



OCTOBER 2020

The Russia policy conundrum Who blinks first?

On 28 September the Netherlands' Russia policy was debated in Parliament. This policy (updated most recently in the government's 'Russia letter' of December 2019) boils down to a twin-track approach of, on the one hand, exerting pressure through EU sanctions and NATO deterrence and, on the other hand, identifying common ground dossiers and engaging in people-to-people contacts. To date, this long-standing policy has not led to satisfactory outcomes. The debate took place against the backdrop of a Clingendael opinion poll indicating that the Dutch public has different threat perceptions of Russia.¹ Anyway, the debate was rather uneventful and lawmakers focused mostly on topical issues such as the ongoing MH17 trial, Belarus, developments around Nagorno-Karabakh and the poisoning of Alexey Navalny. It may be a source of comfort that the Netherlands is not the only country struggling with its Russia policy. The list of accusations and grievances against Russia is growing, but its leadership flatly denies all wrongdoing and does not seem much impressed by Western responses which have not resulted in a change of behaviour. Under a veneer of unity, European countries are divided on Russia and the debate often hovers between two, typically Russian, eternal questions: *kto vinovat* (who's to blame) and *chto delat'* (what to do).

Probing Russia

In the United States the environment for a Russia debate is even more challenging. Soon after the current administration took office an extensive investigation was launched into Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election that has soured domestic political relations ever since. In the past few years US policies on Russia have been marked by an ambiguous combination of tough measures and President Trump's consistently friendly rhetoric towards his

Russian counterpart. This policy similarly achieved no major breakthroughs, so in the run-up to the upcoming presidential election the question 'what to do' is once again being pondered in Washington. To contribute to this important debate, over a hundred prominent ex-officials, academics, businesspeople and experts signed an Open Letter ("It's Time to Rethink Our Russia Policy") that was published in Politico Magazine this summer.²

¹ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/what-do-you-think-are-russians-coming>.

² <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/05/open-letter-russia-policy-391434>.

The authors are ‘open-eyed’ about Russia’s negative track record, but because the stakes in the US-Russia relationship are so high they do make a plea for intensified diplomacy: ‘Too often, we wrongly consider diplomatic contacts as a reward for good behaviour, but they are about promoting our interests and delivering tough messages.’ While remaining firm on principles shared with allied countries, they argue for a ‘balanced commitment to deterrence and détente’ and want to restore US-Russian leadership to strengthen nuclear stability and promote other confidence- and security-building measures. Sanctions should remain a part of the US toolbox but must be applied more flexibly, since the current ‘steady accumulation’ of punishments reduces the incentives for Moscow to change course. The letter says that Russia’s leadership operates in a ‘deeply rooted’ strategic framework, so the US had better deal with the country ‘as it is, not as we wish it to be’.

Russia being such a toxic issue, it did not take long before a ‘forceful’ response to these proposals was formulated (“No, Now Is Not the Time for Another Russia Reset”).³ Another group of prominent former US diplomats and military and intelligence professionals said they agreed on the bad state of US-Russia relations, but thought it required ‘strong pushback’ rather than another reset. Russia, not the US, needs a change of course and ‘until Putin is ready to address his complicity in these actions [with regard to Ukraine, Syria and the harassment of political opponents], further dialogue won’t go very far’. These authors’ slogan is ‘contain and confront’ and they believe taking Russia ‘as it is’ implies acceptance of repression, kleptocracy and aggression. Therefore, sanctions must be maintained or even enhanced until ‘Putin withdraws all his forces’ from Ukraine and Georgia and stops cyberattacks and other forms of interference. Neighbouring countries’ Euro-Atlantic orientation should be bolstered ‘through military, diplomatic and economic support’. The group also rebukes

the Open Letter signatories for failing to keep faith with the Russian people, whose ‘patience with the regime runs thin’.

Eastern Europe calling

Soon this critical choir was joined by foreign policy experts and current and former officials from Eastern Europe (“Take It From Eastern Europe: Now Is Not the Time to Go Soft on Russia”).⁴ They too fail to see the need for a change in policy as ‘the United States did not consider the nuclear danger a reason to change course during a time of Cold War confrontation, and we do not see a case for doing so now’. Rather, Washington has helped to thwart Russia’s *Novorossiya* project (‘its effort to rejoin to Russia the lands in eastern and southern Ukraine originally conquered by Catherine the Great’) and deserves credit for doing so. This group has no illusions about what Russia ‘as it is’ means, and advocates upholding the post-Cold War settlement, defending and securing the Euro-Atlantic area and supporting those who pursue the goals of its further integration. They also propose to ‘engage in vigorous, well-substantiated dialogue with Russia’.

