

Tatyana Parkhalina

What Makes Russia Tick?

The crisis in and around Ukraine that started in the autumn of 2013 has several disturbing aspects:

- It has shown that – in spite of numerous official declarations and documents – there is no genuine partnership between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. Real partnerships should be based not only on common interests in the field of security, but on shared values and common perceptions of international and domestic developments. Instead, the USA and Russia are still pursuing the disarmament agenda of the Cold War – now complemented by the fight against terrorism.
- In the last decade, we have witnessed severe geopolitical competition in the post-Soviet space. On two occasions (Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014), Russia has departed from the territorial status quo defined by the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- It would be a great mistake to reduce the Ukraine crisis to the dilemma “Who should Ukraine be with – Russia or Europe?” Ukraine has no alternative to partnership with both Europe and Russia, who, in turn, would be well advised to co-operate with Ukraine, instead of competing in and around it.
- The developments in Ukraine were evidence of a very deep crisis among Ukraine’s political elites. Neither Russia nor the West noticed the rise of aggressive nationalism in Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014.
- The developments in Crimea and Ukraine dramatically changed the political situation inside the Russian Federation. The level of mutual intolerance between “patriots” and “liberals” is so high that it is leading to deep divisions in Russian society. Furthermore, the economic aspects of this situation (the costs of integrating Crimea, the sanctions, and the dramatic fall in the price of oil) could place severe strains on the Russian economy.

All in all, this has been the most serious crisis of the European security system since the end of the Cold War. Russia and the West have been following the worst parts of Cold War logic by supporting whichever forces in a third country (Ukraine) proclaim their adherence to one or the other. The result has been a civil war.

Note: First published in: *Sicherheit und Frieden – Security and Peace*, S+F 3/2014, pp. 218-220 (in German).

Here it makes sense to come back to the main question of this contribution: “What makes Russia tick?”

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia declared itself a democratic country, signaling to the West that it would like to be integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community as an equal partner. The fact is, however, that Russia was very weak in the early 1990s, and its future was unpredictable. The West’s reply was that Russia should start a process of democratization by building a system of effective institutions, putting in place democratic and civil control over the military and secret services, and promoting the development of civil society and communication between civil society and the state bureaucracy – in other words performing certain “housekeeping” tasks, which, no doubt, were in the interest of Russia itself. But Russian society – both elites and the population as a whole – felt offended and humiliated, as it appeared that the West did not appreciate Russian efforts to transform the communist system.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia made several efforts towards integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Though those efforts were not very well articulated and sometimes unclear, the main vector of Russian foreign policy was still integration into the West. Bearing in mind the complicated political situation that prevailed within Russia, where there was no consensus among elites on the issue of integration or even partnership with the West, it is clear that the Russian government was then more European and more Euro-Atlantic than the majority of the society, whose thinking continued to be governed by stereotypes dating from the Cold War period.

The situation changed dramatically in 2005-2006, when the global economy (galloping oil and gas prices) pushed Russian elites into thinking that they should correlate Russia’s new “economic might” with a new political role in the international arena. Since then, all major Russian foreign policy documents have reflected the fundamental view that Russia no longer wishes to follow an international agenda shaped by others, but would like to participate in shaping that agenda together with key actors such as the USA and the EU on an equal basis.

In the Russian view, the West betrayed the notion of an “equal partnership” and ignored Russian national interests in several situations, including the following:

- when NATO started its air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999;
- in continuing the process of NATO enlargement despite all Moscow’s protests;
- when the USA and the UK launched a military operation against Iraq despite the lack of clear evidence that Saddam Hussein’s regime had weapons of mass destruction;
- when UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya was – in Russia’s assessment – misused to overthrow the Gaddafi regime;

- when Russia's views on conventional armed forces in Europe and missile defence were misinterpreted in ways that did not take seriously Russian interests or Russia's vision of its own security.

