



Chapter 3

Russia and European Great Powers: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom

By Pál Dunay

Introduction: Russian Strategic Ends

Undeniably, the Russian Federation is a Great Power and European in its self-identity. Although the larger part of its territory is in Asia, behind the Ural-mountains, eighty percent of its population lives in Europe; its capital, be it St. Petersburg or Moscow, has always been in Europe. The subjective perception of the Russian people is also European. Hence, Russia is a European Great Power. It is more difficult to tell which other states are Great Powers in Europe. This chapter arbitrarily identifies the other European Great Powers as the so-called Europe of the three, France, Germany, and the UK. It keeps the three other large and influential members of the EU – Italy, Spain, and Poland out of consideration, though we can note that Italy is largely supportive of Russia while Poland is historically hostile.

Russia's strategic objectives are easy to understand with respect to the major western European powers: to create favorable conditions for Russian foreign and economic policy. However, due to the relative and changing distribution of power in the international system, this is achieved by different means. In the 1990s Russia focused more on joint cooperative projects, building on shared interest, but in the 2000s and especially after 2007, Russia undertook concerted and coordinated efforts to weaken these key European states and divide the Euro-Atlantic world while increasing its own power.

Russian Ways and Means to Achieve its Goals

If pre-1945 history makes limited contribution to understanding the foundations of relations, it is better to focus on post-World War II history. During the Cold War, the mere fact that the three states were democracies and belonged to NATO made them Moscow's adversaries both ideologically, politically, and militarily. However, this varied as time elapsed. France was regarded a country that did not fully integrate in NATO after 1966 and hence could be regarded as a preferred partner, whereas (the Federal Republic of) Germany, following the inception of the Brandt government and the launch of *Ostpolitik* in 1969, was the best of the three in Moscow. The UK always lagged behind the other two.

However, as Russia instrumentalizes history for retroactive legitimization and manipulation more than many other states, it is difficult to regard written history as a reflection of objective reality.¹ The Russian argument that the country is surrounded by adversarial forces that want to undermine it is used for patriotic mobilization. However, the current adversarial

¹ Russia is reluctant to face the dark sides of its history and rejects that it ever committed aggression. See "Russia–Poland row over start of WW2 escalates," *BBC News*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50955273>.

feelings towards the three western European Great Powers are akin to Soviet levels and compares to attitudes Russia projects towards the United States. When we assess the Soviet legacy, the popular 1990s saying in Moscow that nothing is so uncertain as our past is apposite.

The country, disillusioned by democratic failure, absence of good governance, social tensions, and dismal economic situation was low hanging fruit to grab by forces that were ready to fix some of those problems, or at least promised to. The claim to be recognized as a Great Power did not fit into a concept and were not adequately backed by wide-ranging power.

Vladimir Putin “inherited” a country from Boris Yeltsin with a turbulent decade behind it and a weaker international standing than the new president’s role model, the Soviet Union. It is difficult to accept a new status, be it far more powerful or weaker. The change of status is a challenge in itself. When a state gains in strength it may enjoy popular support for its achievement, however adaptation is challenging as the state may perceive no limit and may not assess its situation realistically.

During the twenty years of the Putin-era the Russian Federation adopted four foreign policy concepts concerning the main western European partners of the country. Even though such public documents have their own limitations, there is one noticeable difference between them. The document adopted in 2000 mentioned four “influential European states”: Britain, Germany, Italy, and France “that represent an important resource for Russia’s defense of its national interests in European and world affairs, and for the stabilization and growth of the Russian economy.”² In the next concept of 2008, the number of specifically mentioned European countries increased to eight. The UK no longer appeared among them and got a very reserved note: “Russia would like the potential for interaction with Great Britain to be used along the same lines.”³ Such a differentiation must have been due to the UK’s generally pro-U.S. stance, its participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003, and last but not least, the Litvinenko affair in 2006. The two concepts of the 2010s represented some change in the formulation though not in the spirit: “Boosting mutually beneficial bilateral relations with Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and other European states is a considerable resource for advancing Russia’s national interests in European and world affairs, as well as for putting the Russian economy on the innovative development track. Russia would like the potential of interaction with the UK to be used similarly.”⁴ The foreign policy concept adopted in 2016 differs from the previous one, stating: “Stepping up mutually beneficial bilateral ties with the Federal Republic of Germany, the French Republic, the Italian Republic, the Kingdom of Spain and other European countries has substantial potential in terms of promoting Russia’s national interests in European and world affairs.”⁵ The UK retained its status as a prodigal son in Europe, and was not even mentioned by name.

