure or incentives to increase supply in response to an upward shift in demand. But in the event, enough restructured firms opted to make import substitutes to begin the economic recovery. Higher oil prices later supported further growth.

A comparison of Russia's difficulties with the Polish reform experience is instructive. In Poland, the Balcerowicz Plan of 1989 was similar to what the Russian reformers had intended – indeed, Gaidar's team learnt from it. But Polish shock therapy was successful: GDP fell for only two years and then grew strongly. In Russia, from 1992 output fell for six years and by a total of around 40 per cent, making it a miserable decade. Could shock therapy have worked in Russia? It wasn't implemented, so we shall never know.

It was social and political opposition that blocked reform in Russia. Perhaps the mere existence of that opposition made the attempt an impossible mission? In Poland, reform amounted to the removal of an alien system imposed by a foreign power. In Russia, central planning was home-made: part of the Soviet way of life. Polish people had the prospect of 'joining Europe'. Liberalization, stabilization

177 Rutland, P. (2013), 'Neoliberalism in Russia', *Review of International Political Economy*, 20(2): pp. 332–62, http://prutland.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files/2015/07/PR-Neoliberalism-in-Russia.pdf (accessed 11 Sep. 2020).

and privatization could be seen as the route to joining the EU, which was then an attractive destination. Any sense in which Russia might 'join Europe' was always more contested.

Even so, the Gaidar team proceeded in a way that did not help its cause. Its members called themselves a 'kamikaze' crew and assumed that the bulk of the people and the managerial establishment were against them. The general population was deemed to be too ignorant to be persuaded of the advantages of reform, so there was little effort to communicate the point of what was being attempted.

What is its impact on policy?

The myth that liberal reform caused a depression in Russia is beneficial for the current Russian leadership. It provides Western policymakers dealing with Moscow with the notion that a liberal economic order is simply not feasible for Russia; and supports the illusion that those who, in the name of freedom and justice, campaign against members of the security and law enforcement agencies (the *siloviki*) and their corruption and asset-grabbing are tilting against windmills. Yet it is precisely the 2.6 million *siloviki* who stand between Russia and a more efficient and dynamic economy. It is true that the erosion of their power is not in sight. But it is what the majority of the Russian business community wants to see. In the longer term it cannot be ruled out.

What would good policy look like?

If economic reform itself had damaged the Russian economy, it might be argued that Russia is somehow immune to a liberal economic order. This closes minds to other possibilities. It is right that the US government should have complained about the *silovik*-driven house arrest in Russia of American investor Michael Calvey on trumped-up charges. It would be even better if Western officials also complained to the Russian authorities about the 5,000-plus Russian businesspeople held in preventive detention;[178] most are held on equally dubious grounds.

In general, any notion that Western ideas are responsible for Russia's economic problems should be treated with scepticism. The experience of economic reform in the 1990s illustrates an obvious truth: what happens in Russia, given its size and resources, depends primarily on choices made by Russians.

178 Milyukova, Ya. and Seregin, V. (2016), 'Силовики против предпринимателей' [Siloviki against entrepreneurs], RBC, 16 February 2016, https://www.rbc.ru/economics/16/02/2016/56c356ff9a794756f30a2aba (accessed 11 Sep. 2020).

Myth 14
‘Sanctions are the wrong approach’

Economic sanctions have already demonstrated practical and normative value as responses to unacceptable Russian behaviour – but they need to be allowed time to work, and their effectiveness should not be judged against impossible tests.

Nigel Gould-Davies

What is the myth?

Western sanctions were first imposed in March 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea, and have escalated to punish a widening range of actions. They have become an instrument of choice for dealing with Russia. How they are assessed therefore matters. In debates of their effectiveness, at least four variations of the myth that the use of sanctions is ‘the wrong approach’ – or even pointless – circulate:

- **Sanctions aren’t working.** This is the most important version of the myth. It argues that sanctions are ineffective because Russian behaviour has not changed in response to them. Russia persists in, and has broadened its range of, unacceptable actions. It continues to occupy Crimea, intervene in Ukraine, and conduct other major operations such as cyber-hacking and the Salisbury nerve agent attack.
- **Sanctions are not hurting Russia.** This version of the myth argues that Russia is too large and resilient to be hurt by sanctions. No other country of Russia’s size has faced major sanctions since 1945.
- **Sanctions make Vladimir Putin stronger.** This holds that sanctions boost Putin’s popularity: by presenting himself as the defender of Russia against a hostile West, the president benefits from a ‘rally round the flag’ effect, including among elites.
- **Sanctions are driving Russia towards China.** In recent years, this argument goes, Sino-Russian relations have deepened and are now at their best since the 1950s.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Several analysts and policymakers hold one or more of these incorrect positions. Some argue that Russia has 'survived sanctions' and will continue to do so, in part by virtue of having the world's fifth-largest foreign-currency reserves, a sovereign wealth fund worth the equivalent of 10 per cent of GDP, and resources to bail out sanctioned companies.[179] Others argue that 'sanctions make Putin stronger', in particular by increasing elite dependence on him for support and compensation.[180] Some go further and argue that sanctions are counterproductive – in particular, that they are pushing Russia into an alliance with China that threatens Western interests.[181]

Why is it wrong?

The contention that sanctions aren't working is wrong in three ways. First, at key moments sanctions have been critical in influencing Russian actions. There is evidence that the prospect of a severe escalation in sanctions, in combination with Ukraine's military resolve, helped deter Russian-backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine from taking the strategic city of Mariupol in September 2014. The prospect of sanctions may also have deterred further advance by Russian and Russian-backed separatist forces after the routing of Ukrainian troops in Debaltseve in February 2015.[182]

So far, Russia has been sanctioned for seven years, a short time in sanctions history. Previous sanctions regimes, against smaller targets, have typically taken longer to be effective.

Second, this argument ignores both the design of sanctions on Russia and the global experience of sanctions. So far, Russia has been sanctioned for seven years, a short time in sanctions history. Previous sanctions regimes, against smaller targets, have typically taken longer to be effective. For example, Iran was sanctioned for 10 years before it agreed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Furthermore, many sanctions are designed to have cumulative impact by restricting critical sectors' access to technology and finance. The longer sanctions are in place, the stronger their effects. And some of the most significant measures – the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 and the severe US Treasury sanctions on Russian officials and oligarchs in April 2018 – are also the most recent.

Third, sanctions work not only by changing unacceptable behaviour but by demonstratively condemning it. In punishing violators, they reaffirm collective commitment to norms of accepted behaviour and principles of international order.

