Conclusion: reinterpreting Russia in the twenty-first century

The war in Ukraine has served to refocus Western political attention on Russia through the lens of the potential threat it poses to the West: Breedlove is one of many senior officials who have emphasised concerns that a ‘revanchist’ and aggressive Russia poses a challenge that is ‘global, not regional, and enduring, not temporary’.¹ British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond stated that the UK’s ‘security and that of our neighbours in Eastern Europe is menaced by President Putin’s flagrant disregard for international law in Ukraine’, even that Russia was the number one threat to the UK. Indeed, Hammond’s remarks are illuminating about how Russia has come to be seen in the West, and are worth citing at length:

Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Eastern Ukraine are both attacks on the international rules-based system. In the place of partnership, Russia has chosen the role of strategic competitor … we will maintain our efforts to ensure that the EU remains resolute, robust, united and aligned with the US in the face of this challenge. Because this isn’t just about Ukraine, it’s about Russia and its future intentions, about its apparent aspiration to exercise control over the former Soviet republics which were liberated by the collapse of the USSR in 1989 – an event we celebrate, but which President Putin describes as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.²

These observations – an illustrative blend of how the West and Russia disagree, have differing conceptualisations of history and international affairs, and repetitive but misleading clichés about Russia – show how the war has exposed and intensified two important sets of questions that run through this book. First, it has exposed, again, a set of fundamental disagreements between Russia and the West, one that has become increasingly systemic since the mid 2000s. That Russia and the West see the post-Cold War history of European security in very different – and increasingly
diametrically opposed – terms is likely to render their positions unacceptable to each other, and truly common and shared interests few and far between. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has highlighted conflicts of interest and friction in values, and emphasised a sense of Russian competition with the West. As one Russian observer put it, in 2014, Russia ‘broke out of the post-Cold War order and openly challenged the U.S.-led system’. The rivalry between Russia and the West, he suggested, is ‘likely to endure for years’.3

While there are lobbies in the West who seek a return to a more positive relationship with Russia, and some have suggested that the war in Syria may offer grounds for some form of cooperation between the West and Russia in their opposition to Islamic State, this has yet to flower. Indeed, in many ways, Russia’s military deployment and air campaign in Syria has also emphasised the themes running through the book – the sense of surprise in the West when the Russians acted, and the deep disagreements over the nature of the situation in Syria, the root causes and the possible solutions. Moreover, the tensions between the West and Russia appear likely to continue given first the potential for NATO’s Warsaw summit, scheduled for July 2016, to emphasise the differences and disagreements between the alliance and Russia, such as enlargement (Montenegro will join), missile defence, and NATO’s responses to the war in Ukraine, such as the Readiness Action Plan, and the possibility to enhance partnership measures with states in the post-Soviet space – all of which tread hard on long-term, even chronic, tensions between the West and Russia. Western leaders should not be surprised if Moscow states its disagreement with such measures and statements in vivid terms.

Second, it has exposed problems of how the West has interpreted Russia since the end of the Cold War. The sense of surprise occasioned by the Russian annexation of Crimea, as discussed in Chapter 1, is only underlined by the sense of novelty: that events in 2014 have marked a significant turn, the end of the ‘post-Cold War era’, and that it is only now that the differences in interest and values have become pertinent. NATO officials have suggested that ‘In the course of just a few weeks Russia clearly emerged as a revisionist power’.4 Other senior Western officials and observers suggest that ‘we now know that’ the hoped-for convergence between Russia and the West will not happen while Putin is in charge, that Putin is ‘challenging the rules-based order that has kept the continent’s peace’.5 This indicates that important signals that have been increasingly visible for years – at least since 2007 – have been either
missed or ignored, even as the sense of dissonance between Russia and the West became more pronounced.

The optimism of the ‘end of history’ era and the possibility of Russia’s progress towards Western-style democracy and partnership with the West has proven remarkably resilient, if increasingly reflexive and automatic. This was reflected in the UK’s House of Lords report on EU–Russia relations published in February 2015. ‘For too long’, it noted, ‘the EU’s relationship with Russia has been based on the optimistic premise that Russia has been on a trajectory towards becoming a democratic “European” country’. Yet if the refrain that the West ‘must see Russia as it is, rather than as the West would like it to be’ has been often, even yearly, repeated since the mid 2000s, NATO and many of its member states have largely avoided systematically updating their thinking about Russia and shaping a sophisticated Russia policy – at least until the high drama of 2014. But recalibrating at a time of crisis is hardly likely to provide sober evaluation.

Furthermore, Hammond’s comment shows the gaps in perspectives about the post-Cold War era. The frame of reference to describe the relationship is often depicted in terms of a ‘return’ to a Cold War style confrontation between the West and Russia, a sense of ‘déjà vu’, emphasised by dogmatic assertions of Putin’s attempts to rebuild the USSR. This indicates the linear understanding of Russia’s development towards democracy and partnership (or retrogressive, back to the USSR) that has dominated Western understandings of Russia since the early 1990s.