The relations between some European Great Powers and the Russian Federation continued to oscillate dependent upon a few matters: conflicts over the political status quo in

² The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved, Regional Priorities, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

³ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, January 12, 2008, IV, Regional Priorities, accessed July 27, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>.

⁴ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013, point 60, accessed July 27, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186.

⁵ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016, point 66, accessed July 27, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

Europe, conflicts related to Russia's perceived sphere of influence (originally confined to the area of the former Soviet Union later extended beyond it), and Russian efforts to interfere with developments beyond its sphere of influence, including with effect upon European Great Powers.

The Russian Federation, as long as it did not empower itself and started to influence the political status quo in its own favor, strongly insisted that other players respect the status quo. It presents a problem however, that the status quo changes constantly due to domestic developments, the will of peoples, and states. Until 2013, NATO enlargement was at the center of Russian objections as an adverse change of political status quo. It was only then that Russia hesitantly started to object to EU enlargement at least as far as the aspiration of both former Soviet states and those in the western Balkans. Whereas in case of NATO enlargement, Russia always saw the hands of the United States, in the case of the EU, that would have been impossible to argue. The objection to EU enlargement appeared later and less forcefully. However, there is a fundamental disagreement between the approach of the Russian Federation and that of western countries, including the three European Great Powers. The West attributes such a change to the will and determination of those states that want to join NATO (or the EU) by pointing to their free will and documents in which this is enshrined, which are also signed by Moscow.⁶ Russia believes that the member-states of the alliance want to absorb new members in order to change the status quo to the detriment of Russia. Tension and antagonism emerged in 1996 when NATO's enlargement became an agenda item.

Although it is also related to the previous matter, the Russian Federation was always neuralgic whenever any western actor appeared in the so-called post-Soviet space. It regarded the post-Soviet space as an area of privileged interests where other actors should not be actively present. Even so far as steps offering some status in western organizations was objectionable. Memorably, President Putin strongly objected to the involvement of Georgia and Ukraine in the so-called membership action plan at the NATO summit of 2008 in Bucharest.⁷ In spite of the fact that the alliance remained divided on the matter, and short of consensus, there was no realistic chance to extend the program to the two former Soviet republics, this was regarded as a direct threat to Russia's *primus inter pares* position.

Perceptions, Opportunities, and Challenges

Germany, France, and several other NATO member-states did not want to provoke Russia, and so, with some exaggeration, adopted the position of "Russia firsters."⁸ The NATO aspiration of Georgia was followed by war between Tbilisi and Moscow and resulted in declaring Abkhazia

⁶ "We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in this regard." Lisbon Declaration on a common and comprehensive security model for Europe for the twenty-first century, point 7. OSCE Lisbon Summit, 1996, Lisbon Document, accessed July 25 2020, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/0/39539.pdf>.

⁷ The full text of the Russian president's speech at the NATO – Russia Council meeting following the NATO summit meeting in Bucharest in April 2008 is not available. However, a summary by a Ukrainian news agency clearly states: "Russia's pro-Kremlin mass media lauded the recent NATO decision in Bucharest to delay issuing Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Ukraine and Georgia, hailing it as a victory", Text of Putin's speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 2 April 2008), April 18, 2008, <https://www.unian.info/world/110340-analysis-russia-prepares-for-lengthy-battle-over-ukraine.html>.

⁸ The term "Russia firsters" dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Clinton administration. Following the end of 1991 some experts on the Soviet Union were of the view that the post-Soviet space should be seen through the interests of Moscow. The best-known American who belonged to this category was Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.

and South Ossetia as independent states. Although the change has only been recognized by a few proxies of Russia, the change of the status quo holds. France, as the EU's presidency country, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the country's president, largely contributed to conflict termination and agreement upon a cease-fire between the parties that was appreciated by Russia. The reaction of the EU remained measured among others due to the so-called Tagliavini report that attributed the beginning of hostilities to Georgia although following massive and serial provocations by Russia. With this, EU Europe returned to engagement with Russia under the assumption that this was a detour rather than the reflection of a new era in Russian politics. This matter also divided the three western European Great Powers. Germany and France were more willing to accept that Russia was provoked by Georgia and its approach to NATO while the UK went with those states, including the U.S. and Poland, that attributed lastingly aggressive intentions to Russia and a strong will to establish itself as a regional hegemon.