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179 Miller, C. (2018), 'How Russia Survived Sanctions', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 14 May 2018, https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/05/how-russia-survived-sanctions (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).
180 See, for example, Movchan, A. (2018), 'New Sanctions Won't Hurt Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 26 September 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/26/new-sanctions-wont-hurt-russia-putin-oligarchs-rusal-deripaska (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
181 See, for example, *New York Times* (2019), 'What's America's Winning Hand if Russia Plays the China Card?', 21 July 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/21/opinion/russia-china-trump.html (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
182 Christie, E. H. (2016), 'The Design and Impact of Western Economic Sanctions against Russia', *The RUSI Journal*, 161(3); and Secrieru, S. (2015), 'Have EU sanctions changed Russia's behaviour in Ukraine?', in Luengo-Cabrera, J. and Dreyer, I. (eds) (2015), *On target? EU Sanctions as security policy tools*, European Union Institute for Security Studies Report no. 25.

If such norms and principles are not symbolically upheld, their legitimacy may erode and be challenged globally. Upholding them has also boosted Ukraine's own morale and capacity to resist Russian pressure.

As for the next myth variant, that sanctions are not hurting Russia, sanctions against a large country do not work by destroying its economy. Nor have Western sanctions sought to do this to Russia. Rather, they are designed to impose growing costs on the key energy and finance sectors – and, more recently, on individuals and companies close to Putin – through longer-term loss of access to technology and investment, and through international isolation. The US has demonstrated its ability, especially since April 2018, to target oligarchic figures through major financial sanctions. There is abundant evidence that the economic and psychological impact of sanctions is growing among Russian officials, elites and the wider public.[183] Furthermore, Russia continues to develop policies that reflect Kremlin concern about its vulnerability to sanctions (although it has struggled to do so effectively). Since 2018 these policies have included a major anti-sanctions strategy, rapid de-dollarization of reserves, and efforts to conduct trade without dollar transactions. Russia has also sought to substitute Western technology and skills by building up domestic capacity and sourcing from Asia.[184]

Nor is there evidence that sanctions make Putin stronger. On the contrary: Putin's popularity, which spiked after the annexation of Crimea, has fallen even as the West has imposed stronger sanctions. As of March 2021, Putin's approval rating stood at 63 per cent – close to historic lows for him.[185] No less significant, in January 2020 some 78 per cent of Russians believed that Russia should treat the West as a friend or partner, up from 50 per cent in 2017 – before the most severe sanctions were imposed.[186] Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that Putin's standing among, or control over, elites has grown. Sanctions provoked by his policies have alarmed elites by threatening their access to the international financial system. As a result, capital outflows from Russia have escalated, in defiance of Putin's express wishes. Sanctions, together with domestic sources of declining economic performance, are making elite politics more, not less, fractious and uneasy.

Nor are sanctions primarily responsible for closer Russia–China cooperation. While this trend has almost certainly accelerated – and on terms less favourable to Russia – due to sanctions, it began in 2012, before they were imposed, and reflects deeper factors. It is an inevitable development in relations between one of the biggest exporters and one of the biggest importers of energy, sharing a long border, whose regimes have both taken an increasingly anti-Western turn. If economic sanctions were driving a Sino-Russian alliance, broader economic ties would be especially strong. But this is the weakest part of the relationship. Less than 1 per cent of China's foreign investment goes to Russia. China's hard bargaining has disappointed Russia, while local suspicion and hostility towards

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183 Gould-Davies, N. (2020), 'Russia, the West and Sanctions', *Survival*, 62(1).
184 Shagina, M. (2020), 'Drifting East: Russia's Import Substitution and Its Pivot to Asia', CEES Working Paper, University of Zurich, April 2020, https://www.cees.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:ab647675-d360-4e05-bf96-1bce74dcb725/CEES%20Working%20Paper%203.pdf (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
185 Levada-Center (2021), 'Putin's Approval Rating', https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings (accessed 22 Apr. 2021).
186 Saradzhyan, S. (2020), 'Levada Polls Show Russian Public Opinion Toward West Is Thawing', Russia Matters, 21 February 2020, https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/levada-polls-show-russian-public-opinion-toward-west-thawing (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

investors have disappointed China. Sanctions themselves have also deterred China from some deals. Meanwhile, thoughtful Russians quietly worry that their country could slip into a position of subordination.[187]

What is its impact on policy?

Those who call for lifting sanctions on the grounds that they are ineffective rarely, if ever, propose alternative policies that might do more to change Russian behaviour.

Those who call for lifting sanctions on the grounds that they are ineffective rarely, if ever, propose alternative policies that might do more to change Russian behaviour. They want the West to remove measures but not apply better ones. To this extent, their argument is at best poor strategy and at worst made in bad faith. Lifting sanctions unilaterally without a change in Russia's behaviour would send the opposite signal – that serious violations of established norms do not fundamentally matter. By calling into doubt the sanctioning states' credibility and resolve, such a step would embolden Russia and others to challenge these norms.

An understanding of global sanctions experience counsels strategic patience. Although the myth has not been widely taken up at official level and its impact on Western policymaking has been insignificant to date – indeed, the use of sanctions against Russia has expanded – the concern remains that the myth might gain policy traction in the future. Success depends on credible, firm and consistent application over years and even decades. Western containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War is an exemplar. Sanctions should also be judged by the same standards used for other foreign policy instruments. The fact that Russia has not yet implemented the Minsk agreements or halted its involvement in Ukraine – still less the fact that it has not withdrawn from Crimea, a goal never set by sanctions – is not a case against sanctions. These are the hardest goals; no policy could be expected to achieve them on its own.

What would good policy look like?

Sanctions may be the West's most potent instrument. They play to its biggest strengths: Russia's dependence on technology, capital and dollar transactions; and its elites' need to send assets beyond the reach of a predatory state that, in many cases, helped them acquire these assets. Sanctions are a precision tool, targeting individuals and sectors with little impact on the wider population, especially compared to the effects of oil price decline and domestic structural factors.[188] Russia cannot retaliate in kind effectively: its 2014 ban on food imports had little impact on the West, but raised domestic food prices. In effect, Russia sanctioned its poorest citizens. Finally, the West enjoys escalation dominance: sanctions could go much further, as Russian officials and elites fear they might.

In sum, though deployed for only a short time, sanctions against Russia have already shown their practical and normative value.

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187 Aspects of the Russia–China relationship are explored in detail in Myth 8: 'We must drive a wedge between Russia and China to impede their ability to act in tandem against Western interests', and Myth 9: 'The West's relations with Russia must be normalized in order to counter the rise of China'.
188 See International Monetary Fund (2019), *Russian Federation: 2019 Article IV consultation—press release; staff report*, 2 August 2019, p. 53, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2019/08/01/Russian-Federation-2019-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-48549 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

Policymakers should think about sanctions in the right way, and not hold them to impossible tests they must fail, as many critics do. No policy against a major adversary works through crushing impact that compels an immediate change of course. Policy works by influencing the interests, perceptions, expectations and resources of those in the decision-making and governance environment over time. This will also become more significant as the 2024 presidential election approaches.

