

The Russian Challenge

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Question 1

I notice that you say that NATO should respond 'robustly' to this ambiguous war in Ukraine. I haven't read the report so I'm not quite sure what that implies. Does it imply that NATO should in some way become involved in the war in Ukraine, even just by training Ukrainian troops or providing equipment? If so, will that simply not lead to the prolongation of the war, because Russia can't really accept defeat in this country which has enormous security implications and which is right next door to it.

Question 2

Just one rather frivolous question: are any of the gentlemen already on the list of banned people for Russia, to join Nick Clegg and Sir Malcolm Rifkind?

Question 3

What, in your view, would be the consequence of the West accepting Mr Putin's position on Ukraine – that it shouldn't go into NATO, that it shouldn't join the EU, and that it should be federalized?

James Nixey

The unpalatable issue is that the sanctions, as a tool of constraint and pressure, have a cumulative effect which becomes very serious in the long term. Russia today has usable military power and is using it. It's not being answered. Ukrainian armed forces can stand up to anything the local separatists throw at them but not the most advanced equipment and special purpose forces of the Russian army. This means that as long as this is the case, Russia can regulate the conflict any way it pleases. This is why the first Minsk accord was brutally disrupted by a major military offensive. It appears as if that might now be happening again. There has been a very gradual, incremental level – yes, there have been elements of western training, elements of non-lethal assistance and so on. But my view is that if we do not find a way intelligently of establishing some kind of military counterbalance inside Ukraine – certainly not with NATO forces – by strengthening Ukraine's defences, this temptation and this possibility for Russia is going to be completely open and it's going to completely sabotage every possibility for accommodation. I do not accept that the Russian general staff, whose thinking I think I understand a bit, would be so rash and foolhardy to commit acts that it regards as dangerous militarily, in response to what it sees as a balance of forces.

Very quickly, on your very important point, I think if we gave in and we were seen to give in, and it would be a big thing, I think there would be immediate repercussions throughout the entire NATO area. In the Baltic states now, it's very rational for them to ask: if the West is unwilling to honour some of its commitments to Ukraine short of war, how can we be so certain that when we are facing similar challenges later, NATO will honour its commitments by means of war, under Article 5? So I think this will have very serious reverberations across NATO and the EU.

Bridget Kendall

Can I just ask the other four of you, on this question of arming Ukraine, do you think it would be advisable to do it? More dangerous to do it, more dangerous not to? Phil?

Philip Hanson

I think the short answer is, I don't know. I hope that my colleagues would answer this more expertly than I do.

Keir Giles

James has made the point that if we do – we, meaning the West in general – provide more support to Ukraine than has been up until now, it allows Ukraine to become less of a soft target and it makes it more complicated for Russia to regulate the conflict. Jeffrey pointed out that the risk of this is prolonging the war – well, yes, if you allow Ukraine to lose more slowly, then yes, the fighting goes on for longer. But that is indicative of a basic mismatch of expectation between us and Russia. As one of my colleagues has put it very neatly, and I suspect it might have been one of the James's, the problem is we want peace but they want victory.

James Nixey

It's a tough call, isn't it? I think the non-eloquent answer is that people will die no matter what you do. If you provide arms to Ukraine, a certain number of people will die, and if you don't, a different number of people will die. It is the devil's alternative. If the Russians ramp up the conflict, then whether we wish to match that and save lives and perhaps do the decent thing, or to modulate the conflict and keep it down, is a decision I don't envy anybody. There's a copout, sorry.

Andrew Wood

I think we're gradually going to get forced in this direction, just to answer that particular point. But turning to the wider point – well, I'll just answer the question about the list. Nobody knew who was on the list so we don't know if we're on the list, but we assume not.

But on the particular question, because it's linked to the NATO issue, that you raised: this is presented by the Russians as an East-West issue, and it's becoming increasingly an East-West issue, which is where it chimes in with Jeffrey's point. But fundamentally, it is an issue about the nature of government in Russia and the nature of government in Ukraine and the relationship between the two of them. That's what we're trying to defend, the possibility of Ukraine choosing for itself. What Putin fears for Ukraine is it will choose for itself and it will choose a model which works, when his is not. So I don't think saying Ukraine is not going to join NATO in the foreseeable future is not to the point at all. That's my interpretation.