Russia's number one trading partner is the European Union and remained so following Brexit. The total value of the trade in goods between the twenty-eight members of the EU and the Russian Federation was €232 billion with a surplus of €57 billion on the side of Russia.⁹ The surplus is essential for Russia as this large amount can be used freely according to the country's priorities. Russia is trading overall ten times more with the EU than it does with the United States.¹⁰ It is a high-volume interdependent relationship that maintains Russia's engagement in Europe. Among the EU member-states in 2019, Germany was the number one trade partner of Russia in both imports and exports, whereas France was sixth in Russian imports and fifth in Russian exports, while the UK ranked just ahead of France during its last year in the EU.¹¹ Total trade is down from 2012 when it reached €322 billion. Russia is glad to portray this as a consequence of western economic sanctions. However, nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, the massive decline of the price of oil plays a much larger role in this. When oil represents a large share in Russian exports it makes a major difference whether a barrel of crude oil is USD \$147, \$35, or \$60. Furthermore, the Russian so-called counter-sanctions reduced trade turn-over significantly. Compared with this, the value of U.S. imports was USD \$22.28 billion and exports USD \$5.79 billion, i.e., the total trade in goods equaled USD \$28.07 billion. If we look at investment, again the high level of interconnection is noticeable between EU Europe and Russia. The number of German, French, and UK companies present in Russia has declined since the beginning of Russian aggression, in the case of Germany from 5,700 in 2013, to a bit more than 4,000 in 2019, while the number of French companies is approximately 500. The contraction of investment (and the accompanying constraints on access to high technology) hurts Russia far more than the trade sanctions.

More recently, the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines have created problems in transatlantic relations. It is a sufficiently complex matter with a variety of intersecting economic and political interests. If we create a structure separating various actors and their

⁹ European Commission, "Countries and Regions: Russia," April 22, 2020, accessed July 24, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>.

¹⁰ "Volume of U.S. import of trade goods from Russia from 1992 to 2019," accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/187732/volume-of-us-imports-of-trade-goods-from-russia-since-1992/> and "Volume of U.S. export of trade goods to Russia from 1992 to 2019," accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/186567/volume-of-us-exports-of-trade-goods-to-russia-since-1992/>.

¹¹ "Eurostat, Russia – EU international trade in goods statistics," March 2020, accessed July 25, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Russia-EU_trade_in_goods_statistics#Trade_with_Russia_by_Member_State and Daniel Workman, "Russia's Top Trading Partners, March 16, 2020," accessed July 25, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

interests and also differentiate between genuine interests and discursive messages it may be easier to summarize the complex case.

The main actors are the Russian Federation, which would like to sell more gas to Europe at a competitive price, and Germany, which knows that gas will remain a major component of the so-called energy mirror. (Germany seeks to break its dependence on both coal and nuclear energy in the next decade or two.) Other European states may also benefit from an alternative and complementary source of supply by growing access to gas. This contributes to security of supply.

There are states that have contrary interests, for example states that would like to sell gas from their own territory and have concluded that their gas supply will not be competitive, including, among others, the United States. There are states that do not want to lose (partially or fully) the transit fee they benefit from (irrespective whether they are willing to purchase Russian gas in the future or not). Poland is in the latter category, not wanting to buy Russian gas but glad to realize income from the transit fee and has regularly complained it was too low. The total transit fee following a new agreement between *Gazprom* and Poland in May 2020 is not clear although the capacity of the Yamal pipeline of 32bcm is only partly booked.

When we look beyond the above, we see various attempts to support the counter-interests by ideological consideration, unfounded fear, and so-called “factoids.” Ideological considerations include the securitization of the matter by emphasizing that with growing dependence of Western Europe on Russian gas supply to the former will depend upon the latter. I do not intend to speculate whether Russia would be willing to create dependency or not. I prefer focusing on facts and raise the question: Can Russia create such dependence or not? My response is in the negative for the following reasons. First, the world’s gas market has changed. It is nearly as global as the oil market. As Europe has an abundant number of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals and an increasingly dense network of so-called interconnectors, it is largely impossible to create a monopolistic dependency that can be used for blackmail. Second, Russia enjoys a significant trade surplus in its relations with the EU, primarily due to oil and gas exports.¹² Third, the share of Russian gas in German imports may create interdependence, but hardly a dependent situation bearing in mind Russia’s import needs, reliance on German investment, and in many areas, access to western technology.

The investment is significantly delayed due to a variety of problems. Legal concerns in the European Union ended up reducing *Gazprom*’s share in the company that realizes the investment to fifty percent so that it would not have majority stake in the company. It took the Danish authorities three years to give permission for the pipeline to cross its territorial waters. The U.S. introduced sanctions against companies that participate in the investment. At that juncture one of the partners, a company registered in Switzerland withdrew from the project due to the following factors: most of its services have already been paid and hence the financial loss it suffered was affordable, it was a publicly-traded company registered on the New York Stock Exchange, and understandably wanted to avoid suffering a decrease in its share value. The technology to fill in the gap thus required further technological development of the Russian pipe-laying ship (*Akademik Cherskiy*). Overall, the delay may be unpredictably long, especially if no company is ready to certify the pipeline when it is completed due to their fear of so-called secondary sanctions.