Overall, sanctions can play an important role.

Myth 15
‘It’s all about Putin – Russia is a manually run, centralized autocracy’

Vladimir Putin’s Russia is not a one-man show. To understand how governance actually works in the country, we need to take into account the power and complexity of the bureaucracy – which will only continue to grow in importance.

Ben Noble and Ekaterina Schulmann

What is the myth?

It is tempting to believe that Vladimir Putin makes all important decisions in Russia on his own; that politicians and bureaucrats then execute Putin’s commands without fail in a system known as the ‘power vertical’; and that political institutions, such as the national-level legislature as well as regional authorities, serve merely to implement Putin’s wishes. This myth relates, therefore, to how Russian decision-making is understood, to the implementation of decisions in Russia, and to the nature of the country’s political institutions.

Putin’s ‘Direct Line’ – an annual televised question-and-answer session during which the president hears from, and responds to, the problems of Russians across the country – combines all three elements of the myth. Putin appears to make decisions alone and on the spot to solve callers’ woes. He instructs officials to carry out these orders. And he engages directly with citizens, without the need for mediating institutions such as political parties or parliament.

To the extent that it reinforces misperceptions of Russia, this ‘all-powerful Putin’ myth can be framed in two ways. The ‘positive’ version – Putin as the ‘good tsar’ – suggests strong and competent leadership. In effect, the myth makes Putin appear a more potent and unconstrained political force than is the case in reality. The ‘negative’ version of the myth, no less detrimental to a realistic understanding of Russian politics, highlights the pathologies of personalized decision-making and thus supports cartoonish Putin-as-dictator characterizations in the West.[189]

189 As a sign of this duality, an article in *The Economist* noted: ‘Both liberal reformers and conservative traditionalists in Moscow are talking about Mr Putin as a 21st-century tsar.’ *The Economist* (2017), ‘A tsar is born’, 28 October 2017, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/10/26/a-tsar-is-born (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Respected analysts, state officials and journalists have made statements that conform to the myth. According to Fiona Hill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and the former senior director for Europe and Russia on the US National Security Council: 'Putin's Russia is a one-man show. […] In the end, he makes the decisions.'[190] According to three *New Yorker* writers: 'Every aspect of the country's political life, including the media, was brought under the "vertical of power" that he [Putin] constructed.'[191] And according to Gregory Feiffer, a former Moscow correspondent for the US's National Public Radio (NPR): 'In Putin's first year as president, parliament became nothing more than a place for legislatures [sic] to rubber stamp Putin's policies.'[192]

Why is it wrong?

The myth exaggerates the degree of personal control exercised by the president. It glosses over key factors such as the meaningful roles of collective bodies, managerial incompetence and the self-interested behaviour of people beyond Putin. All these factors are vital to understanding how governance actually works in Russia today.

Although Putin may have the *ability* to intervene in all types of decision-making, that does not mean that he always does or wants to. And, on occasion, his direct intervention as a judge between competing positions is not enough to settle a policy decision.

On decision-making, to focus purely on Putin would be to ignore the important roles played by other organizations and actors, including the Presidential Administration, the Security Council and the government. According to an insider in the first of these: 'All of [the Kremlin's] decisions on serious issues are collegial and coordinated. The final decision is up to the president, but the agreed upon point of view goes to him for approval.'[193] Even if this characterization goes too far in the other direction, a picture of Putin dictating policy alone misses the crucial ways in which other actors frame problems, channel information, battle over details, develop positions and set the agenda for Putin to review.[194] Even if Putin were to single-handedly decide everything (which he does not), the agenda-setting power of the bureaucracy to shape which issues reach the leader's desk would still be crucial. Although Putin may have the *ability* to intervene in all types of decision-making, that does not mean that he always does or wants to. And, on occasion, his direct intervention as a judge between competing positions is not enough to settle a policy decision.[195]

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190 Hill, F. (2016), 'Putin: The one-man show the West doesn't understand', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 72(3): 140–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170361 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
191 Osnos, E., Yaffa, J. and Remnick, D. (2017), 'Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War', *New Yorker*, 6 March 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
192 Feiffer, G. (2008), 'Putin's Eight Years in Power Leave Dubious Legacy', NPR, 6 May 2008, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/90134100?t=1610450452380 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021). Instead of 'legislatures', 'legislators' would be a more appropriate term.
193 Anonymous source in the Presidential Administration – quoted in Pertsev, A. (2020), 'Powerful, but not omnipotent', *Meduza*, 3 November 2020, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/11/03/powerful-but-not-omnipotent (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
194 According to a report by the Dossier Center, for example, Putin 'increasingly relies on information from the FSB [Federal Security Service]' (p. 3), thereby increasing the agenda-setting power of this state body. Dossier Center (2020), *Lubyanka federation: How the FSB determines the politics and economics of Russia*, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FSB-Report-Printed-Final.pdf (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
195 Noble, B. (2018), 'Authoritarian Amendments: Legislative Institutions as Intra-Executive Constraints in Post-Soviet Russia', *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(9), pp. 1417–54. See the discussion about the 'budget rule' (pp. 1428–32).

On decision implementation, the surprising fact is that presidential orders are frequently *not* fulfilled. A review ordered in 2020 by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin into the implementation of presidential 'assignments' (*porucheniia*) by deputy prime ministers, ministers and department officials revealed widespread non-implementation within specified timeframes.[196] The Ministry of Finance, for example, failed to complete 73 per cent of its presidential assignments on time. More importantly, non-implementation has also been a feature of certain high-profile policy objectives, such as the 'May Decrees' and 'National Projects' – spending promises and development goals set by Putin – with aims abandoned or deadlines kicked further into the future.[197] It is likely that this non-implementation does not reflect brazen defiance of Putin, but it does show how the mere fact of an order coming from the president does not ensure its swift execution.

On political institutions in general, Putin markedly weakened institutional centres of political power beyond the Kremlin following his election to the presidency in 2000. But that does not mean that all political institutions are simply shams. Take the federal-level parliament, the Federal Assembly. Although the legislature is very much subservient to the president, presidential initiatives make up only a minority of the assembly's agenda. And the lower chamber – the State Duma – shows much less deference to government ministers, particularly under the speakership of Vyacheslav Volodin, a former senior Kremlin official. In addition, the parliamentary phase of law-making can provide a window onto disagreements within the executive – something that shows the insufficiency both of accounts claiming that the legislature is simply a 'rubber stamp' and of suggestions that executive actors' preferences are dictated by, or perfectly align with, those of Putin.[198]

What is its impact on policy?