Finally, a gathering of almost 200 Ukrainian political leaders, experts and intellectuals entered the fray (‘Appeasing Vladimir Putin’s Russia Will Only Embolden It’).⁵ They argue the Open Letter’s appeal to put relations with Russia on a more constructive path ‘sounds like nothing other than a dressed-up strategy of appeasement’. Concessions only encourage the regime, as became clear when NATO’s rejection of Membership Action Plan status for Ukraine and Georgia in 2008 and the Obama administration’s subsequent reset with Moscow in 2009 ‘set the stage for armed aggression’. The group calls for more vigorous action against ‘the world’s main exporter of various threats and instability’, including support for Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO.

3 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/11/russia-reset-response-open-letter-393176>.

4 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/31/open-letter-not-time-to-go-soft-on-russia-405266>.

5 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/25/open-letter-russia-ukraine-421519>.

Divided we stand

This heated Politico debate reveals the parameters of today's discussions on Russia and the clear divide between the what-to-do and the who's-to-blame schools of thought. The Open Letter paints a realistic picture of the stalemate that has been reached in the relationship with Russia and the overall inefficacy of Western policies, even if these are well intentioned. The authors' premise is that Russian behaviour (which they rightly claim is 'deeply rooted') does not absolve the West from trying to find a way out, because the quality of this relationship does not serve our, or the world's, interests. Answering their critics ("Why We Still Need to Rethink Russia Policy: A Rebuttal"), the letter's six lead authors⁶ reiterate that engagement – they never used the term 'reset' – may be difficult but is preferable to a policy of harder pushback 'in the conviction that Russia will eventually capitulate ... accept all responsibility for the deterioration in relations and take the first steps to repair the damage'. This line of action, according to the six, minimises 'Russia's power to resist ... and continue to inflict damage'.⁷

Indeed, it seems the hard-line naysayers miss the point that Russia, whether we sympathise or not, feels beleaguered and, given its 'power to resist', is not likely to blink first – certainly not after a toughening of Western policies and accelerated Euro-Atlantic integration of Russia's neighbourhood. They tend to date the breakdown of the European security order back to 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia, but they should be aware that Moscow never wholly subscribed to this order and

reckons things started to go wrong much earlier, with the West's unsanctioned military interventions and NATO's enlargement during the 1990s and early 2000s. If you expect Russia to hand back Crimea and reverse the recognition of South-Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence as preconditions for a 'well-substantiated' dialogue, you may be in for a long wait (while anticipating a popular revolt to turn policies around sounds rather wishful). Furthermore, some of the arguments put forward are flawed. Contrary to what the Eastern Europeans say (and apart from their inflated *Novorossiya* hypothesis), the prospect of nuclear conflict *was* in fact one of the reasons for the US to engage in a process of détente and arms control with the Soviets during the Cold War. And the Ukrainian critics may believe NATO's failure to include Georgia and their own country in its Membership Action Plan has invited Russian military aggression (although this programme does not include security guarantees), but it was rather the Alliance's simultaneous, and haphazard, assurances of membership that set alarm bells ringing in Moscow.

Diplomacy, for better or worse

Today's barrage of accusations and recriminations between Russia and the West does not augur well for a meaningful dialogue. The unfolding crisis in Belarus and the Navalny case are likely to produce additional animosities that will complicate the obstacle race even further. However, as the writers of the Open Letter remind us, diplomacy is not a fair weather business among like-minded nations. In Europe, French President Macron has been the most vocal proponent of renewed engagement with Russia and has opened a bilateral diplomatic track covering various topics (albeit that the Russians seem to be playing hard to get and other European countries are rather suspicious of Macron's motives).⁸

6 Former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and former Deputy Secretary General of NATO Rose Gottemoeller; former National Security Council Senior Director for Russia Thomas Graham; former National Security Council Senior Director for European and Russian Affairs Fiona Hill; former Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman Jr.; Robert Legvold from Columbia University and former Ambassador to Russia Thomas R. Pickering

7 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/25/russia-open-letters-rebuttal-421546>.

8 On this initiative: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/macrons-overtures-towards-russia-deserve-support-not-scorn>.

Even if we conclude our competition with Russia is systemic, and not a matter of tactical differences or unfortunate misunderstandings, the case for diplomacy remains valid and should be widened beyond bilateral initiatives. Forty-five years ago, on 1 August 1975, heads of state and government of NATO and Warsaw Pact countries signed the Helsinki Final Act, a document that would have a mitigating effect on East-West relations during the latter part of the Cold War (still a period of very intense systemic competition). Despite initial criticism in the West that the process sanctified the Soviet Union's posture in Europe,⁹ political leaders ventured beyond the moral high ground because it served their interests. Today we will not reach the same level of pomp and circumstance, but we need to evoke a similar spirit.

