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## **The Russia Factor in European Security: Back to the Future?**

Dr. Marie Raquel Freire<sup>2</sup>  
University of Coimbra

The post-Cold War design of European security has never been fully realized. After 1991, the European Union and post-Soviet Russia sought to rethink European security by ingraining the Helsinki collective security ideals in the new context of relations, building on the idea of the “European common home” (Gorbachev, 1989). The normative underpinning of the new security architecture in the Helsinki spirit was formed by the shared interests and concerns of all participants. The evolving security framework proved, however, to be somewhat exclusive, mainly due to the reinvention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after the demise of the Soviet bloc and the Warsaw Pact. Why did NATO remain if the Cold War bipolar division was over? And why did it engage in a policy of enlargement towards the East, if Russia was no longer “the enemy”? These were questions on Russian minds, which, to Moscow’s understanding, never got a reassuring answer.

Particularly after NATO’s first enlargement towards the East, in 1999, when former Warsaw Pact members the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined the Alliance, Russia voiced discontent. In fact, in Russia’s perspective, NATO enlargement became the major external threat, as stated clearly in main policy documents (Military Doctrine 2010, 2013), and the Alliance’s militarization policy and arms build-up was recently added as cause of concern (Military Doctrine, 2015). Despite NATO’s continued affirmation that it “poses no threat to

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Raquel Freire is associate professor in International Relations at the School of Economics of the University of Coimbra, researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of the same University and Jean Monnet Chair.

any country” (NATO, 2015), Russia has contested the proximity of military equipment and personnel to its borders: NATO and Russia seem to be locked in the classical security dilemma in the face of limited dialogue, transparency, and confidence-building measures.

The NATO-Russia Council (NRC, established in 2002) emerged as a forum for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision, and joint action (NATO, 2016), allowing Russian officials to participate in NATO meetings in a format “NATO at 29” instead of “NATO+1” (as it was the case under the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council). However, the NRC never succeeded in its role as a trust-builder. Russian officials claim the format essentially remained the “plus 1” rather than effectively becoming a joint exercise with Russia’s inclusion. Moreover, after the 2014 events in Ukraine, the NRC suspended its activities, keeping lines of communication at a minimum (i.e., at the ambassadorial level). The war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea constituted the culmination of a long period of disagreement and distrust between Russia and the West.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Russia understands current developments as expressing a “containment policy” promoted by the West, reengaging with Cold War language (Foreign Policy Concept, 2016). According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2016), “while [Russia] naturally played an increasing role in European affairs, the European countries had apprehensions about the nascent giant in the East and tried to isolate it whenever possible and prevent it from taking part in Europe’s most important affairs.”

The evolving design of European security, in an unintentional way, led to the creation of new dividing lines. NATO was a central element in the process, as it remained a strong collective defense organization, well-equipped and even taking on new out-of-area roles (NATO Strategic Concept, 1999). Russia remained outside of the Alliance, which became the main guarantor of European security, simultaneously diminishing the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), originally tailored to become the leading provider of an inclusive European security project. Parallel to NATO’s evolving doctrine and enlargement policy, the European Union also enlarged and put forward an agenda for building closer relations with its neighbors, both to the South and East. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was first received in Russia with little concern, as the format and committed resources did not seem to be sufficient to promote a fundamental change in the status quo. However, suspicion grew more intense with the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was launched in 2009 and included six former Soviet republics: Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). Russia perceived the EaP as a “counterweight to Russian influence” (Entin and Entina 2016). Moreover, the color revolutions that had taken place earlier in the post-Soviet area had put pressure on the status quo, and the new Association Agreements (AAs), including provisions for Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), offered by the EU, reinforced Moscow’s apprehension. So far, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed the new AAs with the EU, despite the fact that these three countries have territorial disputes that to a degree involve Russia, which further renders complexity to the security picture. This “escalatory spiral” (Charap & Troitskiy, 2013, cited in Casier, 2016) ultimately has led to more insecurity.