A fixation on Putin leads to at least three problems: 1) an obsession with Putin's thinking at the expense of attention to other factors; 2) a narrative of Putin's almost unique power, which suits the Kremlin; and 3) a difficulty in combining complexity with critique.

Looking at the first of these problems, too much time can be – and has been – spent on trying to work out what Putin thinks or 'really believes' concerning certain issues. The hope appears to be that knowledge of Putin's inner thoughts will act as the key to understanding and anticipating policy decisions. But this approach is often not sensible. It can easily descend into rank guesswork and reading too much into Kremlin gossip, which may often be disinformation. More importantly, it is likely that Putin does not have settled views – never

196 Pashkovskaia, E. (2020), '«Двоечники» Мишустина. Кто из министров чаще всего «забивает» на поручения президента' [Mishustin's "delinquents". Which ministers most often "blow off" presidential assignments], *Baza*, 3 November 2020, https://baza.io/posts/139fdeb5-89db-436c-854f-fd8320fe14aa (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
197 bne IntelliNews (2020), 'Russia's Putin sets new 2030 goals as National Projects scaled back', 22 July 2020, https://www.intellinews.com/russia-s-putin-sets-new-2030-goals-as-national-projects-scaled-back-187975 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
198 Noble, B. and Schulmann, E. (2018), 'Not Just a Rubber Stamp: Parliament and Lawmaking', in Treisman, D. (ed.) (2018), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

mind personal preferences – on a range of policy issues. Putin often acts as an arbiter on policy decisions, making it more fruitful to analyse the nature and sources of these rival viewpoints. In addition, by focusing on Putin as an individual, observers can all too easily ignore the structural conditions that help shape his thinking. These conditions may well remain unchanged in a post-Putin world and, therefore, will likely also influence his successor.

Projecting an image of Putin's strength helps the Kremlin's information goal of portraying the president as untouchably powerful – something that, conceivably, encourages emulation in other non-democratic states.

Secondly, sustaining the myth plays into the Kremlin's hands. Projecting an image of Putin's strength helps the Kremlin's information goal of portraying the president as untouchably powerful – something that, conceivably, encourages emulation in other non-democratic states.[199] When it occurs, the use of 'manual control' by Putin is better seen as a sign of systemic malfunction rather than primarily as evidence of his presidential power. And these moments – on display during the 'Direct Line' broadcasts – are largely pieces of set political theatre rather than actual decision-making.[200]

The third problem with making it all about Putin is that this encourages black-and-white thinking. If all decisions, particularly those criticized by foreign governments, are assumed to come from Putin directly, then that may provide reassuring simplicity. But it also means that attempts to push back against this approach – to provide nuance and show the many shades of grey in Russia's governance processes – can be seen incorrectly as efforts to let Putin off the hook. Acknowledging complexity is not, however, a sign of condonement or complicity.

What would good policy look like?

Good policy should begin by acknowledging the role of people beyond Putin in decision-making; by acknowledging the frustrations he faces in realizing his goals; and by acknowledging the very real roles played by political institutions, even if not conforming to the norms of democratic governance.

Good policy should recognize quite how much can be learned about Russian politics by examining the public statements of individuals in official positions. True, these sources will not provide the full picture. But dismissing them as merely a veneer perpetuates the idea that 'mysterious, enigmatic' Russia can only be discovered in the shadows. That is simply wrong. Yes, there are influential individuals without official posts, deployed to carry out tasks that require plausible deniability of state involvement, but the majority of key players map onto formal structures of power.

Likewise, the documents produced by official bodies should be taken more seriously. Publicly accessible documents relating to the law-making process, for example, reveal a rich picture of the reality of governance, including inter-factional rivalry and bureaucratic incompetence. Much more realistic predictions of state policy can be made from the draft annual state budgets and amendments

199 This point is also noted in Hill (2016), 'Putin: The one-man show the West doesn't understand', p. 141: 'Overestimating him [Putin] can be as dangerous as underestimating him.'
200 RIA Novosti (2019), 'Итоги «прямых линий» Владимира Путина' [Results of Vladimir Putin's "Direct Lines"], 20 June 2019, https://ria.ru/20190620/1555662941.html (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

that go through the Duma than from the latest rumours about intra-Kremlin factional conflicts. Analysing these materials requires knowledge and skills. Good policy in the future will likely, therefore, be dependent on Western societies investing in a larger corpus of Russia analysts across a broader range of areas.

Not only does looking beyond Putin make sense in understanding current governance, it also makes sense when thinking about post-Putin politics. Although Putin now has the constitutional option to remain president until 2036, generational change is inevitable, making a focus on younger, second-tier officials crucial. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis has made manifestly clear the key roles that regional elites have played, and are likely to keep playing, in important decisions. This has been evident in relations between the Kremlin and the Moscow city government during the pandemic, constituting a line of tension that could well prove increasingly consequential. Such a dynamic would have been completely missed or misinterpreted by those analysts who overestimate the degree to which Russia is centralized, with the result that policymakers would have been blind to a likely source of important developments in the near future.

There is a reason why this myth exists. Putin is powerful. Cheerleaders and critics alike focus on cases that provide especially potent demonstrations of his power. The resulting general image is of a fundamentally personalist system in which little else matters beyond him. But Putin is not 'a cross between Joseph Stalin and a Bond movie villain'[201] sitting atop a 'well-oiled machine'[202] of state governance. He does not simply dictate policy, particularly in those areas outside of his personal interest.[203] If policymakers ignore the limits to Putin's power, as well as the many other actors who enable him (and constrain him, however obliquely), they will create policy in response to a caricature, not a complex country.[204]

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201 Galeotti, M. (2021), 'No One Benefits From Renewed Demonizing of Russia', *Moscow Times*, 14 January 2021, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/01/14/no-one-benefits-from-renewed-demonizing-of-russia-a72606 (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
202 Gorokhovskaia, Y. (2020), 'It may seem Putin controls the Russian state personally. The reality is more dangerous', *Guardian*, 25 August 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/25/alexei-navalny-putin-russian-activist-russia (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).
203 Ananyev, M. (2018), 'Inside the Kremlin: The Presidency and Executive Branch', in Treisman, D. (ed.) (2018), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
204 Greene, S. and Robertson, G. (2019), *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia,* New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.

Myth 16
‘What comes after Putin must be better than Putin’

Irrespective of who eventually succeeds Vladimir Putin, political conditions in Russia are likely to continue to impede the development of more constructive relations with the West.

Nikolai Petrov

What is the myth?

