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Multilateralism in Russian Foreign Policy: A Toolbox for the Future

It has become common for scholars to claim that Russia prefers bilateral agreements to multilateral ones, since the former are better suited to securing Moscow's interests.¹ There are indeed significant differences between Russia and EU/NATO member states in terms of the ways they make use of multilateral institutions. However, in global terms, the level of multilateral coordination achieved in the EU and NATO is unprecedented and is likely to remain unchallenged in the foreseeable future. Russia's attitude to multilateralism looks far more mainstream when compared to that of large states outside the EU/NATO framework. Most countries, small and large, including Russia, make use of multilateralism while soberly assessing how multilateral tools can contribute to their policy goals. This might mean that attitudes to multilateralism will shift in the longer run as a result of the changing significance of multilateral institutions but also as a consequence of adjustments made to national foreign policy goals.

The Western Lens

Reflection on Russia's relations with the EU² and NATO³ may lead to the conclusion that Russia rejects multilateralism. Yet Russia has its own reasons to complain about NATO's unwillingness to treat the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a partner in multilateralism and the clear preference that NATO demonstrates for developing bilateral co-operation with CSTO members.⁴

In terms of their underlying rationale, Russia's and NATO states' attitudes towards each other have both similarities and differences. They are similar in that both have a high degree of flexibility which is often registered at the bilateral level, where states do not necessarily have to stick to the lowest common denominator negotiated in a multilateral framework. On cer-

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- 1 Cf., e.g., Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Lanham 2012, p. 19.
 - 2 Cf. Jakub Kulhanek, The Fundamentals of Russia's EU Policy, in: *Problems of Post-Communism* 5/2010.
 - 3 Cf. Vilhelm Konnander, What prospects for Russia in the Baltic Sea Region? Cooperation or isolation? In: Jakob Hedenskog/Vilhelm Konnander/Bertil Nygren/Ingmar Oldberg/Christer Pursiainen (eds), *Russia as a Great Power: Dimensions of security under Putin*, London 2005, pp. 109-129, here: p. 111.
 - 4 Cf. Yulia Nikitina, *How the CSTO Can (and Cannot) Help NATO*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 285, September 2013.

tain occasions, this flexibility may be utilized to promote a hostile *divide et impera* kind of policy. The major difference is that Russia, and Russia's CSTO partners, cannot deny the significance of the EU and NATO as key multilateral frameworks and therefore cannot avoid entering into dialogue with them. The EU and NATO, by contrast, have raised doubts regarding the genuine nature of multilateral interaction within the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Sceptics suggest that these organizations are no more than fronts for Russian influence, which is simply imposed on other member states of these organizations and must be countered rather than supported by the West.

Russia's view of NATO follows a remarkably similar logic. Back in 2002, when the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established, Russia insisted that each state should participate in the NRC in its national capacity – in other words, that the NRC should itself be a multilateral body made up of nation states, not a forum for the multilateral NATO to meet Russia and communicate a position previously agreed by NATO members. As this effort all but failed according to Russian estimates, the Alliance has been increasingly viewed as a form of US influence in Europe. For Moscow, this necessitates talking with Washington rather than multilaterally with NATO. This was no surprise to decision-makers in Moscow; on the contrary, it confirmed their longstanding beliefs. It is indeed more than possible that, from the very beginning of the NRC, both sides foresaw its limited potential, and their suspicion created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Part of the blame for disregarding the potential of multilateral mechanisms lies with the states themselves. In the course of bilateral negotiations with third countries, member states of multilateral institution X may find it appropriate to make X the scapegoat, blaming it for constraints that they unwillingly have to respect. Member states often seem inclined to guard against encroachments on their sovereign competencies by the multilateral entities in which they participate. Bilateral ties with external partners are among the key assets that member states of multilateral structures may use to make their allies aware of the wider range of policy options available to them. Even those states that benefit most from being part of a multilateral institution do not want to leave it as the only game in town. Meanwhile, states that do not participate in that institution are unlikely to have an interest in helping it become a key decision-making centre with influence over their fates.