But the Russian leadership's most crucial concern was connected with the process of extending NATO enlargement into post-Soviet space. While Germany and France, in spite of pressure from Washington, resisted granting Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine at NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008, a formula was ultimately found according to which those countries would become members of NATO, yet without a concrete timetable. This was perceived by Russia's political and military leadership as a promise that the two countries would be integrated into NATO, and the Kremlin openly declared that Russia would use every means at its disposal to prevent Georgian and Ukrainian integration into the Alliance.

During his first visit to Berlin in June 2008, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president since May, presented a Russian initiative for a prospective European Security Treaty (EST), which aimed at Russian integration into a modified security system. Of course, this proposal had not been fully worked out, and the South Ossetia crisis and, subsequently, the global financial crisis meant that the international community never discussed the EST proposal seriously. Instead, NATO-Russia co-operation in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council was frozen in the wake of the Russia-Georgia war and only revived in December 2009. Only on the eve of NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon in 2010 was the EST discussed between President Medvedev, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy at a short summit in France. However, the "reset" in US-Russia and NATO-Russia relations that had been launched in March 2009 never got beyond the level of rhetoric, as disagreements over NATO's missile defence system were so serious as to prevent both sides from taking any steps to make it a practical reality.

Later on, the lack of political will in Russia, the developments in North Africa and the Middle East (the "Arab Spring"), the crises in Libya and Syria and the different understandings of global security challenges in Russia and the West (in spite of the existence of documents on common security threats) resulted in a situation in which the dramatic lack of trust between Russia and the West (in spite of positive practical co-operation on the NATO-Russia track) again became a serious factor in their relationships.

When Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin as president, the main vector of Russian foreign policy shifted from the Euro-Atlantic to the Euro-Asian space. On the one hand, this reflects an objective geopolitical tendency (the USA also made the pivot to Asia), on the other hand, it is a result of the subjective perceptions of Russian elites that the West does not want to accept Russia as an equal partner.

Since the EU and Russia started to play tug-of-war over Ukraine, we have witnessed the revival of old patterns of behaviour from the Cold War period, when one country or another was used as a staging ground for the achievement of geopolitical goals. The “reunification” of Crimea with Russia helped Russian leaders to deal with several problems. First, Russia demonstrated once again that without its participation it is no longer possible to solve problems in the post-Soviet space (including the Euro-Atlantic integration of individual post-Soviet states). Second, it underlined the fact that it influences the shaping of the international agenda. And third, it made clear that Ukraine is a core Russian interest, as its alignment is crucial not only to Russian security, but to Russia’s conservative political base.

Here it should be noted that the recent deterioration in the Russian domestic situation occurred independently of Russian policy vis-à-vis Ukraine, as its economy is entering a period of stagnation. This was obvious in 2013, which saw slowing economic growth, declining state revenues, inflation, and other problems including a very high level of corruption in the Russian bureaucracy, the lack of effective institutions, incomplete separation of powers among the various branches of government, insufficient feedback between civil society and the state, and an absence of democratic and civil control over the military and secret services. Sooner or later, this type of state will always face challenges and risks that it cannot solve. For Russia, Ukraine represents a classic propaganda attempt to shift attention from domestic problems and to blame all the country’s difficulties on enemy activities and sanctions.

The Ukraine crisis is not over, the presidential elections mark only a certain stage in its evolution, but some lessons could be learned from developments in the four months up to May 2014:

- The “information warfare” practiced by all sides during this crisis has been so extreme as to make objectivity all but impossible; the international community should elaborate a “code of conduct” for reporting on such events;
- Russia cannot be excluded from the discussion on the future of the post-Soviet space. Russia, Europe, and the USA should co-operate – not compete and not confront each other – in this region;
- It is obvious now that the Euro-Atlantic security system that existed before the crisis will no longer be able to operate as it used to – neither institutionally, nor in substantive terms. The move of both sides towards mutual deterrence is a great challenge for their partners beyond Europe, who are not ready to accept either the Western position, or the Russian reaction. That is why the responsibility of political elites and the expert community in the USA, Europe, and Russia is to rethink conflict prevention measures as well as the way they interact during various kinds of crisis.