There is a persistent belief in the West that its relations with Russia after President Vladimir Putin (eventually) leaves power will necessarily improve, at a minimum returning to their pre-Putin or early-Putin level – in other words, to the way they were before or during his first presidential term in 2000–04. This assumption is wrong and is sustained by at least two errors. One is the belief that the downturn in the relationship between Russia and the Western powers under Putin was an anomaly rather than a new norm. The other is the implicit understanding that Russia is capable, given its political conditions and human resources today, of developing the institutions and democratic culture required to move away from its current authoritarian model. There are reasons why both of these statements must be challenged.

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Western politicians and most of the Western media are in thrall to this kind of illusion.[205] Every wave of protests in Russia brings anticipation of Putin’s imminent departure and the arrival of a ‘happy ever after’, or at least an improvement of some sort. Putin invariably is seen as the proverbial bad guy: either in his personal capacity; or as the embodiment of a Soviet generation and former member of the KGB and FSB security agencies.

205 See, for example, the review in Götz, E. and Merlen, C.-R. (2019), ‘Russia and the question of world order’, *European Politics and Society*, 20(2): pp. 133–53, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545181. ‘In this view, the Putin regime is an anachronistic autocracy that finds itself on the wrong side of history, to borrow Barack Obama’s pithy phrase. This means that if another, more democratic regime comes to power, there are good chances that Russia will fully integrate into the existing liberal international order.’

The failure of attempts by individual Western politicians to achieve a breakthrough in the relationship with Russia – be it Barack Obama with the US 'reset', Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande or Boris Johnson – has resulted in the opinion (not without evidence, it must be said) that progress cannot be achieved 'under Putin'. For many politicians, this is the easiest and most comfortable explanation for their failure to respond more effectively to Russia.

Such a narrative is susceptible to amplification by the significant populist element in modern-day politics in Western countries. This can create a self-reinforcing dynamic in which politicized exploitation of a stereotype negatively shapes public opinion towards the Putin regime. In turn, political positions and policy towards Russia become hostage to this populist view and are all but obliged to echo it, entrenching the myth yet further. The phenomenon is especially noticeable in the US.

Why is it wrong?

Illusions about the supposed impermanence of the disruptive foreign policy that has prevailed under Putin are based on wishful thinking about the prospects for change in Russia's political culture. First of all, Putin and his anti-Western rhetoric remain popular in Russia precisely because he expresses a view widely held domestically (and reinforced by ceaseless anti-Western propaganda).[206] Anti-Western sentiment, though by no means universal, has been inflamed by Putin and has taken a firm hold in the hearts and minds of many Russian citizens – including, depending on the particular topic in question, among young people.[207]

This is not going to change after Putin's departure, in part because Russian society also suffers from a post-imperial syndrome characterized by a state of deep resentment towards the West, which to Russian eyes neither allows the country to remain a superpower nor has provided it with a decent place within the international system. Even in the best-case scenario for Western observers, in which a pro-Western leader comes to power in Russia, any drive for a radical improvement in the relationship with the West will face considerable inertia.

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206 Putin's approval rating was 63 per cent in March 2021, according to a survey by the Levada-Center. See Levada-Center (2021), 'Putin's Approval Rating', https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings (accessed 14 Apr. 2021). On popular sentiment towards the West, a February 2021 survey indicates that respondents increasingly consider Russia to be a 'non-European' country: Levada-Center (2021), 'Russia and Europe', 22 March 2021, https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/03/22/russia-and-europe (accessed 14 Apr. 2021). Opinion towards the US is almost evenly balanced, though slightly more respondents have a negative perception of the country: Levada-Center (2021), 'Attitude Towards the US', 9 April 2021, https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/04/09/attitude-towards-the-us (accessed 14 Apr. 2021). On Putin's foreign policy, a June 2019 survey by pollster FOM (Public Opinion Foundation or POF) asked, 'Do you think there have been more successes or failures in Russia's foreign policy lately?' Some 48 per cent of respondents said that there had been more successes than failures, whereas 23 per cent said that there had been more failures than successes; moreover, among those who follow foreign policy, noticeably more respondents (50 per cent) saw it as more successful than unsuccessful. See FOM (2019), 'Внешняя политика: мониторинг' [Foreign policy: monitoring], 20 June 2019, https://fom.ru/Politika/14223 (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

207 According to the Levada-Center's deputy director, Denis Volkov: 'Our own country's aggressive foreign policy does not cause much regret among Russian youth. Most young people still agree that Russia should position itself as a "great power" and do not regret the accession of Crimea to Russia. Many young people would welcome an improvement in relations between Russia and the West, but they are not going to apologize for the actions of their country or seek a compromise with the West.' Volkov, D. (2020), 'Ценности, ориентации и участие в политической жизни российского молодого поколения' [Values, orientations and political participation of the Russian younger generation], Yevropeyskiy dialog [European Dialogue expert group], http://www.eedialog.org/ru/2020/06/12/cennosti-orientacii-i-uchastie-v-politicheskoj-zhizni-rossijskogo-molodogo-pokolenija (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

The trouble with believing that what comes after Putin must be better than Putin is that it implicitly influences the majority of forecasts about Russia, thereby sustaining inertia in the West as politicians await an improvement that may never materialize.

Second, any chances for a post-Putin Russia to build a viable democratic political system are lower now than they were in the 1990s. Although nearly two generations of Russians have grown up since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have done so largely under Putin and tend to be more pro-Soviet than anti-Soviet in their worldview. For many years, the country's elections have been far from free and fair, and any remaining chances for meaningful democracy are rapidly evaporating. Long gone, too, is any semblance of legitimate and independent local government. Apart from a limited number of civil institutions either accepted or tolerated by the Kremlin, Russia's civil society is non-existent and therefore has no experience or track record. This begs the question of how realistic it is to expect the emergence of advanced democratic institutions after Putin leaves office, when there are currently no foundations to speak of. In the early 1990s, a hunger for democracy compensated for the absence of institutions and expertise, and there was a clarity among the general public about which democratic models were to be adopted and a willingness to see the process through. Today, that hunger has been replaced by disappointment with the results of the attempted democratization, and with the political models themselves.

Third, in order for this 'beautiful Russia of the future' to emerge, the country will need a new professional cadre of elite bureaucrats and policymakers, along with the resources for their rapid mobilization. The conditions needed to achieve this are not present in today's Russia, and it will therefore take a long time to develop and establish new elites from scratch. This is a far cry from the Russia of the *perestroika* era under Mikhail Gorbachev, when new elites clamouring for change were emerging from within the old system. A recent policy brief on 'post-Putin diplomats', published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), serves as a good illustration of this point.[208]

What is its impact on policy?