The debate about the role of multilateralism in Russian-Western relations focuses on the natural unwillingness of each side to play a role in a game where the rules are being set by the other, and where they, as non-members, are deprived of rights. Hypothetically, if every member state had made it clear that bilateral negotiations made no sense, Russia would have relied on negotiations with the EU and NATO rather than their member states, while the West would have talked to the CSTO or the EAEU, although this would have obviously gone against the member states' interests on many

issues. But up until the point where a multilateral framework turns into a super-state, which even the EU is still far from becoming, a combination of bilateral and multilateral talks – with the emphasis on the former – will remain the key form of international politics.

National priorities play a role when states define their attitudes to multilateralism. Smaller states may treat multilateral frameworks as the best means to compensate for a lack of resources. Larger states often have to struggle with the omnipresent temptation to go it alone, skipping the painstaking work of negotiating with allies. This temptation and the usefulness of multilateral frameworks for larger states are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist and vary from case to case. For the largest Western states, it took two world wars, resulting in the total devastation of some of them, before they considered establishing strong regional multilateral institutions, similar to those that philosophers had suggested centuries earlier.

In the patchwork of European states, Russia plays a unique role. At the time when the West was starting to develop its key multilateral structures, Russia was at the core of an alternative project that ultimately failed. In many respects, Russia is still dealing with the consequences of the Soviet system and its collapse. The new regional multilateral frameworks centred around Russia (the CSTO, the EAEU) and Russia and China (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation/SCO) are rarely treated as respected partners by the West, in spite of their achievements in bringing their members closer together. As a standalone post-Soviet state, Russia remains the largest European country in terms of both territory and population, even if one only considers the portion of the country that is geographically in Europe. Russia is so large and powerful that it cannot realistically be denied a role in regional politics, but, for the very same reason, and because of Russia's remarkable political and societal complexity, the key regional organizations (the EU and NATO) are not ready to accept it as a full-fledged member, even in the distant future. The Russian government is well aware of this and assumes as a result that decisions taken by the EU and NATO will frequently contradict Russian interests.

A list of issues that make Russia unsuited to membership of Western structures usually centres on the supposed values gap and shortcomings in the development of the country's democratic institutions. Indeed, the transformation of the Russian state and society will continue, just as other countries will undergo change. At least in some scenarios (not necessarily the most probable ones), this could narrow the divergence of world views and interests. However, given that a large number of diverse members already represent an institutional challenge for the EU and NATO, the possibility of extending membership to Russia is not likely to be considered, even if Russia were to become more "like-minded". If a genuine intention to integrate Russia and other partners that do not fit within Western frameworks were to exist, it is more likely that this would take the form of transferring competences to a different institution rather than adapting the EU or NATO.

Russian and Western attitudes towards each other's multilateral efforts tell us little about their approaches to multilateralism as such; they rather reflect the imperfect state of this particular regional relationship, which is still largely based on competition for influence. This is often framed in terms of deterrence and the creation of counterweights, where multilateral cooperation is mainly seen as a way to boost one's chances in the competition rather than to put an end to the rivalry through multilateral effort.

Security for All

In the course of history, the Russian readiness to counter-balance Western powers has often been combined with more constructive offers, some of which have been partially successful. At the same time, these efforts have time and again been undone by catastrophic crises that peace initiatives were unable to prevent.

Tsar Nicholas II initiated conferences on international law and disarmament prior to the First World War. The Soviet government appealed for a collective security system in the interwar period. The Allied powers of the Second World War agreed to set up the UN framework immediately prior to stumbling into the global Cold War, which was accompanied by serious regional conflicts. At the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the participants agreed on the Helsinki Final Act just a few years before the Cold War hit a new low. The Charter of Paris appeared a year before the international environment changed dramatically with the collapse of the USSR. The OSCE was launched in the midst of Russian-Western tensions around the Chechen and Yugoslav wars and NATO enlargement. Post-Soviet conflicts remained frozen at best, in spite of numerous multilateral mediation efforts. The creation of the NRC was followed by harsh disagreements over ballistic missile defence and the Iraq War. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's proposals to discuss a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture lost steam amid the Georgia crisis of 2008. During the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the NRC was again blocked, while the potential of the OSCE and the UN has been only partially realized. Overall in the history of security relations, multilateralism so far appears to function rather like an airbag – it is able to reduce shocks, but it is not a guarantee against crises or an effective remedy for crises that are in progress.

If the prerequisite for Russia's enthusiastic participation in multilateral efforts is full equality, then the OSCE is an appropriate forum to reveal the opportunities and limitations that a multilateral institution may provide when this prerequisite is met.