Question 4

The United States has expressed grave concern about the spread of China into the South China Sea. Earlier in the year, the Russians had joint naval manoeuvres with China in the Black Sea. Do you see any linkage between these two events and reason for wider concern?

Question 5

I would like to ask the panel, what is your perception of Mr Putin as a politician. Do you think that he is an independent political figure, or is he being influenced by different forces within the Russian political establishment? Can you maybe give us a brief overview about if there is a conflict between FSB, Putin,

maybe mentioning Mr Kadirov in Chechnya – what is the triangle? What is the nature of power within the Russian political establishment?

Question 6

Given the agreement that was made in Budapest, is there not a moral obligation on the part of the US and the UK to provide arms to Ukraine?

James Nixey

I haven't heard of a connection between Russia's latest moves and the Chinese moves into out-of-area operations, if you like. I would say, and it is not addressed in this report, that China's influence in the region is, if you like, the new game in town. It's now the largest investor in Central Asia. It's got a much more subtle foreign policy, much quieter than Russia. I think we ignore it at our peril. As for a Chinese-Russian linkage, to ape my mentor, Bobo Lo, it's an access of convenience and it's probably a diverging rather than converging relationship. They don't have that much in common and probably China would prefer not to be seen with it too much. It's a bit awkward.

James Sherr

I'm far from convinced that the Chinese would love it. So far, as a result of this conflict, the Chinese have basically offered Russia tea and sympathy. They have driven very hard bargains with the Russians over energy supply, for example. I don't think the Chinese confuse Chinese interests with Russian interests.

Bridget Kendall

Putin and power – Andrew?

Andrew Wood

Of course there is a good deal of conflict around Putin. It would be entirely unnatural were there not so because most of the people there have been there for a long time. So there are bound to be differences of view. Some of them have come to the surface. Some of them have been about the distribution of a shrinking share of rents. It's the nature of any group of people who have been in power for such a long time that such divisions should occur. Because of the dilemmas that Russia faces now – how far to go in Ukraine, what to do about Ukraine, whether or not to reform the economy, whether or not to establish an independent judiciary and all those other issues in civil society – there is bound to be concern at the degree to which decisions are made by Putin, taking various factors into account but made on the basis of very little definable advice, and without necessarily giving much notice to the machine which has then got to implement them. That's a recipe for confusion as well as further division.

I do not think that Vladimir Putin is a puppet master, nor do I think he is in charge of his own fate. Possibly I'm influenced on that because I spent a long time in Yugoslavia and the Milosevic model – sometimes events also have an effect on people. But he is the necessary arbiter as things stand. The succession problem is a huge one. Nobody knows who will succeed Putin or how such a succession will come about, or whether it will produce stability. So you have a polity within which one man plays a dominant role without actually being the master of events. So I think it's a good question, but the answer is, in a way, nobody knows – and in another way, everybody knows.

Bridget Kendall

When I was in Moscow recently, one analyst I saw ventured the argument that this is also about another factor putting pressure on the Kremlin, which is the IS factor: returning jihadists through a soft border in the south. You immediately can see a reason for conflict between Kadirov and the FSB, which then lands in front of the president and is something very difficult to resolve.

Andrew Wood

I'd be much more worried about returning people from Ukraine.

Bridget Kendall

Budapest memorandum and the obligations that it puts on the US and the UK – Keir?

Keir Giles

Is there a moral obligation on Ukraine? You could argue that. You could argue further that there was also a political and a legal obligation to do a great deal more than has been done, especially in the very early stages, and that that is an obligation which collectively we ducked. But idealism aside, there is also a practical issue of self-interest here as well. Coming back to the question about what happens if you allow Russia a walkover – we've been here before. The Minsk II agreement has its precursor in the Georgian ceasefire agreement. Accept the status quo in Georgia, organize a reset, return to business as usual with Russia, pretend that we can play along – all it does is encourage Russia to believe that actually, yes, military force against neighbours is quite effective and doesn't cost a great deal. So I would strongly urge thinking long and hard before moving towards that acceptance in any level of what Russia is doing at the moment.