¹² In the value of the total export of goods, Russian oil and gas represent approximately thirty-eight percent (twenty-six and twelve percent, respectively). See TradingEconomics, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/exports>.

The consequence of this situation means that Russia will have to increase its transit through Ukrainian territory that provides Kyiv with economic benefits under the transit agreement achieved between the two states in the last minutes of 2019 (facilitated by the EU). There is a looming danger that the U.S. would introduce sanctions on anyone buying gas from Nord Stream 2. It remains to be seen whether there is a perceived U.S. interest to further alienate its European allies, (and not only Germany) or if Washington will stop short of such an abrupt step. Germany kept a low profile in the matter waiting for a favorable change in Washington and the EU reforms to norms that do not support secondary sanctions. It is difficult to imagine that Germany and the EU as a whole would support U.S. policies in areas, which are high on the priority list of the latter. The Biden administration continues U.S. opposition to Nord Stream 2, and the Navalny case increases pressure for further sanctions.

Attributing economic problems to western sanctions aims to generate the rally around the flag effect in Russia. In fact, it worked for some time, for around four years, until 2018. It was then that a larger part of the population noticed Russia's "*aggrandizement*" aspirations come with a price tag and that is paid by the people.

The Russian Federation carried out highly objectionable activities that are systematically rejected by western European democracies respectful of a norm-based international order. These activities include spreading fake news about partner-states, interfering in the elections of democratic states, and extra-judicial killings in other countries. These activities have largely contributed to the deterioration of relations and there is no reason to assume that the Russian leadership has drawn the correct conclusion and plans to stop the activities it carried out for decades and most intensively since its self-declared Great Power re-emergence.

Responses need to be timely in order to have an impact among the population, be backed by convincing facts which counter the fake information without compromising the sources when they are not public, and should aim to prevent Russia from adapting its communication strategy to be more effective.

Russia also uses its media as front organizations for carrying out political missions. There were several allegations concerning Russian interference in elections and referenda in major western democracies. Although the U.S. presidential election of 2016 gained the most attention, both the French presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK alerted the two countries. In France, the Rally National or *Rassemblement national* (formerly Front National) and its candidate, Marine Le Pen was quite openly supported by Moscow. When Vladimir Putin visited France in 2017, he had to suffer public humiliation. President Macron refused to answer a question from RT, stating that the media outlet was not a news organization and was interfering with the French elections when actively supported Marine Le Pen. Putin stood next to Macron without any facial expression, stone faced in accordance with the experience of a seasoned politician and a KGB officer. In the UK, the question emerged as to whether Russia interfered with the June 2016 Brexit referendum. There is no doubt that Russia has been interested in weakening western unity, including alliances and integrations, like NATO and the EU. The departure of one of the Great Powers from the EU fit into this pattern well. However, motivation cannot be regarded as evidence. The report published by the UK remained vague, at least as far as its publicly available part. It is understandable for a variety of reasons, most importantly the protection of non-public sources but also the counter-interest of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to present an image that Russia influenced the referendum in favor of Brexit. Andrei Kelin, the Russian ambassador to the UK, commented upon the report by saying that the name of Russia could be replaced by that of any other country there. In Germany, Russian interference with elections is indirect as the center of the political spectrum is well-established and the parties on

the flanks can only “color” the political picture. Still, Russia benefits from the sympathy of both the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and *Die Linke* parties that often pronounce views that Russia would share (anti-immigration, countering the increase of military spending, etc.). Overall, Russia alarmed the West with its carrying out such activities in a better organized and more than ever clandestine manner.

The most brutal Russian violation of the sovereignty of states, including in western Europe, is the attempted killing of persons on their territory. Such extra-judicial executions were part of Soviet practice carried out by proxies (Bulgaria and the GDR) in the 1960s and 1970s. Russia returned to it after a long break in the 21st century. The targets in the UK and in Germany, for example, have been Russian defectors or people who challenged Russian power previously. The two highest profile cases occurred in the UK, with the Litvinenko case of 2006 and the Skripal case of 2018. In the former case, a Russian agent named Andrey Lugovoy killed Mr Litvinenko by using polonium-210 (and has been member of the Russian *Duma* since 2007). In the latter an attempt was made to kill Sergey Skripal and his daughter by a chemical, Novichok. In this case, the attempt remained unsuccessful and the three perpetrators of Russian defense intelligence were identified, made public and communicated also through government channels. Memorably, then British Prime Minister Theresa May informed President Putin at the G-20 summit in Osaka about the name of the third perpetrator. This meant the UK had so solid and unquestionable evidence that it could be officially communicated without a doubt. Both cases gained high profile attention and had chilling effects in the relations between Russia and the UK and beyond. The UK succeeded to generate wide-ranging support, and diplomatic reaction followed, including the closing of consulates, the expulsion of Russian diplomats and lowering the size of the Russian diplomatic mission to NATO.