The unique role played by the OSCE in the course of the Ukraine crisis, when no other regional organization could be considered both impartial and capable of security-related monitoring, presents a good example of the par-

ticipating States' ability to reach consensus and act rapidly. The limitations are nonetheless evident.

The most serious of these are caused by the difficult state of Russian-Western relations, as described above. The fact that decisions are taken by consensus in the OSCE does nothing to alleviate tensions. On the contrary, the multilateral forum may be (and is indeed) used for rhetorical exchanges that bring existing disagreements to the surface. Even if at some point all participating States were to decide to act in a co-operative manner, their divisions over past conflicts would not disappear easily. In practice, there is always a mixture of more co-operative and less co-operative behaviour, driven by governments' understanding of national interests.

Moreover, the OSCE has to be seen in context. The Organization is based upon political commitments and functions alongside much more solid, wealthy, and less inclusive institutions, such as the EU and NATO. The participating States know the context and inevitably take it into account. They would probably act in a different way if they considered the OSCE to be the pivot of security-related decision-making in the region. Prior to its recent limited revival, the Organization was marginalized in many policy quarters – both West and East of Vienna. Improving the OSCE's prominence is no easy task when on the most serious issues some of the key participants either prefer to go it alone or reach out to the less-inclusive structures that correspond more closely to their interests. At one point, the Russian state's grievances vis-à-vis the presumably ineffective OSCE grew so large that leading Russian OSCE experts felt they had to reach out to persuade the state of the Organization's advantages.⁵

While the OSCE's institutional shortcomings are obvious, it nonetheless has to be asked whether the Organization's lack of legal personality, its modest budget, and its various operational restrictions are indeed enough of a major stumbling block to prevent a more impressive performance that would make it a true guardian of regional peace and security. The answer is provided by the UN record. The United Nations does have a proper charter as the legal basis for its existence, a mandate to foster international peace and security, and the necessary administrative and financial resources. The UN Security Council (UNSC) is an established body whose permanent members include the leading security actors within the Euro-Atlantic community, as well as Russia and China. The importance of the UN framework in general, and the work of the UNSC in particular, is stressed in all major Russian foreign policy documents. As with other great powers, Russia's openly stated respect for the UN does not mean that it never prevents the forging of consensus. All in all, the veto power for permanent members was introduced precisely in order to let them make their concerns heard, even when those concerns are not shared by others. The number of cases where a permanent member has

5 Cf. Andrey Zagorsky/Mark Entin, Should Russia leave the OSCE, in: *Russia in Global Affairs* 3/2008, pp. 19-31.

exercised its veto right has dropped dramatically since the end of the Cold War.⁶ The scope of the most divisive issues is limited, with the Israel-Palestine conflict still being the most prominent.⁷ Most disagreements may never even come to a vote; however, a large number of resolutions are eventually adopted (61 in 2017),⁸ which, of course, requires the involvement of Russia, a permanent member of the UNSC.

It is well known that the media's attention span is limited, and most issues debated in multilateral institutions therefore never become an issue for public debate or awareness. The crises that garner headlines are those that remain most acute and are hardest to resolve. Russia's constructive involvement in the resolution of various issues around the globe will be unnoticed by many if the ongoing conflicts in which Russia does have a stake remain unresolved.

Good Neighbours

The immediate international environment in which Russia finds itself was shaped by the collapse of the USSR, which came as a surprise to many, including the leaders of the newly independent states. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was advertised to Soviet citizens as a more flexible alternative to the Soviet Union, but one that would keep all of its important assets intact.⁹ At the same time, the CIS founding documents made it clear that each state would respect the others' sovereignty and territorial integrity. The administrative boundaries inside the USSR were turned into internationally recognized national borders. Yet the CIS turned out to be a divorce act rather than a USSR 2.0. The former Soviet Republics took different paths of internal political development and set divergent foreign policy priorities. More than a quarter of a century later, the issue of Russia's recognition of the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states is still a matter of lively discussion by experts.¹⁰ Official Russian statements have repeatedly confirmed that Moscow's respect for its neighbours' sovereignty is not in question. Yet Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova would disagree with this, pointing to the role Russia has been playing in post-Soviet conflict zones. Although these are just three

6 Cf. Research Report: The Veto, in: *Security Council Report* 3/2015, at: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/the-veto.php>.