Bridget Kendall

Just a quick thought from the panel: Kerry's visit to Sochi, to spend four hours with Lavrov and a long time with Mr Putin; a recent phone call between Cameron and Mr Putin; would it be a good idea for Mr Cameron to try and meet Mr Putin, reach out? Why are you all saying no, he shouldn't do that?

Andrew Wood

There's a difference if you've got something real to talk about, some firm message, or a message to receive, even better – fine. As James said earlier, there are things we need to talk to the Russians about. Fair enough. But you have to be very careful about the signal it gives. I particularly would advise any western leader going to meet Mr Putin not to spend two bloody hours in the waiting room. After half an hour, you should say: I'm sorry, this is a serious conversation I've come for, you're obviously not ready for it. I'm taking the plane home.

Bridget Kendall

You harrumphed, James.

James Sherr

What the Russians call [in Russian], the tonalities, are very important to them. However tough Kerry might have been in private, watching his visit, publicly he projects a kind of unctuous weakness, a gratitude at basically being subject to ill treatment. This has terrible repercussions there. So he should not be going to Sochi in the first place. He should insist the meeting take place in Moscow, because Sochi is widely seen to be Putin's court. Don't go there.

But the other side of it puzzles me. What I find very worrying is that at the military-to-military level, communications have been virtually shut down. At a time we have Russian airplanes flying in our airspace in a very provocative manner, we have nuclear sabres being rattled, we have this extremely tense and precarious situation, I would be comfortable if more of these channels were open. So I think we're looking at this the wrong way round.

James Nixey

I'd agree with that. The Russian piece of propaganda, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, which comes out with the *Daily Telegraph* now and again, had a terrific picture on the front page the other day, which was John Kerry just like this towards Lavrov – across the table, not a bear hug. It's the optics. Perhaps it's professional but it's not – he doesn't look good, at the very least.

Question 7

I have the dubious pleasure of meeting many Russian businesspeople. Whenever I ask them the sort of questions that have just been asked now, they normally say: look, it's very simple – follow the money. Arguably, the sanctions regime has been incredibly effective because those with money in Russia are really feeling the pain. Arguably, if that were ratcheted up and made tighter still, with the prospect that Russian oligarchs and also less senior businesspeople face a contracting world where really they can only take their holidays in Sochi and nowhere else, perhaps then we might end up with a palace coup. Perhaps Putin can just be quietly buried in his own plutonium and then a change of sentiment from the business elite, and everything could be reset. What do the panel think about that?

Question 8

Following on the last comments from the panel, a question from a US perspective. To what extent has weak or naïve US leadership over the last two presidents – whether looking in Putin's eyes or the famous reset – in fact helped make this situation worse? Then looking forward 19 months and 12 days (but who's counting), when the US has new leadership, what would your recommendation be regarding how we should approach this diplomatically and tactically? Should we keep Europe firmly in the lead through NATO, through the four countries that have been negotiating with Russia and Putin, which we are not even part of? Or should we begin to respond to Russia as the sworn enemy that Russia has been saying continually it is?

Question 9

I wanted to pick up Philip Hanson's point about Russia's economy and comparative advantage and so on. The Russians can obviously depend on enormous natural resources for quite a long time but what consequences does that have for the rest of the economy, for industry and so on? It looks at the moment

as though everything is either going into oil and gas or it's going into the military-industrial complex, as in the Soviet era. That didn't end well as an economic model before. So is it going to do any better this time?

Philip Hanson

The benefit of exploiting oil and gas to the full is an obvious proposition as far as it goes. In itself, it would be the natural thing to do if this were a fully market-driven economy. That would be what Russia would be specializing in. I think the implications for the rest of the economy depend not so much on the existence of oil and gas resources as on the way in which the rents from those resources are used. This is the Gaddy and Ickes interpretation, which you are probably familiar with. I think there's a lot to be said for that view.

What would really make a difference for the rest of the economy – which does incidentally have a few bright points here and there, retailing and some software and so on. There are some bits of the rest of the Russian economy which are respectable-looking by international standards. But what would really make a difference for the non-oil and gas economy would be a change in the rules of the game, a change in the way in which the rule of law would be implemented, protection of property rights fulfilled. All of those things require changes which are ultimately political. I think that's the real problem. I don't think one should be blaming oil and gas so much as they should be blaming the way in which the rules of the game developed in Russia and the way in which they need to go to change those rules.

