

European security in the context of the Russia-West crisis

“Russia and the Western countries look at the same problems from very distinct lenses”

The crisis in the Russia-West relations stems from the profound misunderstanding of each other's views regarding acceptable foundations of European security and stakes across the post-Soviet space. The conflict over Ukraine resulted in the sanctions war between Russia and the West, Russia's isolation from important international forums like G-8 and suspensions of the Russia-EU negotiations on the New Agreement. It will not be an exaggeration to recognize that relations between Russia and the West have reached their lowest point in the past 25 years. In this situation it would be expedient to address several fundamental questions.



Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova

Can better mutual understanding of divergent security concerns between Russia and the West be achieved ?

It should be recognized that it is impossible to achieve mutual understanding of divergent security concerns because Russia and the Western countries look at the same problems from very distinct lenses. Russia is being portrayed in the West as a violator of the post-bipolar status quo. But what is a starting point for the definition of this status quo ? Is it the end of the Cold war embodied in the Paris Charter of 1990 ? Or is it the end of the bipolarity happened one year later in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR, when the most radical changes happened in Europe's security landscape but they were not formalized by a new Peace conference on the post-bipolar order ? Or is it NATO's military campaign of 1999 against Serbia ? Or, probably, it is a recognition of Kosovo's independence ? Or maybe the starting point is the Caucasus crisis of 2008 ? Or everything has started with the conflict over Ukraine ? No doubt, Russia and the West have very different views on the question *“who has violated the post-bipolar order”*.

Each side believes that it is she who is right, which is why all attempts to reduce the Russia-West different views to a common denominator will be just a waste of time and efforts. Rather they should agree on common and legally binding rules of behaviour along the Helsinki Act model. The settlement of the Ukrainian conflict is a key factor for a new Helsinki or Paris summit, which

should discuss three fundamental contradictions of the post-bipolar era : the contradiction between the principle of territorial integrity and the right of nations for self-determination ; the contradiction between the right of nations for sovereignty and the right of nations for humanitarian intervention ; the contradiction between the right of nations to freely choose and join security alliances and the right of nations to organize their national security according to their threat perceptions (NATO's expansion and Russia's response to it in the Baltic area).

Is it possible to decrease mutual mistrust ?

Mistrust and trust do not appear out of nowhere. Only by jointly solving problems and disputes, we create trust. Russia-West have gone through several stages since the collapse of the Soviet Union, starting with high expectations, but now experiencing disappointment and dissatisfaction. The Yeltsin era is still singled out by the West as the most favorable period in the post-bipolar international relations. But why was *“democratic Russia”* not involved in the negotiations over the expansion of NATO ? Because *‘trust’* over that period was based not so much on legal foundations, but rather on personal relations between Clinton and Yeltsin. Yet personal relations are never enough for developing trust between nations. For instance, the Bush-Putin honeymoon period ended in 2008 as tensions flared up and led to risky juxtaposition over the Georgian conflict.



European Union

Vladimir Putin talks to Donald Tusk, president of the EU Council, at G20 Summit in Hamburg in July 2017. "Rather than attempting to reduce the different views to a common denominator, Russia and West should agree on common and legally binding rules of behaviour".

Instead, the real breakthrough in trust-building between East and West occurred under Mikhail Gorbachev. However, the breakthrough was not the result of Gorbachev's image or his long speeches about 'new political thinking', most notably over a 'common European home'. Instead, dialogue was kick-started by the most sweeping disarmament proposals in history and unilateral forces reductions and their withdrawal from Eastern Europe that, in turn, ushered in a new era of US-Soviet/Russian relations.

What economic and security arrangements represent a viable option for those OSCE participating States whose economic and security status is not clearly defined ?

The best economic arrangement would be a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. It is a beautiful idea as attractive as a nuclear free world concept. And like a nuclear free world which does not mean just our world minus nuclear weapons, a common economic space would require completely different political relations between participating states. If Ukrainian conflict is resolved it will be possible for Russia and EU to start with common, very practical, functional projects in the post-Soviet space in line with the proposal of Medvedev in 2010 –

to provide Ukraine with a syndicated loan for modernization of its gas transportation system. In the security sector Russia would like to have the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) within Collective Security Treaty Organization¹ (CSTO) but everybody understands that this scenario is unrealistic now. Generally speaking, it would be satisfied with a neutral status of GUAM countries² but a "new Yalta" agreement between Russia and the West over the heads of these states is impossible.

If the Ukrainian conflict were resolved, it would be possible to come back to the unfinished job of the 90s and hold a big peace forum, which would promote security arrangements in Europe and in the post-Soviet space. The neutral status of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan should be guaranteed by security, sovereignty and de-facto existing territorial integrity. Withdrawal and reduction of military forces of NATO and Russia around them must be insured by new conventional arms control agreements and confidence building measures in addition to the Open Skies and Vienna Document regimes. Their economic development and association with the EU and other countries should incorporate Russian political, economic, and humanitarian interests.

*Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova
Professor at Institute for World economy and International relations, Russian Academy of Sciences.*

- 1 :** The CSTO is an intergovernmental military alliance, which includes Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia.
- 2 :** The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development is a regional organization of 4 post-Soviet states : Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.



The Commonwealth of Independent States