7 Cf. Emma McClean, Hard Evidence: Who uses veto in the UN Security Council most often and for what? In: *The Conversation*, 31 July 2014, at: <https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-who-uses-veto-in-the-un-security-council-most-often-and-for-what-29907>.

8 Cf. United Nations Security Council, Security Council Resolutions, *Resolutions adopted by Security Council in 2017*, at: <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2017.shtml>.

9 This was the spirit of the Alma-Ata Protocols of 21 December 1991, which established the CIS.

10 Cf., e.g., James Nixey/Richard Sakwa, *The Russia Question: Sovereignty and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, 8 December 2016, at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-question-sovereignty-and-legitimacy-post-soviet-eurasia>.

of many former Soviet Republics, their reproaches make waves around the world, and they find many supporters as a result of the tragic character of these conflicts and the importance of the key international legal principles that are at stake, such as territorial integrity and the right to self-determination.

While the principles of international law are globally recognized, their interpretation remains tricky and politicized. A small number of states, including some powerful ones, fully share the strong concerns about Russia expressed by Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Others limit themselves to moderate statements or avoid touching upon contentious issues. Almost all of the countries that have strong concerns regarding Russia's behaviour vis-à-vis its neighbours are situated in Europe or North America. The issue is thus treated as a litmus test: Based on Russia's role in the resolution of post-Soviet conflicts, some parts of the West have drawn conclusions regarding Russia's ability to play a constructive role in world politics. Russia's unwillingness to support a strengthened international presence in these conflict areas is treated as a rejection of multilateralism.

Nevertheless, Russia made and supported attempts to use multilateral mechanisms in zones of actual or potential conflict, even if it rarely went to the point of believing that the presence of international organizations would be the key to conflict resolution. The OSCE has operations in Moldova and Ukraine and, along with the UN mission, was also active in Georgia prior to the 2008 crisis. An additional OSCE mission was based in Crimea until 1999.¹¹ The possibility of a UN peacekeeping mission in the Donbass has been debated among experts since 2014 and by officials since Vladimir Putin's proposal on the issue in September 2017.¹² For Russia, the most relevant lessons in terms of the role of multilateral institutions in conflict resolution came from the Balkans and are often interpreted from one specific angle: In Moscow, it is believed that the West made use of international presences in conflict areas to the detriment of Russian interests and that any repetition of this trap must be avoided.

However, Russia has other neighbours, with whom its relations are not nearly so troubled. The multilateral arrangements of the EAEU and the CSTO bring together a fair share of CIS members that have expressed their willingness to participate in closer economic and military co-operation. The decisions taken by these organizations are heavily influenced by the necessity of forging member consensus. Efforts have been made to explain the mean-

11 Cf. OSCE, The Secretariat, Conflict Prevention Centre, *Survey of OSCE Field Operations*, Vienna, October 2017, pp. 46-47.

12 Cf. Steven Pifer, *Test Putin's proposal for UN peacekeepers*, Brookings Institution, 13 September 2017, at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/test-putins-proposal-for-u-n-peacekeepers>; Alexey Arbatov, *A UN peacekeeping operation is the only way forward in Ukraine*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 28 September 2017, at: <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/73251>.

ing and importance of Eurasian integration to a wider audience.¹³ Although Russia is an obvious heavyweight in economic and military terms in comparison to its smaller allies, the decision-making systems of the Eurasian entities require co-operative behaviour.

The scepticism some Western countries have towards the EAEU and the CSTO is primarily founded in the assessment of their members' internal developments rather than the character of their multilateral interaction. From that angle, they represent unions of temporary autocracies that will at some point have to give way to more open and democratic systems of government. However, the idea of a relatively fast and straightforward transformation along Western lines has been challenged repeatedly in many parts of the world. It may well be that the EAEU/CSTO states will keep working on the gradual development of those multilateral structures for many decades to come without any fundamental change to their national political systems or the nature of their interaction. At some point, this gradual strengthening may make it impossible for external partners to ignore these entities.

Legal Grounds

Next to the OSCE, the Council of Europe (CoE), which Russia joined in February 1996,¹⁴ is the second most important regional institution in which Russia has full membership rights and whose role Russia could have an interest in enhancing. Although recent political developments connected with the Ukraine crisis have complicated Russia's participation in the CoE, membership has been significant and generally positive for Russia.