Bridget Kendall

On the question of sanctions, ratcheting them up, would that provide a squeeze which would lead to political change?

Philip Hanson

[low audio] The leading oligarchs have lost quite a lot of money over the past year and a half. These are paper wealth, changes in their paper wealth, reflected above all in the fall in the dollar – except for Vladimir Yevtushenkov, who was ripped off by the Russian authorities, but that's another story. If that were to continue for quite a long time – and I don't think what's happened so far is primarily due to sanctions. I think [indiscernible] had a very good point when he argued [indiscernible] that the oligarchs are by and large, with one or two exceptions, Putin's hostages. The assets that they own which give them a serious rate of return are predominantly in Russia itself. He compared the assets they own abroad – some of them are just toys or entry tickets, like owning a football club, owning a basketball club, that sort of thing. But there are also some quite substantial foreign assets, but the rate of return on the assets held in Russia is much more serious. They haven't, by and large – this is a very broad generalization – become internationally established as businesspeople. The heart of their business remains in Russia. It's to that extent they are committed to the existing order in Russia.

Bridget Kendall

There is another sanctions argument, isn't there, which is that if you ratchet up the sanctions more so there is more pain across the board in Russia, instead of them being the targeted ones which hit the elite or the people who you want to hurt, they hit everybody. Then the way it might affect public opinion might go a way which is the way the West would like it to go, but it could create a huge backlash. Anyone else want to comment on the sanctions question?

Keir Giles

Not directly on the sanctions, because after all we have been here – both the broad sanctions and the smart sanctions are doing exactly what you're asking for. But hoping for a palace coup, in the expectation that this will make things better, I think is at best a brave gamble and at worst it's exactly the kind of dangerous optimism that got us into this mess in the first place. Most people in this room will be fully aware that peaceful transitions of power in Russia are exceptional. Internal instability within Russia is one of the things that the frontline states are just as concerned about as direct and deliberate intervention.

James Sherr

The merit of the sanctions should not be underestimated. They prevent debt-ridden state companies in Russia from raising money abroad, from dealing with their debt problem. They deny both the energy sector and the military-industrial complex advanced technology. There's a third merit, that so far the damage they do to European economies has been considered bearable. Once you start talking about ratcheting them up, you also then have to ask what the implications would be for other countries.

May I just quickly come back to the US question? Sorry, no – subject to correction on what I said from Phil.

Philip Hanson

No, I agree entirely. I just wanted to make the point that it's too easy to judge the effectiveness of sanctions by just saying, look, trouble in the Donbas is still going on. What's changed? What have the sanctions achieved? In fact, what we don't know is what might have happened in the absence of those sanctions. There's a reasonable case to be made that absent the sanctions that we have had, there would have been more adventures, perhaps a broader adventure in Ukraine itself and beyond Donbas. We can't [indiscernible] proposition, an untested hypothesis, but I think it has to be borne in mind.

James Nixey

I think the point of sanctions – what it isn't. It isn't to try to change Vladimir Putin's mind. I don't think we can do that. It is more sending a signal that we are not happy with you for breaking the rules of the post-Cold War order, for being responsible for sending weapons into an area which have brought down an international airliner. I think it would be exceptionally naïve to believe that any kind of sanction could change his mind, which is not an argument for not doing it. If we don't do sanctions, what is the point? What is the point of foreign policy at all? It's what we're here for. It's not just, as some people say, oh you must do something. It is a valid tool, a legal tool and a civilized tool in the face of aggression.

Bridget Kendall

The US question, briefly, James.

James Sherr

Very briefly, because it's a huge subject. My own view is that the precondition for the ability of the United States to focus on what many Americans like to think are their key priorities – Asia and the Middle East – is a stable Europe, and one should not forget that.

Andrew Wood

The question of manner – it's a normal thing (and having slept in America for 40 years, I know this very well) for Europeans to say rather little and the Russians say even less, but you can hardly have a meeting with an American without them saying: it was wonderful, it was just terrific, we made great progress and you're a great person. It's instinctive. They don't actually mean it, but the Russians tend to think they mean it. So there is a point.

