

Preface: Russia matters

To many Western observers, Russia and the Russians defy logic. Russia appears as a country of incongruity, and the actions and decisions of its leaders can seem irrational, whether they be about providing succour and support for the leaderships of Iran or Syria when it would appear more logical for Russia's development to improve partnership with the West, or holding the Winter Olympic Games in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

This 'defying of logic' tends to be emphasised by the high drama, even epic nature of the Russian story. Against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the widespread hope for a more democratic Russia and partnership with the West, a struggle has played out between heroes and villains, saints and sinners, embellished by extraordinarily wealthy oligarchs and the Committee of State Security (KGB), protesting liberals against established authorities, and of conspiracy theories, scandals, spies and war.¹

At the same time, as one American observer has stated, the West has a 'painfully uneven track record of interpreting, let alone navigating developments in Russia during the Putin era'.² This is true: Western observers often fail to 'get Russia right',³ and there is a persistent sense of surprise as expectations are confounded and the Russian leadership keeps the West guessing about its intentions and actions.

This can be attributed – partly – to the point that Russia is a 'museum of contradictions'.⁴ Observers must navigate the ambiguity created by simultaneous Russian strength and weakness, tradition and novelty, wealth and poverty, freedom and restrictions: all the complications and complexity with which Russia has emerged – with some difficulty – from the rubble of the USSR. They must also try to grasp the balance and implications of a formal state with an informal style of leadership.⁵

These arguments are valid. Russia is difficult to understand, let alone 'get right'. But Western observers often get Russia wrong because of the way they approach it. Many apparent contradictions are instead paradoxes: the seemingly absurd or self-contradictory to a Western eye may be consistent if pursued through Russian logic. For this to be understood, however, expertise is required: a sophisticated, empathetic understanding of Russia and how it works. Yet since the end of the Cold War there has been a degradation of expertise, and the growth of an 'enormous foundation of ignorance' about Russia in the West.⁶

When attention is paid to Russia, it often suffers from a strong ethnocentrism – the imposition of Western national points of reference onto Russia – combined with a sense of the progressive march of history.⁷ These problems emerge from a long debate about Russia's nature, about whether it is European or Asian; or whether Russia is 'a part of Europe or apart from it'.⁸ As historians have pointed out, Russia serves to catalyse Western hopes and fears, aspirations and frustrations for the development of mankind. Indeed, it catalyses the broader antithesis of West and East, civilisation and barbarism.⁹ Many in the Western political community hoped that the USSR's collapse validated the 'end of history' argument, the victory of Liberalism, and marked the beginning of Russia's progressive transition to democracy and return to the Western family of nations. One Western commentator has suggested that a 'single narrative about Russia has prevailed': 'openly or subconsciously, since 1991, Western leaders have acted on the assumption that Russia is a flawed Western country', one that, given Russia's forward progress, would sooner or later join the Western club.¹⁰

Consequently, Western observers often find themselves bound by 'Russian contradictions' of their own making, and their discussion about Russia has become lost in a series of confusing mazes and dead ends. Russia has appeared simultaneously to be resurgent and declining, a partner and a competitor; there is confusion over the Russian leadership, particularly whether Putin's leadership is strong and likely to last for a long time, or weak and likely to come to an end soon. Russia becomes abstracted to 'Russia', framed by Western points of reference – with the result that the Western officials and observers often get Russia wrong.

Getting Russia 'right', however, matters. It matters because of Russia's status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, its great natural resource wealth, and its evolving military capability (particularly its nuclear weapons). This array of

assets is accentuated by Russia's great size, which makes it a ubiquitous player in regions across the world in Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Asia-Pacific and the Arctic, and by the efforts of the Russian leadership to turn Russia into an 'indispensable partner', one without whose participation major international questions, from conflict management and arms control to energy security and the architecture of international relations, cannot be addressed. To this end, the Russian leadership is investing vast resources to address its many internal problems and to retool its military, and to reach out across the world to establish or reinvigorate relationships with states and multilateral organisations from the Asia-Pacific region to Latin America.