The trouble with believing that what comes after Putin must be better than Putin is that it implicitly influences the majority of forecasts about Russia, thereby sustaining inertia in the West as politicians await an improvement that may never materialize. Most mass media outlets in the West follow their politicians' line, rehashing this popular and palatable misconception instead of challenging it and shaping public opinion to ensure that views on Russia's prospects are better informed and more realistic.

The mistaken belief that Putin is an anomaly is also preventing the West from facing the uncomfortable truth that its problems with Russia will not disappear overnight once a new leadership ultimately takes power. This has potentially negative implications for both proactive and defensive Western policies towards Russia. For example, pushing for a quick win in terms of political change could be counterproductive, not only because it would require reforming the whole system (rather just replacing the person heading it) but also because any precipitous or

208 Liik, K. (2019), 'The last of the offended: Russia's first post-Putin diplomats', ECFR, 19 November 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_last_of_the_offended_russias_first_post_putin_diplomats (accessed 17 Feb. 2021).

premature changes could lead to instability. A fast-track approach would also likely struggle to engage with Russian civil society via educational initiatives and practical support. With electoral systems, for example, reform of technical structures needs to go hand in hand with the laborious task of changing the political culture of voters.

Finally, adherence to the myth that Russia after Putin will inevitably be an improvement (by Western criteria) on the current regime carries the obvious risk of disappointment and consequent policy overreaction. When illusions collide with reality, this can create a toxic media and political atmosphere in which policymakers and the general public are more susceptible to extreme proposals and unfounded assertions about Russia's strategic intentions – thus removing the foundations needed for the development of credible policy.

What would good policy look like?

The Western powers need to develop long-term strategies that serve their wider national interests, rather than focusing on Putin or any other individual. These strategies should be built on extensive research into the contemporary Russian political system and civil society, examining the challenges in each area and the prospects for addressing them. Specific tactical steps must be joined up and built into a long-term strategy, as the West's current positions arguably lack clarity, consistency or flexibility. To begin with, it would be useful to analyse the mistakes that have lately been made by all sides, and to conduct an audit of existing approaches to building relations, retaining only those that can achieve positive results, while also developing more effective ones.

In formulating policy towards Russia and engaging with Russian interlocutors, Western diplomats should distinguish between the regime, the state and the country.

A clear strategy, based on general principles but also necessarily country-specific, would support more active and productive engagement both with public opinion in Western countries and with actors in Russia. Implementation of each step in the strategy should be constantly monitored for cost versus benefit. Current affairs in Russia must also be constantly monitored and analysed for their implications for the country's future political development.

The strategy should be multifaceted and multi-vectored. The usual containment, engagement and isolation policies, in whichever combination, are not enough. Western powers should not close the door to possible cooperation with Russia (either during Putin's rule or post-Putin) on urgent issues, such as the Arctic, the Middle East, COVID-19 and climate change. In consultations and discussion of problems, attention both to results and process is important, to allow effective responses to rapid changes in circumstances.

In formulating policy towards Russia and engaging with Russian interlocutors, Western diplomats should also distinguish between the regime, the state and the country. When engaging with the Putin regime, the logical approach should be to minimize contacts with actors at the heart of the regime and to avoid particular political or dialogue formats that might contribute to its legitimation. In contrast, bilateral contacts at the expert level, and with civil activists and ordinary citizens, should be intensified. Western and Russian expert and political groups must strive to establish tighter connections.

Finally, it is important to break the pattern in which, in any dialogue with the West, Russia's position is represented by Kremlin appointees, as for example in the St Petersburg Dialogue.[209] Russia has national interests that legitimately need to be formulated, articulated and taken into account, but these are not the same as the specific interests of the Putin regime. The more that Western powers proceed from this principle as they develop their policies, the more chances there are that Russia after Putin will be a more normal country on the world stage than it has been under Putin.

209 A Russo-German 'civil society' forum set up in 2001 under the patronage of Vladimir Putin and Gerhard Schröder, Germany's chancellor at the time. See 'Петербургский диалог/Petersburger dialog' [Petersburg Dialogue], https://petersburger-dialog.ru.

Conclusion

Keir Giles and James Nixey

Selecting the myths and misconceptions about Russia to include in this collection was challenging. There is no shortage of views on Russia that are commonly accepted but nonetheless confused, misguided or misinformed, sometimes dangerously so; and most analysts nurture their own personal lists of *bêtes noires* from among them. However, this paper is not about 'wanting to be right' about isolated data points. It is about correcting those myths that lead to bad policy.

All of the authors of this volume could have written on a number of different topics, and the resulting selection is only a sample of the wide range of firmly established but fundamentally incorrect ideas about Russia with which they have to grapple in the course of their professional lives. Other candidates for inclusion that in the end did not make the cut were that 'Russia engages in aggression abroad to divert attention from pressures at home' (untrue – Russia has its own foreign policy objectives, regardless of domestic politics) or that 'there can be no security in Europe without Russia, and that there are no major world problems which can be solved without Russia' (again no – where Russia is involved in a situation, it is almost invariably a substantial part of the problem, not the solution).

This is in no way to suggest that people should not be allowed to say these things – it is a vital feature of a democracy that a wide range of genuine and honest opinion should be allowed to flourish in open debate. Our point is a different one: that fallacious propositions, especially but not only those devised and inseminated by our adversaries, should not be so widely embedded in the foundations of Western decision-making. The one aspect that all of the selected myths have in common is that our authors have observed them leading directly to policy errors by Western actors in dealing with Russia.

And it is the action that results from these mistaken views that matters. Collecting and dissecting this cross-section of errors has not been an exercise in intellectual vanity; instead, it is intended for a very specific purpose. The authors have repeatedly found that engaging in serious policy discussions on Russia requires first challenging unhelpful but firmly entrenched preconceptions. These present obstacles that must be cleared so that Russia can be considered on the basis of reality, rather than on the basis of mental constructs that are comfortable for Western observers but entirely misleading. In a strange parallel, this process of breaking through barriers to a meaningful discussion resembles a common experience of European and US officials in interactions with their Russian counterparts, where a precondition for serious conversation is so often dealing with the disinformation, misdirection, bluster and bluff that precede it.

Considering all of these observations in the round allows us to extract a number of common themes. These can be distilled into a set of 10 foundational principles essential for achieving better results in managing the West's relationship with Moscow.

10 principles for the West for dealing more rationally and effectively with Russia

1. **Adopt strategies based on an honest appraisal of the evidence of Russia's capabilities, intentions and actions.** Do not adopt them through putting hope before experience, or because plausible alternatives are uncomfortable, or on the basis of the myths debunked in this report.