Membership of the CoE has required Russia to undertake quite a lot of legal adjustments, including a ban on the death penalty, which is still heavily criticized by conservative voices in the country. It is also now possible for Russian citizens to appeal against decisions of the Russian courts at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE (PACE) opened an important new opportunity for members of the Russian parliament to join international debate.

The CoE is built on the idea that its members share common values and that these will help them to introduce similar mechanisms for the protection of their citizens' rights and similar rules for political processes at the national level. In practice, Russia and the West have rather drifted apart in this regard. This is reflected in the remarkable number of judgments the ECtHR has made

13 See the reports of the Centre for Integration Studies at the Eurasian Development Bank, at: <https://eabr.org/en/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports>.

14 Cf. Council of Europe and the Russian Federation, Council of Europe, Council of Europe Programme Office in Moscow, at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/moscow/field-office>.

against the Russian Federation over the past years, with only Italy and Turkey having more.¹⁵

This record of ECtHR rulings obviously irritated the Russian state, which led to a decision enabling the Russian legal system to overrule ECtHR decisions.¹⁶ At the same time, Russia's official stance remains that it is interested in participation, though it believes that some ECtHR regulations require reform if they are going to work properly.¹⁷

The Russian delegation's voting rights in the PACE have been suspended as a result of the Russian parliament's role in the Crimea crisis in 2014.¹⁸ In protest against this decision, which remains in force, Russia cancelled its annual payment to the CoE in 2017.¹⁹

Prominent Russian voices have regularly characterized Russia's membership of the CoE as an unnecessary burden.²⁰ The CoE is different from most other multilateral structures as it can question Russia's political processes, while the ECtHR can object to decisions on legal cases, including cases that draw a lot of public attention. For Russian observers with only a casual interest in international organizations, the CoE is mostly considered an irritant, while those who wish to see the repeal of decisions taken by Russian courts consider it a key body, even if they had no previous general interest in international affairs.

Economic Rationale

The Russian economy represents less than two per cent of global GDP, while the United States accounts for 24 per cent, and China some 15 per cent.²¹ Unlike in the field of security or in terms of co-operation with its smaller neighbours, Russia has no leverage that would let it achieve any substantial results in the global economy without co-operation with others. The EAEU may help

15 Cf. European Court of Human Rights, *Violation by Article and by States (1959-2016)*, at: http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Stats_violation_1959_2016_ENG.pdf.

16 Cf. Vladimir Putin signs law allowing Russia to ignore international human rights rulings, in: *The Independent*, 15 December 2015.

17 Cf. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Comment by the Information and Press Department on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in the 127th Session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe*, 17 May 2017, at: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2759379.

18 Cf. Russian delegation suspended from the Council of Europe over Crimea, in: *The Guardian*, 14 April 2014.

19 Cf. Russia cancels payment to Council of Europe after claiming its delegates are being persecuted over Crimea, in: *The Independent*, 30 June 2017.

20 Cf., e.g., *Dolzhna li Rossiya vyjti iz sostava Soveta Evropy?* [Should Russia Withdraw from the Council of Europe?], *Zvezda*, 28 April 2016, at: <https://tvzvezda.ru/schedule/programs/content/201509181148-ykon.htm/201604281306-7a16.htm>.

21 Cf. Alex Gray, *The world's 10 biggest economies in 2017*, World Economic Forum, 9 March 2017, at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/worlds-biggest-economies-in-2017>.

to bring neighbouring countries together, but it does not bring any significant change to the Russian role in global economic interactions. The world's leading economic heavyweights have larger toolboxes at their disposal, but often they too understand the value of multilateralism in opening the way to clarifying rules and lowering barriers to trade and investment.

Russia joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2012, after 20 years of negotiations and a long approximation process.²² The accession was long overdue, as the organization's membership was rapidly heading towards true globalization and had a membership roll nearly as long as that of the UN. By 2017, there had been eight complaints filed against Russia requiring WTO dispute settlement.²³ This puts Russia in the large group of countries in the middle in terms of the number of complaints filed against them, between the leading global economic powerhouses, which have the most complaints against them, and the least economically significant countries, which have no complaints against them. Russia is learning to use WTO mechanisms to its advantage and has filed four WTO complaints against the EU and two against Ukraine. In October 2014, the Russian Ministry for Economic Development, together with the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics and Sberbank, created a Centre for WTO Expertise.²⁴

Russia joined the WTO at a point when further progress towards lower trade barriers became problematic with the stalling of the Doha Round of negotiations. This could even be an asset for a newcomer, as it gives it the time needed to master the existing mechanisms and procedures. Much of the WTO negotiations naturally drive countries towards coalition-building. Taking part in coalitions and proposing new ones will be one of the skills Russian representatives will try to acquire.