Russia matters specifically to the West because since the mid 1990s, it has become a major partner, both as an energy supplier to the EU and for Western businesses. Additionally, as often stated by senior Western leaders, the West and Russia face many common problems and questions, from international terrorism to conflict resolution and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Given its political influence and geographical location, Russia has an important role to play in many of the regional political and security questions that the West faces.

To be sure, there are serious long-term problems in Russia, including a struggling economy that relies on natural resources exports and demographic problems. Some critics argue that Russia is in strategic decline and that Russia's strategic outlook to 2050 is a negative one. And some suggest that the numerous disagreements between the West and Russia mean that the West should look elsewhere to develop partnerships to address solutions to international problems. Russia, the argument goes, does not matter because it does not act like a partner, nor does it demand prioritisation as a problem: it is merely a declining regional power.

These objections, though debatable, are important. But they miss the point. It is a one-eyed strategic outlook that only addresses the distant (and unpredictable) future: strategy is a dialogue with the current context and the immediate future.¹¹ And it is in this regard that Russia matters to Western policy-makers, given the scale of its assets and the explicit intentions of its leadership.¹² This is all the more true for the EU and NATO and many of their member states, given that they neighbour Russia.

Russia matters whether it is a partner, or, as seems more likely, a competitor. Indeed, the war in Ukraine that began in 2014 has illustrated that Russia matters because of the influence it wields

on Euro-Atlantic security: senior NATO officials suggested that it has ‘created a new strategic reality in Europe’, and that Russia is speaking and behaving ‘not as a partner but as an adversary’.¹³ Philip Breedlove, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe, suggested that ‘Russia has managed to use its military, political and economic forces to fundamentally destabilise a European nation and change internationally recognised borders by illegally annexing Crimea’. The sudden shift, Breedlove suggested, ‘carries significant implications for the future and seriously challenges how Europe has developed its stability and security since the end of the Cold War’.¹⁴

For the foreseeable future, therefore, Russia matters more to the West than any other single international question, not least because it weaves together questions of the evolution of wider international affairs, as well as specific issues of security, energy and economics. Indeed, it raises many wider questions about the end of the Cold War (and perhaps the post-Cold War) eras, the nature of Europe in the twenty-first century and how the West – including NATO and the EU – approaches the wider world. A better understanding of how Russia approaches international questions and how it is evolving domestically is necessary. This book takes a step in this direction by exploring Western interpretations of Russia and why many in the West, particularly in political and media circles, so often ‘get Russia wrong’ – and by exploring ways of how to ‘get it right’.

Notes

- 1 R. Braithwaite, *Across the Moscow River: The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Yale University Press, 2002).
- 2 A. Weiss, ‘Winter has come’, *Democracy*, 30 (Fall 2013), www.democracyjournal.org/30/winter-has-come.php?page=all. All links in the text were checked 3–7 August 2015.
- 3 D. Trenin, *Getting Russia Right* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2007).
- 4 J. Sherr, ‘Russia: managing contradictions’, in R. Niblett (ed.) *America and a Changed World. A Question of Leadership* (London: Chatham House and Wiley/Blackwell, 2010), p. 162.
- 5 R. Sakwa, ‘Can Putinism solve its contradictions?’, *OpenDemocracy* (27 December 2013), www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/richard-sakwal-can-putinism-solve-its-contradictions.
- 6 Personal correspondence with State Department official, September 2013.

- 7 K. Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931).
- 8 V. Baranovsky, 'Russia: a part of Europe or apart from Europe?', *International Affairs*, 76:3 (2000), pp. 443–458.
- 9 M. Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (London: Belknap Press, 2000); J. Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).
- 10 A. Applebaum, 'A need to contain Russia', *Washington Post* (21 March 2014).
- 11 H. Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 12 J.W. Parker and M. Kofman, *Russia Still Matters: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities for the Obama Administration*, INSS Paper SF-280 (Washington, DC: National Defence University, March 2013), <http://inss.dodlive.mil/2013/03/01/strategic-forum-280/>.
- 13 A. Vershbow, 'A new strategic reality in Europe', NATO (4 April 2014), www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_108889.htm; Anders Fogh Rasmussen, 'De-escalations starts on the ground', NATO (13 April 2014), www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_109102.htm.
- 14 P. Breedlove, 'The meaning of Russia's military campaign against Russia', *Wall Street Journal* (16 July 2014).