It is to be hoped that once the dust of the US presidential election has settled, and irrespective of its outcome, Washington will muster the adulthood required for engaging Russia in a serious dialogue and for partnering with Europe in this endeavour. Although European countries' ties with Russia have a different quality and feature economic and energy dimensions that are lacking in the US-Russia relationship (which has a more geostrategic character), security issues loom large in the equation, so until further notice American involvement is crucial and will be a *sine qua non* for Moscow. This undertaking is predicated on the assumption that at the end of the day Russia, whose state of near-permanent belligerence takes a heavy toll on an ailing economy that is ill-prepared for the upcoming energy transition (to name but one challenge), has an interest in these talks as well. Here are a few considerations that may inform this avenue:

- Modesty. This process is not about proselytising the other, but about better managing a steadily antagonistic relationship. This engagement serves to avoid further isolation, which seldom has a moderating effect on behaviour;
- The conversation is one between governments on topics of mutual concern and must be forward-looking, taking into account participants' assessments of the gradual deterioration of relations;
- Both potential 'common ground' and divisive 'hard security' topics must be addressed. The compromise underpinning the Helsinki process was that, apart from European security, economic, scientific and technological cooperation (favoured by the East) and humanitarian issues (favoured by the West) would be on the agenda. Productive talks come in packages;
- Less controversial topics for a reinvigorated exchange of views may yield a modicum of mutual trust. One may think of climate change (a development with tremendous consequences for Russia) and the related fields of energy security and environmental safety, as well as Arctic governance. Even the Middle East (where Russia has repositioned itself and is about the only actor who communicates with all relevant parties) could figure on this list. Other examples include anti-terrorism, radical fundamentalism and drugs-related international crime;
- As far as security issues are concerned, nuclear arms control is first and foremost an affair between the US and Russia (by far the field's largest shareholders) which must be taken up urgently, at the very least by extending the New Start Treaty on limiting strategic offensive capabilities. But this domain cannot be separated from conventional arms control in Europe, and in the wake of nuclear diplomacy the Vienna-based discussions on confidence-building and risk-reduction measures must be re-energised too;

⁹ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>.






- However, most of the elements above hinge on the readiness to discuss in earnest Europe's 'eastern neighbourhood' or, from Moscow's perspective, the former Soviet space on Russia's southwestern border as the most sensitive bone of contention. Why? Because it is here that competition is being played out most intensely, including by military means deployed within shouting distance of each other. In this context, the West should know that:
 - Russia considers further 'Euro-Atlantic integration' of this area as an existential encroachment upon its national security and is prepared to employ virtually any means to counter this development;
 - Across this region Russia has significantly more political, economic and military leverage than Western countries and is more passionate about retaining this status than the West is about upending the ratio. This asymmetry dictates that Moscow's red lines are much darker than the West's pink lines;
 - NATO cannot formally rescind its membership guarantees to Georgia and Ukraine, but it should somehow convey the message to Russia that for the foreseeable future they will not join (if at all). No, this is not giving Moscow a veto over allied decision-making, but yes, this is respecting Article 10 of the Washington Treaty that stipulates new accessions must 'contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area', and these two will not. By implication, the credibility of NATO's Article 5 provisions on collective self-defence comes into play as well;
 - For the time being, the mutual ambition in this region should be 'peaceful coexistence' (no irony intended here). Once the competitive pressure lessens, Russia may at some point be induced to trade in its nuisance diplomacy for wielding its considerable influence for the benefit of resolving the region's protracted conflicts. Ultimately, the core issue of Ukraine (firstly the stand-off in the Donbas region), in which Russia has an instrumental role to play, needs to be settled too;
 - To improve the atmosphere, the EU and NATO could show more magnanimity than they have done so far to establish staff-to-staff contacts with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) respectively.¹⁰ After all, these organisations' memberships comprise a number of the countries involved.
- Even if the West no longer believes in spheres of influence, it should accept realities on the ground. In this sense the case of Belarus is another testing ground, and until now the West's justified moral indignation has not got in the way of a fairly restrained response, which is probably a wise thing to do. Indeed, Russia's readiness for actionable diplomacy remains a very big if and it may seem the price for engaging Moscow, both on its 'near abroad' and elsewhere, is steep, but the West's failure to embark on this road may eventually carry a much higher price.

10 The EAEU counts Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as member-states. The same countries plus Tajikistan are members of the CSTO.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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