On a more serious note, I do think the Normandy formula has outrun its usefulness.

James Sherr

Yes.

Andrew Wood

It's too closed and it's attached to an agreement which is itself flawed. Too much responsibility, and the only responsible person there is Chancellor Merkel. Too much responsibility rests on her.

James Sherr

Exactly.

Question 10

I just wanted to clarify a bit the point in the introduction – James alluded to it earlier – the incompatible agendas and therefore it's not wise to expect any compromise to bring any solutions. I just wondered, these three major issues are essentially Syria, international terrorism and the one which hasn't been mentioned much yet is energy, and particularly the gas trade. I guess I would challenge that those are merely transactional issues. Those are the issues that would require quite serious engagement on both sides. Before compromise as a word got hijacked pretty much to mean appeasement, it could come back to its original meaning, which actually compromise is a common promise which everyone who gives is prepared to hold. Do you believe any common promise at that stage is possible between the West (however you define it) and Russia and Ukraine, in which everyone would feel more secure than they are at the moment? The downside if it doesn't happen, then energy remains unresolved, and what it means for Europe's climate targets – essentially it just means they're over, without Russian gas.

Question 11

Just a very quick question for Phil about the current relationship between Putin and Kudrin. I thought it was interesting, when I was watching one of those short, 15-minute snippets from Channel 1 TV that's beamed out onto the internet, when Putin was doing his big question-and-answer marathon, there was Kudrin in the audience. There was Irina Khakamada. She asked a question about the opposition, Kudrin, the economy – it was interesting how Putin used this, because he turned it around against Kudrin apparently. This was just a snippet. The reply was: well, your economics, being sort of liberal economics, would put us back in the 1990s. It might be rational economics and it might work in that way, but mine is from the heart and I care about the Russian people. As I watched this, I thought, to what extent is Kudrin being used here? Did Kudrin expect this to come out? So what is going on with their current relationship, because you did mention Kudrin.

Question 12

There's a very cogently argued article in the current issue of the Chatham House journal *International Affairs*, which argues that the European Union has made a mistake in acceding or sleepwalking, I think is the term he used, into a very unalloyed, uncorrected, Atlanticist view of Europe, instead of trying to embrace or give substance to a more transformative idea of Europe, which even Mr Gorbachev had argued for. I wonder if any members of the panel recognize the validity of this criticism, or is it too late to do anything about it, if they do.

Question 13

I'd like to return to the question of narrative. We've had very clear expositions of the Russian narrative about what's going on and we know our own. What's the panel think the West could do, if not to change the Russian narrative, at least make more Russians more aware that there is another way of looking at things? This seems to be absent from many of the policy proposals that are coming up.

Bridget Kendall

Thank you very much. The energy question – James, can I put that to you, because this is about whether actually compromise doesn't always have to be appeasement, and whether there is common promise to be achieved.

James Nixey

I don't see how energy is either compromise, appeasement or transactional. It is quite clear Russia and the West are mutually dependent as far as energy is concerned. We need it, they've got it, they need our money. But that is a slowly changing ballgame as a result of diversification efforts, new unconventional energy sources. Ukraine is trying to make itself less dependent as a result of reverse flows, new networks, new sources as well. For the time being, we absolutely need each other as much as the other. Phil knows far more about this, but over time it's a changing picture. But I don't see how it's compromise. You have to make a virtue out of necessity.

Bridget Kendall

Phil, to you, if you have anything to say on that, and also the question about Kudrin. Is he really being listened to by Putin or is he just being used?

Philip Hanson

[low audio] Can I skip the energy point, because I don't have very much to add to what James has said. On Kudrin-Putin, Putin is on record as saying to Kudrin on a number of occasions that there are politicians and experts, and you're an expert, not a politician. Also experts sometimes get things wrong. He's referring back to the monetization of the [indiscernible]. There's a very curious relationship but [indiscernible] personal relationship, going back to St Petersburg, but there's also an element of toleration by Putin of Kudrin's position, but no toleration on the part of Sechin, who in December said: who are these Navalnys, Kudrins and Nemtsovs? Who are they really working for? He said that on the record. It was on YouTube for a time, but it's no longer on YouTube.