In 2019, when a Russian agent in Berlin carried out the execution of a Georgian person who had fought against Russian forces in Chechnya, it was managed very differently. The criminal process reached the phase of indictment ten months later; two Russian diplomats faced expulsion, and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas vaguely referred to further consequences in the future.¹³ It is remarkable how little public attention was paid to this matter, unlike the successful and attempted assassinations carried out in the United Kingdom. It has demonstrated that neither Germany nor Russia was interested in creating a situation where the matter would get politicized on a high level and majorly influence general relations. Germany expelled two Russian diplomats from the country’s embassy in Berlin and the entire matter has been kept out of the attention of the public to the greatest extent possible. One would be tempted to conclude it was managed as a “family affair.” It is important to conclude that even in case of the most appalling violations of non-interference it is up to the parties how they are willing to manage such an affair. Do they intend to burden the relations with high profile, public collision or instead avoid it? There may be reasons for both. The former interferes with the relations and may take the parties (and their allies) hostage to react, but clearly expresses that such actions are found fully unacceptable. The latter affects relations less and hence lets the parties retain their flexibility as far as their relations overall.

¹³ “Bundesanwaltschaft geht von Auftragsmord der russischen Regierung aus,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 18, 2020, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/mordangeorgierbundesanwaltschaft-geht-von-auftragsmord-aus-16820831.html>.

Implications and Recommendations

In sum, many activities of the Russian Federation during the last decade contributed to the deterioration of the relations between Moscow and the West. If one tries to play the role of the devil's advocate, the question emerges whether there can be a rational explanation for this and whether a cost-benefit analysis would show it was worth doing. Russian explanations would argue that its readiness to accept the junior partner status in the first half of the 1990s was not honored, its interests were not respected, and the West took advantage of its cooperative attitude. The return to a realist Great Power political agenda is in compensation for the former. Russia is respected internationally, even if not liked. It is back at the table of the high and mighty.

It is important to contemplate the domestic repercussions of Russia's international standing. The Russian leadership used its Great Power standing as a selling point. The population of the country did not become more affluent through those actions but could be proud to live in a state whose views are listened to and respected. What Moscow officials do not mention is the contribution of such "externalization" of Russia's problem to the legitimacy of the Putin regime and postponement of the realization that the sources of shortcomings are domestic at their roots. Russia, without aspiring to be a multi-dimensional Great Power where its strengths extend to more than a few select spheres, will not be able to find the place it aspires in the international system.

The United States has been struggling with its role in the international system in the Post-Cold War era, especially after the unipolar moment ended. Washington tried to combine the role of a "normal" nation-state with that of the beacon of the international system but has rarely succeeded in finding a balance. Most European countries would like to find a partner in Washington that leads by example. With the inauguration of the Biden administration in January 2021, a window of opportunity has opened. The U.S. may return to its leadership role ("America is back"), taking into account the interests of its European partners, but it is unrealistic to expect that the views will be in full concord. The U.S. and western Europe will continue to use a different mix of compellence and diplomatic persuasion with Russia. A tougher Russian response towards western Europe may bring the U.S. and its European partners closer together and this is not in Moscow's interest.

Transatlantic relations survived ups and down in their more than seven decades of history. Its main actors have objective reasons to see their relations with Russia differently. Intensive communication, exchange of views, cooperation, and mutual readiness to understand the views of each other proved essential sources of success most of the time. In the last two decades the insufficient understanding of the complementary efforts taken by various western actors to find the right balance between containing and accommodating Russia often contributed to troubles. It takes a complex and nuanced understanding of international relations to find common strategic interest in the fog of world politics. The conditionality and power politics of the U.S. can only avoid Scylla and Charybdis if complemented by interaction, cooperation and economic interdependence, and understanding of those interests among their main western European powers. The victory of western politics in the end of the Cold War was preconditioned by the coexistence of those factors. It requires actors and leaders who understand this and are ready to back their actions by mutual concessions.

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