2. **Remember that the Kremlin is not the West's friend.** Well-connected members of the Russian regime enjoy the West's luxury resorts, legal systems, banks, schools, high-end properties and so on; but this does not mean they share its politics, values or respect for the rule of law.

3. Do not accommodate or appease Russia in return for assumed benefits. These will not materialize. In particular, **avoid the temptation to seek a grand bargain in relations with Russia, or a major geopolitical realignment.** So-called 'realist' policies simply play into Russia's hands.

4. **Expect to be disappointed by Russia.** Experience consistently demonstrates the futility of treating Russia as a reliable partner acting in good faith. Expect Russia to violate any agreement entered into with it when this suits Russia's interests, unless there is substantial leverage to enforce the terms of the agreement in question.

5. **Don't give up.** Keep the pressure on Russia by being clear about core Western interests and refusing to accept hostile actions that challenge them, and keep faith that Western political systems, sanctions and other responses work in the long term. Adopt the principle that each 'unacceptable' action should be met with an equal or asymmetric reaction.

6. **Accept that an unfriendly relationship with Russia is appropriate** at present and **dictated by the realities we face.** Indeed, a good relationship with Russia would be highly inappropriate in the contemporary context. Russia's conditions for 'friendship' invariably come at a cost that is damaging to our interests and those of others.

7. **Place security above economic gains.** Any reduction in business with Russia is far outweighed by the costs of failing to deter Russia from undermining or attacking Western nations, societies, citizens and core interests. There are times when security and economic imperatives will come into conflict, and this will entail some financial sacrifice. Financial investment only builds political bridges when political interests coincide.

8. **Resist the temptation to compromise interests and values in pursuit of cooperation,** even while recognizing that cooperation may still be possible in a small handful of areas. A similar principle applies to dialogue. Neither

cooperation nor dialogue is as important as understanding the fundamental differences between Russia and the West.

9. **Expect noisy, angry and vituperative responses from Moscow** as the price to be paid for defending Western interests. Such responses must not act as deterrents to policy, as that would constitute successful blackmail.

10. **Build expertise.** The West needs to reconstitute a far larger and more expert pool of Russia specialists to ensure trustworthy analysis of Russia's actions, and to prevent the development of still further myths.

These common-sense principles derive from the authors' experience of seeing how the application of policy based on erroneous assumptions has repeatedly resulted in failure. Trade has trumped security, a cooperative relationship with Russia has been – and still is – assumed to be the default state, dialogue is seen as an end in itself, expertise has been allowed to atrophy, and so on. The 10 principles listed above are, then, the result not just of analysis and experience but of simple logic.

All the same, it is highly unlikely that the publication of this report will end the conversations around the myths it exposes. Many of the myths have become embedded in the Western discourse as articles of faith, and will not easily be dislodged. But the authors of this collection have shown how the patterns of repetitive failure in engagement with Russia are founded to some extent in readily identifiable false premises that have taken root in policy and analytical communities outside Russia. In challenging such thinking, the authors hope not only to reduce the analytical bandwidth that needs to be expended on repeatedly tackling the same misconceptions, but also to aid policymakers in developing options for engaging with Russia that have a much greater chance of success.

This success is of course also dependent on Western countries examining themselves. Their ability both to defend themselves and to project long-term influence is critically dependent on strengthening not only the resilience of their institutions and societies, but also that of their reputations – nurturing and rebuilding the credibility of their democratic systems. Most importantly of all, it is crucial for the West to avoid belief in myths in its self-appraisal as much as in its assessment of Russia.

Myths about Russia endure not only as other myths do, passed down through oral and written tradition. They flourish in policy debates like invasive weeds – ones that not only propagate naturally but also benefit from malicious and regular re-seeding and fertilization at the hands of the Kremlin's extended network of messengers, minions and tools. Their complete eradication is as improbable as the arrival of a liberal, democratic and internationally responsible Russia. Nevertheless, patient and persistent weeding brings us steadily closer to the ideal croquet lawn of clear-sighted and objective policy analysis, undistorted by false premises and comfortable delusions. It is the authors' hope that this volume can be put to durable use as a powerful weedkiller.

About the authors

Duncan Allan
Duncan Allan is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and the director of Octant Research & Analysis Ltd, an independent consultancy. For more than 28 years he was a member of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office's cadre of research analysts, working on the countries of the former Soviet Union, particularly Russia and Ukraine. He served at the British embassies in Moscow and Kyiv.

Annette Bohr
Annette Bohr is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. With over 30 years' experience as an analyst of Central Asian foreign, domestic and energy policies, she has authored dozens of works on regional politics, informal governance, energy issues and ethnic and language polices in Eurasia, including a monograph on petro-authoritarianism in Turkmenistan.

Annette regularly prepares briefings and reports for a range of corporate investors, government departments and international financial institutions. She was previously a fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University and an analyst at Manchester University and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich.

Annette holds degrees from the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University and the University of Cambridge.

Mathieu Boulègue
Mathieu Boulègue is a research fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. In his research, Mathieu focuses on Eurasian security and defence issues as well as on Russia's foreign policy and military affairs. Part of his research addresses Russia–NATO relations, Russia–China defence and security affairs, and Arctic military security issues. Having trained as a policy and security analyst in the field of post-Soviet affairs, Mathieu regularly publishes articles and papers on Eurasian security and foreign policy questions.

Before joining Chatham House, Mathieu was a partner at a risk management and strategic research consultancy in France, working as director of Eurasian affairs. He graduated from Sciences Po Toulouse in France and King's College London (MA in international conflict studies).

Keir Giles
Keir Giles is a senior consulting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He also works with the Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC), a group of subject matter experts in Eurasian security.

Keir's career began in aviation in the early 1990s, working with Soviet military and paramilitary aircraft in Crimea. With the BBC Monitoring Service, he specialized in military and economic issues in the former Soviet space, and in 2005–10 he was seconded to the UK Defence Academy, where he researched Russian military, defence and security challenges.

Keir is widely published on the topic of Russian cyber and information warfare. He is the author of *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, 2019), which examines the long-term causes of conflict with Russia.

Nigel Gould-Davies

Nigel Gould-Davies is a senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), and the editor of *Strategic Survey: The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics*.

Prior to joining the IISS, Nigel was an associate fellow of Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme, while teaching and conducting research in Asia. From 2010 to 2014 he held senior government relations roles in the energy industry in Central and Southeast Asia. From 2000 to 2010 he served in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, where his roles included head of the economics department in Moscow, ambassador to Belarus and project director in the Strategy Unit. From 1996 to 2000 he taught politics and international relations at Oxford University. He is the author of *Tectonic Politics: Global Political Risk in an Age of Transformation* (Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, 2019). Nigel holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Oxford University and a PhD from Harvard University.