One cause of this is that, until 2014, Russia had largely disappeared from the Western political map. In consequence, there has been a long-term reduction in coordinated specialist capacity to understand Russia, particularly in Western governments and international organisations. Specialist expertise about Russia still exists, but it has diminished as a result of changing priorities and budget cutbacks, especially regarding specific sectors such as the Russian military and security sectors and the economy.

If the wars in Ukraine and Syria have illuminated these limitations, and there have been some hasty attempts to address them, the House of Lords report did not see ‘evidence that this uplift is part of a long-term rebuilding of deep knowledge of the political and local context in Russia and the region’, a point also emphasised by the discussion in the USA about Russia expertise at the end of 2015. The prolonged discussion has resulted in several reasons for this, including that experts do exist, but that there is a reluctance or
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inability to hire them, even that a conscious choice has been made at the highest levels that such expertise does not need to be sustained. Whatever the underlying reason, given the pressing nature of other priorities, both domestic and elsewhere in the world, and the likely ongoing nature of budget cuts or limits, it appears unlikely that, for the foreseeable future at least, significant additional resources will be allocated to Russia studies.

But a simple increase in resources and the number of analysts will not necessarily facilitate the correction of analytical mistakes and recognition of warning signs or the better interpretation of Russia and the reduction of surprise in the West about it. There is a need to reassess the conceptual approach. Since 2004, mainstream Western thinking about Russia has been too focused on the ‘regime question’ and the trajectory of Russia’s democracy and transition towards partnership with the West, progressively narrowing and becoming simplified to an increasingly intense focus on Vladimir Putin, his popularity ratings (including using this as an explanatory tool for understanding Russian foreign policy) and civil society and the liberal or radical elements of the anti-Putin non-systemic opposition.

While in different ways these merit attention, too much focus on them distorts our understanding of Russia. This distortion is emphasised by a screen of symbolic and often imprecise language that has contributed to an increasing abstract version of Russia, one that has become further blurred by the extravagant but usually misleading use of analogies, and increasingly partisan and emotional. The frequent references to the Cold War serves to distort understanding of Russia, the references to mid-twentieth-century Nazi Germany, so evident in the wake of the war in Ukraine, even more. They distort the debate by short-circuiting it, silencing dissent through guilt by association, and anchoring the discussion to an increasingly mythical and politicised twentieth century, and facilitating easy assumptions about eternal, ‘unchanging’ and expansive Russia. In political terms, this is not ‘déjà vu’, but mental arthritis, and it amplifies the polemic about Russia. In practical terms, it means preparing for a replay of the last war.

But much has changed in the West, in Russia and in the relationship, and a substantial transformation has taken place in the European institutional architecture since 1991. Much of the Western hope for partnership has been based on statements of faith rather than substantive assessment of Russian goals, and they have fallen foul of divergent understandings of post-Cold
War developments, diverging priorities and definitions of how to approach these priorities – and, in consequence, real disagreements about European security and international affairs. The result is that, rather than moving on together, the West and Russia have moved on in different directions, a trend emphasised by a sense of dual – and increasingly contradictory – histories and diverging concepts through which the world is understood. The mainstream Western interpretation of Russia, however, has struggled to move on from the framework approach set in the early 1990s, the linear trajectory depicting Russia as either in transition to the West or heading back to the USSR. Though this approach has produced some fine work, it is also the approach that has underpinned the persistence of the view of ‘Russia the West would like to see’ at the expense of the Russia ‘as it is’ – and therefore at the root of the persistent sense of surprise about Russia.

To be sure, there is widespread criticism of Putin, but underpinning this is a persistent hope that he will change or that his departure will be the instigator of systemic change. Of course, there are likely to be retirements of senior personnel – and one day, one way or another, Putin himself will go. But there is already a long track record of failed predictions along these lines, particularly of Putin’s departure, and care will need to be taken to avoid broken clock analysis, of repeating it until simply being right by chance and not understanding the reasons for or the implications of the change. Furthermore, if there is recognition that Russia’s democratic trajectory is no longer a useful prism for understanding it, and that Russia is ‘increasingly defining itself as separate from, and as a rival to, the EU’, and that its ‘Eurasian identity has come to the fore and … the model of European “tutelage” of Russia is no longer feasible’, correcting the course will prove more difficult.

Indeed, much of the discussion, even in reports that acknowledge this, tends still to focus on the decline in Russia in standards of democracy, corruption and rule of law – in effect, on the often repeated criticisms of ‘Putin’s Russia’ and the assertions that Russia is not monolithic but diverse, including many who regard the West favourably. This may, in parts, be true, but it also implicitly imports the convergence with Europe and transition after Putin approach. It is a continuation of optimistic hope, rather than sober analysis of the diversity within Russia, including many who do not favourably regard the West.