Although almost all the countries of the world, with minor exceptions, have joined the WTO or are in the process of acceding, the internal debate on WTO membership continues in Russia. Lobbyists representing certain industries, as well as populist politicians, portray the organization as a globalist plot seeking to harm the Russian economy, which cannot defend itself with protectionist barriers and must respond to the complaints of the EU and other trade partners. This provides just a hint of the many ways multilateralism may get twisted in public debate.

Russia has been an active participant in the G20 forum of leading economies since its establishment in 1999 (summits have been held since 2008) and successfully held the chairmanship of the group in 2013. The G20 primarily deals with global macroeconomic stability and is the key mechanism that Russia can use to make its voice heard on matters where its own weight

22 Cf. World Trade Organization, Accessions, *Russian Federation*, at: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_russie_e.htm.

23 Cf. World Trade Organization, *Map of disputes against WTO members*, at: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_maps_e.htm.

24 About the Centre, see: Tsentr ekspertizy VTO [Centre for WTO Expertise], at: <http://www.wto.ru/2014/10/15/o-центре>.

is rather insignificant. The G20 has the advantage of appearing to the public as a club of world leaders rather than a faceless bureaucratic monster, which is how the WTO may appear. Given Russia's exclusion from the G8 in the course of the Ukraine crisis, the role of the G20 as a "club" becomes even more important. Apart from the leaders' performance at the summits, including above all their body language, the work done in the G20 passes without notice or interest on the part of the general public in Russia.

Since 1996, Russia has aspired to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).²⁵ Negotiations were suspended in 2014 as a result of the Ukraine crisis.²⁶ However, the Russian government understands the importance of OECD standards for investors and insists that interest in a possible revival of the accession process is mutual.²⁷ A centre for OECD competency is supporting the process from within the Russian Presidential Academy.²⁸

While the idea of a pivot towards Asia remains a disputed notion among experts,²⁹ Russia is definitely determined to establish a more visible political and economic presence on the continent. In comparison to the dynamic economies of Asia, Russia has few assets to offer. In that most densely populated part of the world, Russia cannot impress its partners with its demographics, labour market, growth rates, the modernity of its cities, its technological development, or the high quality of its trade logistics infrastructure. Such limitations push the Russian government towards multilateral frameworks, even if these are loose and tend to be symbolic in nature. On the eve of the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, which was held in Vietnam, President Putin authored an article describing Russia's strong willingness to grasp Asia's economic potential.³⁰ Russia's involvement in APEC is also supported by a group of experts at a dedicated centre within the Presidential Academy.³¹ The forums developed by ASEAN – the East Asia Sum-

25 Cf. OECD, *The Russian Federation and the OECD*, at: <http://www.oecd.org/russia/therussianfederationandtheoecd.htm>.

26 Cf. DW, *OECD suspends Russia accession talks while Moscow vows "symmetrical" sanctions*, 13 March 2014, at: <http://www.dw.com/en/oecd-suspends-russia-accession-talks-while-moscow-vows-symmetrical-sanctions/a-17494773>.

27 Cf. Sputnik international, *OECD Wants Russia to Enter Despite Some States' Objections – Russian Minister*, 29 August 2017, at: <https://sputniknews.com/world/201708291056897566-russia-oecd-cooperation-membership>.

28 The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration has an English language website at: <https://www.ranepa.ru/eng>.

29 Cf., e.g., Alexander Gabuev, *A Pivot to Nowhere: The Realities of Russia's Asia Policy*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 April 2016, at: <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/63408>.

30 Cf. Vladimir Putin, *Russia's APEC goals: Shared prosperity and harmonious development*, in: *The Globe and Mail*, 8 November 2017, at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/vladimir-putin-russias-apec-goals-shared-prosperity-and-harmonious-development/article36875042>.