James Sherr

They take them off very quickly.

Philip Hanson

So I think that Kudrin is in the centre of a tug of war, where there are elements in the existing regime who are vehemently opposed to him and others, including Putin himself, who appear to regard him as a useful source of guidance, as long as the expert is on tap, not on top.

Bridget Kendall

The question about European security architecture. One for you, Andrew.

Andrew Wood

I would find the article more easy to credit if he at any point described the nature of this Europe-wide community which would apparently exclude the United States, that has been destroyed. For any European-wide system to work, all governments and all operatives within it would have to obey a clear set of rules. The defining characteristic of the Putin style is not to obey any rules at all and to retain total freedom of action. So personally, I find it completely unconvincing. But it does represent a hope that was there when Gorbachev began his process of reform. We all wish it had been possible, but just to repeat myself, it would have to depend on the rule of accepted law throughout the space. That does not pertain, and I do not believe for a moment that is the West's fault.

James Sherr

Just to add a word on this, I cannot think of a more inappropriate time to offer such a prescription than the present. This conflict has done something many of us thought was impossible. It has remilitarized NATO in Europe. It has created far more transatlantic unity than we have seen in a very long time. There are reasons for that, that need to be considered and respected.

Bridget Kendall

And finally, narratives – obviously to you, Keir.

Keir Giles

The question, if I understand it rightly, is how do we now reach the Russian public in the way which we are suggesting needs to be done in the report. It is, of course, exceptionally challenging. I already talked about the problems for people within Russia actually accessing foreign information even if they want to. The internet came up but if you consider that foreign voices are drowned on the internet by the efforts of the Kremlin troll army, in addition to the regulation that is going on from the authorities – national broadcasters who want to reach out into Russia now face a challenge that is very different from before. Nobody has short-wave receivers anymore, even if that capability could be resurrected from Cold War days. The era of journalistic cooperation, when there were rebroadcasting licences for western national broadcasters in Russian cities, is long gone. Those licences have been cancelled, withdrawn. So the means by which you can access the Russian mass consciousness have been steadily eroded one by one. It is going to be an uphill struggle. It is going to be extremely difficult.

Bridget Kendall

Is it also true – sometimes people say to me: in the Soviet days, people used to listen to the BBC Russian Service. Of course now, as you say, there's no short-wave radio. I wondered if it's also a question of this idea of no ideology. The message that's coming across is no longer one which you can match with reality and say, this isn't like my Soviet reality, therefore the whole message is a lie. But actually, it's a much more sophisticated message which has elements of truth in it, and therefore how on earth do you counter that?

Keir Giles

Yes, the mismatch between what people see on their television screens and what they experience in real life is not as stark now, mostly because so much of the domestic news agenda – well, there is no domestic news agenda, because so little of what people see on their television screens is actually devoted to life around them. Not just national but especially provincial life. So yes, we used to hear that there was a widespread audience for the BBC Russian Service within Russia. We used to hear that a lot from the BBC Russian Service. I'm not sure there were ever any reliable statistics for who exactly was interested in what the BBC had to say outside an exceptionally narrow and not influential group of intellectual dissidents.

Now, in theory, those figures ought to be much more measurable, but now of course you have the additional problem of all of these foreign broadcasters being portrayed within Russia as dangerous foreign interventionists, and the impression mounting that to listen to them, to engage in this intellectual activity of seeking alternative explanations, is in itself treasonous.

Bridget Kendall

I should say that the BBC Russian Service had a huge spike when the annexation of Crimea happened and ever since then, so clearly some people are accessing it.

James Sherr

I don't think we should underestimate just how proud and how nationalistic the general mood of Russia now is. I see this on the part of highly educated people, many of whom live in the West, who are very proud of what Putin is doing. This is not just some kind of regime gimmick that you can address by technical means and better messaging. This is an evolution that has happened, driven by the Russian elite but it has been happening to Russia as a whole. I think that's one reason most of us are pessimistic about resolving this soon.

Bridget Kendall

I can see more hands up but we have to finish. I'm sorry I haven't been able to take more of your questions. Thank you very much for all of them, but most of all, my thanks go to the panel very much for a very stimulating discussion.