Shaping a more sophisticated understanding of Russia and how it is evolving will require drawing some lessons from the
methods that were used to understand the USSR. This is not to suggest a re-invigoration of Soviet studies to understand a backward-looking Russia, but to propose a constructive reflection on what has gone before, what has been useful and what has not. The continued existence of problems that were identified over a decade ago, for instance, should be cause for concern. Leo Labedz’s assertion in the 1980s that there is far too much non-scholarly, melodramatic discussion of Soviet politics, one in which observers simplify, stereotype and mythologise through interpretative flights of imagination and the use of historical metaphors, and in which the key to Soviet politics was sought in the writings of avowed enemies of the regime, echoes loud today in the approach to Russian politics. The result, now, as then, leads both more to emotionally exaggerated fiction than sober analysis, and to the wrong frames of reference for the bases of Russian thinking, politics and policy. The war in Ukraine has only heightened this sense of partisanship and the static nature of the debate about Russia in entrenched positions.

Second, a classical area studies approach is one of the skills that must be relearned. Again, this is not to suggest the adoption of some form of Kremlinology – an art that has become widely (mis) understood as the attempt to interpret the order of protocol on the Mausoleum. (The modern version of which was visible when Putin ‘disappeared’ from public view for a few days in March 2015, and commentators began to pore over his clothing, comparing the ties he was wearing as evidence that photos were being faked.) Instead, it is the serious multi-disciplinary study of Russia that builds an empathetic understanding of Russian history, society and politics, and includes accurate linguistic and conceptual interpretation.

An important element of area studies is also a more sophisticated understanding of the wider Russian political landscape and political culture. This includes an interest in and careful observation of the idiosyncrasies and minutiae that make Russian politics what it is, a deeper knowledge of the main institutions and a much more developed biographical knowledge of established and emergent individuals, their backgrounds, careers, networks and the roles they play – including not only the leadership team and non-systemic opposition, but also in specific sectors (military, energy and so on). Emerging from this will come a more sophisticated grasp of power both in Russia itself, and how the Russian leadership deploys it in its international dealings. This is particularly important given the competition between Russia and the West and Moscow’s increasingly
obvious attempts to deploy power abroad, as shown by Russian actions in Syria and further afield.

The relearning of these skills is essential to enhance the ability to handle and examine sources more carefully and pose the right questions of Russia – and the ability to distinguish between fact and assumption, knowledge and opinion. Testing the reliability of sources and distinguishing between the signal and the noise, filtering out the important information from the unimportant, is becoming ever harder. But it becomes more important because of the increasing sense in the mainstream Western discussion that almost all signals from Russia are to be interpreted as ‘Kremlin propaganda’ and dismissed as such – unless they come from an opposition figure or group, in which case they are treated as reliable. Though there is undoubtedly propaganda, however, dismissing all evidence as such would be a very misleading and dangerous step – as would largely accepting the opposition’s views.

At the same time, the increased ability to look further and deeper into Russian affairs and interpret them accurately is only part of the solution. The positive effect of even a substantial increase in the scale of expertise will remain limited if the coordination of this expertise remains limited. Too often a gap is evident between Russia expertise and public policy. The consequent problem of ‘unknown knowns’ within the Western system needs to be addressed and reduced. This means that Russia experts will have to shape and deliver a convincing, sophisticated Russia agenda that is relevant and accessible to politicians and officials. It will mean retiring easy but tired metaphors and lazy repetition of superficial points of reference, and mean ensuring that Russia is seen in terms of the twenty-first century, rather than the twentieth. It will also mean reversing the process of separation that has taken place since the 1990s between the Russia expert community and the wider strategic studies community, and establishing more institutionalised and resilient links between Russia experts and public policy officials and politicians, not just those working on the Russia desks, but more broadly. Whatever measures are taken, Russia will continue to surprise Western policy-makers and observers, but these can be mitigated by the development of a more empathetic, sophisticated analysis of Russia that prepares Western politicians and policy-makers for both realistic foreign policy and domestic political developments rather than desirable ones or wishful thinking.

The mainstream view of Russia in the West has on one hand tended to see Russia as an appendage of Europe, one that is bound
to Europe, rather than seeing it as a Eurasian state with interests not only in Europe but across the world. On the other hand, the mainstream view has tended either to ignore, or refuse to grasp, many of the concepts that influential Russians have used to organise their experiences and make sense of the world on the international stage, and ignore much of the minutiae of Russian domestic political life. International disagreements are reduced to simple Russian intransigence (even when it is not), foreign policy actions to Russian authoritarianism and the populist requirements of domestic popularity; domestic politics is reduced to Putin and watching his popularity ratings and the growth or decline of civil society and the emergence of potentially anti-Putin figures.

This is the result of an unhappy blend of ethnocentrism and political optimism that has failed to see that although there are common interests, and despite appearances and a certain relief that the Cold War was over, the Russian authorities neither began their post-Cold War journey from the same ‘end of history’ starting point as Western states, nor wanted to join the West to become ‘like the West’. Given the increasing dissonance and competition between the West and Russia, having a clearer interpretation of Russia matters. It is time, belatedly, to move on from the immediate post-Cold War optimism of the end of history and superficial comparisons of Russia with the USSR, and begin to shape an interpretation of Russia in the twenty-first century.

Notes

Conclusion


7 *The European Union and Russia: Before and Beyond the Crisis in Ukraine*, p. 26.


9 *The European Union and Russia: Before and Beyond the Crisis in Ukraine*, p. 22.