31 The Russian APEC Study Center has an English-language website at: <http://apec-center.ru/en>.

mit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – have also ignited growing interest on the Russian side.³²

In making use of multilateral structures dealing with economic matters, Russia has shown its ability to give due regard to rules and procedures when they indeed help it to promote its interests and when it has acquired (or is able to acquire) the rights that make it a peer to other participants. It is also important that, even when interaction with multilateral institutions of this kind requires significant changes to Russian legislation and business practice, these organizations do not go as far as to criticize the essence of Russia's political system, which is something that has repeatedly caused trouble in Russia's relations with the EU.

Polycentric Elites

For many years, in terms of official policy as well as expert opinion, Russia has insisted that the world of the present and the future has to be considered multipolar or polycentric.³³ The counter-argument is to suggest that a multipolar world would be chaotic and dominated by rivalry.³⁴ Whatever the intentions of world leaders might be, the number of actors with global significance is indeed growing. Multilateral co-operation seems to be a natural solution for a world in which a significant number of states and non-state entities play an important role in global policy-shaping.

There has been no shortage of statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the matters of multilateral co-operation, usually combining a point about Russia's constructive attitude with an expression of concern about the fact that Russia's special interests are not always respected. When the activities of multilateral institutions are interpreted as being driven by other great powers determined to reduce Russia's influence, this ignites concern and suspicion.

It is unlikely that most of the existing multilateral mechanisms will draw much public attention in the foreseeable future, and, as the contrary case of the WTO confirms, this can be beneficial given the complexity of issues discussed by diplomats and experts. The level of Russia's engagement in multilateral co-operation will be defined by the Russian elites. The consensus that this is a polycentric world tells us little about how people believe the

32 Cf. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference following a number of bilateral meetings and multilateral events on the sidelines of ASEAN, EAS and ARF, Vientiane, July 26, 2016*, 26 July 2016, at: http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2370655.

33 Cf. Alexander Dynkin/Natalia Ivanova (eds), *Russia in a Polycentric World*, Moscow 2012.

34 Cf. *Condoleezza Rice attacks multi-polarity as "necessary evil"*, EurActiv, 1 July 2003, at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/security/news/condoleezza-rice-attacks-multi-polarity-as-necessary-evil>.

world should be structured or about the intentions that key actors will demonstrate within it. Russia will play its part in shaping these important aspects of the world and its character in the future.

The most common view of the Russian elites singles out liberals, who are more inclined to use internationally accepted norms, rules, and frameworks as policy guidelines, and conservatives, who seek to minimize external constraints on the country's sovereignty. Neither of the two groups will disappear, and both will contribute to the formulation of Russia's policies. At the present moment, it appears that the liberal voices are strong when it comes to economic matters, while the conservatives have the upper hand on security. Although this has had a visible impact on Russia's role in multilateral institutions, the policy decisions that are ultimately made often escape the radicalism that can be found in both groups. The radical part of the liberal elite would probably prefer to make Russia's close interaction with key Western institutions a priority, which is clearly not the government's preference. The more radical conservatives would rather withdraw from most of the multilateral institutions, especially those that force Russia to respond to others' complaints, such as the Council of Europe and the WTO. This option is likewise disregarded by the government.

Although the elites do take part in the debate on Russia's present and future involvement in multilateral co-operation, this debate is often marked by sheer ignorance. With some positive exceptions, the level of expertise available for analysis of multilateral institutions is insufficient. The government acknowledges its need to boost levels of expertise, at least in some areas, but it will only be possible to assess the results in the longer run.

Conclusion

Russia is not shying away from multilateralism. A number of bitter disagreements that persist between Russia and the West do not reflect the whole spectrum of policies shaped by the existence of multilateral institutions. In many respects, Russia is making very rational choices on the use of multilateral mechanisms. When the Russian government knows that these mechanisms will not serve its interests (or will even contradict them) and that this will not change soon, they do not have much interest in making a contribution to their efficiency. When, on the contrary, multilateral structures can help Russia to secure its interests, be it through universally accepted common rules or forums for dialogue, it becomes interested and ready to participate.

In a number of cases, mainly those where Russia and the West are most deeply at odds with each other, the progress that could be achieved via multilateral co-operation is blocked by irreconcilable national interests. This should not be interpreted as a complete failure on the part of international organizations. Both national special interests and the ability to forge multilat-

eral consensus will remain parts of international politics, and Russia will make use of both sets of tools, depending on what serves its interests best.