Philip Hanson

Philip Hanson is emeritus professor of the political economy of Russia and Eastern Europe at the University of Birmingham. He has worked in the Treasury, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, as well as at a number of universities: Exeter, Michigan, Harvard, Kyoto, Sodertorn and Uppsala. He has acted as an analyst or consultant for Oxford Analytica and several banks and companies. His books include *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy: An Economic History of the USSR 1945 - 1991* (Routledge, 2003).

John Lough

John Lough is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He began his career as an analyst at the Soviet Studies (later Conflict Studies) Research Centre, focusing on Soviet/Russian security policy. He spent six years with NATO, and was the first Alliance representative to be based in Moscow (1995–98).

He gained direct experience of the Russian oil and gas industry at TNK-BP as a manager in the company's international affairs team (2003–08). From 2008 to 2016, he ran the Russia and CIS practice at BGR Gabara, a public affairs and strategy consulting company.

Alongside his work with Chatham House, John is a consultant with Highgate, a strategic advisory firm.

Orysia Lutsevych
Orysia Lutsevych is a research fellow and head of the Ukraine Forum in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. She focuses on social change and the role of civil society in democratic transition in the post-Soviet region. Her recent research has analysed Russia's use of proxy NGOs in achieving its foreign policy objectives. Prior to joining Chatham House, she led the start-up of Europe House Georgia and was executive director of the Open Ukraine Foundation. She has an MS in international relations from Lviv State University and an MS in public administration from the University of Missouri.

Kate Mallinson
Kate Mallinson is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. An acknowledged independent political risk expert, she advises foreign companies, multinationals and international financial institutions on the impact of regulatory, security, domestic and geopolitical developments in the former Soviet Union.

Kate also researches informal networks and governance in Central Asia, and travels frequently to the region as an election observer for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). She has previously worked in advocacy in Uzbekistan (1999–2001), Ukraine (2001) and Russia (1996–97) for Médécins Sans Frontières.

She is a frequent panellist at conferences and events around the world, and often comments on developments for the media.

Anaïs Marin
Anaïs Marin is an independent Belarus expert and an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. In 2018 she was appointed UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, having previously been involved in policy expert and advocacy networks on the country. She also participated in several OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) election observation missions in the region.

Anaïs has published for various think-tanks, notably the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA, Helsinki), the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS, Paris) and most recently the Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. In her academic capacity, she has investigated the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes ('dictaplomacy'), first as a Marie Curie Fellow (Collegium Civitas, Warsaw) and since 2019 with a grant from the Polish National Centre for Science (University of Warsaw). Her current research focuses on how Russian 'sharp power' impacts European democracy and regional security.

She received her PhD and MA from Sciences Po Paris/CERI.

James Nixey
James Nixey joined Chatham House in 2000 and has been director of the institute's Russia and Eurasia Programme since 2013. He is also an associate fellow with the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and serves on the board of the journal *UA: Ukraine Analytica*.

His principal research interests concern Russia's relationships with the other post-Soviet states and key international actors. James has also written for the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Independent*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, BBC.co.uk and CNN.com. He holds degrees in modern languages and international relations, and has previous experience in journalism (as a reporter in Moscow in the late 1990s).

Ben Noble
Dr Ben Noble became an associate fellow of Chatham House in December 2020, joining the Russia and Eurasia Programme. An expert on Russian domestic politics, he is a lecturer in Russian politics at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, and a senior research fellow at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

Dr Noble frequently provides commentary and analysis on Russian domestic politics for academic, policy and general audiences in public events, as well as for the media.

In 2019, he was awarded a Rising Star Engagement Award by the British Academy for a project on the closure of legislatures in non-democracies. Before joining UCL, he was Herbert Nicholas Junior Research Fellow at New College, University of Oxford.

Nikolai Petrov
Nikolai Petrov is a senior research fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in London, and a professor in the political science department at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. His research at Chatham House deconstructs the hidden decision-making process in Vladimir Putin's Russia. He has authored dozens of analyses of Russia's politics, post-Soviet transformation, the socio-economic and political development of Russia's regions, democratization, federalism and elections.

Nikolai is a member of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia), the Scientific Advisory Council and the European Dialogue group. He holds a PhD in geography from Moscow State University.

Ekaterina Schulmann
Ekaterina is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. She is also an associate professor at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSES), and senior lecturer at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA). From December 2018 to October 2019, she was a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.

With a PhD in political science, she specializes in modern Russia's legislative process, parliamentarism and decision-making mechanisms in hybrid political regimes. She authored the books *Law-making as a political process* (Moscow School of Political Studies, 2014) and *Practical Politology: a guide to the contact with reality* (collection of articles, ACT, 2018, 2020), and was one of the co-authors of *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), edited by Daniel Treisman.

She has a weekly programme on Echo Moscow radio station dedicated to popularizing political science terminology and concepts, and has a sizeable audience on her YouTube channel. Previously, she worked as a civil servant in a local administration, as a State Duma deputy's assistant, as a political faction analyst, as an expert at the analytical department of the Russian State Duma, and as the legislative affairs director of a consulting company.

James Sherr
James Sherr OBE has been a senior fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute at the International Centre for Defence & Security in Tallinn since 2019. He also is an associate fellow and former head (2008–11) of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House.

He was a member of the social studies faculty of Oxford University from 1993 to 2012; a fellow of the Conflict Studies Research Centre of the UK Ministry of Defence from 1995 to 2008; and director of studies of the Royal United Services Institute (1983–85).

He has published extensively on Soviet and Russian military, security and foreign policy, as well as on energy security, the Black Sea region and Ukraine's efforts to deal with Russia, the West and its own domestic problems.

He was awarded an OBE in the 2020 New Year's Honours List for his services to British interests overseas.

Kataryna Wolczuk
Kataryna Wolczuk is an associate fellow of Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme and a professor of East European politics at the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies (CREES), University of Birmingham.

She has long experience of working with international organizations, think-tanks, governments and international media, and has extensively researched the post-Soviet countries. She frequently contributes to publications, conferences and events on the Eastern Partnership and Eurasian integration, as well as on the domestic and foreign policies of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

Andrew Wood
Sir Andrew Wood is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, where he focuses on Russia's domestic and foreign policies. He was British ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1985 to 1989, and ambassador to Russia from 1995 to 2000, having earlier served in Moscow in 1964–66 and 1979–82. After his retirement from the Diplomatic Service in 2000, he acted on behalf of a number of firms with interests in Russia and other formerly Soviet countries.

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Cover image: A representation of Imperial Rome is projected onto the façade of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, 2016.
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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700
contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

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