Russia’s feelings of exclusion led to the development of competing regional projects, with Russia promoting the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, originally Eurasian Customs Union) as integration fora seeking to bind states from the post-Soviet space to Russia. The formats in which these regional cooperation initiatives developed ended up exacerbating the clashing logic in West-Russia relations, in

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<sup>3</sup> The West is here understood as NATO, the United States and the European Union.

particular with the EU and Eurasian Economic Union requiring incompatible economic commitments from member states. This has created a further fissure in cooperative integration possibilities by rendering the project of a pan-European collective security system from Lisbon to Vladivostok and indivisible security (Medvedev, 2009) difficult to implement. President Medvedev's proposal for a new European Security Treaty was perceived in Moscow as allowing a reframing of issues and actors in a more inclusive way, and one in which Russia would have a voice and be heard in security matters. "Helsinki II," as the proposal came to be known, following on the OSCE steps, never saw the light of the day. These proposals clearly show that Russia never felt included, or that it had the place and recognition it deserved, in the European security system. Ukraine became the epitome of this sentiment, with the annexation of Crimea signaling the revisionist power's ultimate move to maintain the status quo.

The end result of the latest developments has been the realization that trust has never really been present in EU-Russia relations, and that the mechanisms in place within NATO and within the EU-Russia "strategic partnership" were too weak to frame relations. Despite the heavy interdependence between Russia and the West, we stand now at a dead end. Which alternatives exist to deal with the current situation?

*Back to the past?* This scenario of trying to reestablish the status quo ante does not really offer new alternatives. The "reset policy" of the Obama Administration or the "Partnership for Modernization" (PfM) with the EU are examples of attempts by the West to revitalize the relationship with Russia, yet these ad hoc initiatives failed to deliver results. "Moscow's answer to the EU's mantra, [that] 'there is no return to the business as usual for Russia' is: we do not want business as usual" (Romanova, 2016). A deeper reassessment needs to be made.

*Back to the future?* Turning to the OSCE might build on positive multilateral synergies. Many common concerns related to transnational terrorism, other illicit transnational practices, and even energy politics are already part of the OSCE agenda. However, the original aim of the OSCE (then the CSCE) included confidence-building measures. The West should repurpose these first steps in rethinking its relations with Russia. This points to the need for the joint definition of policies and actions, and joint monitoring of results – i.e. co-ownership of decisions (Casier, et al., 2016) and processes.

Some policy measures aimed at easing restrained relations could include the following. First is a recognition that security and integration mean different things to Russia and the West. At the same time it would be important to focus on areas of shared priority and where progress is easier to attain. Easily identified topics include fighting terrorism, organized crime, illicit transnational practices, and cybercrime, alongside technological cooperation, educational exchanges, sustainable development, environment, climate change, and crisis management. This means that step-by-step, pragmatic and technical cooperation might be a way forward. But it does not mean that Russia is ready to "allow the problems to be deconstructed into technical issues until there is a global consensus" (Romanova, 2016). It does mean, therefore, that structural causes need to be tackled and strong long-term solutions need to be found. Ad hoc and small scale initiatives might ease tensions, but they will not solve crystalized differentials. For these, confidence-building measures and constructive dialogue need to be built from scratch.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the evolution of the European security architecture has created feelings of exclusion, with Western institutions prevailing. This necessitates a redesign of the security architecture in a more inclusive way. This does not mean the demise of NATO,

but it does require a new multilateral format or the refashioning of the OSCE, for example, to provide new channels to discuss and decide on fundamental matters for European security. This also does not mean the demise of the Euro-Atlantic dimension of European security, but it entails thinking about innovative ways of eventually incorporating the Eurasian dimension of European security in a single (new) project. It clearly means the need to address “the cause, not the symptoms, of previous failures through negotiation over core principles and norms, and recalibrating security regimes and institutional arrangements, instead of relying on ad hoc agreements” (Averre, 2016).

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