

# Report on the seminar on changing perspectives of political relations in Europe

## Advisory Council on International Affairs

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## Welcome by the chair of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV)

Mr. De Hoop Scheffer welcomes the three speakers and participants. He introduces the three speakers. Dr Cimoszewicz is a former prime minister of Poland and former minister of Foreign Affairs. Prof. Verpoest works at the Catholic University Leuven. Unfortunately prof. Malgin could not make it and Mr. Smeets agreed only a few hours ago to replace him. Mr. Smeets will of course not present a Russian view, but his own. He is a journalist with a wealth of experience on Russia. Mr. De Hoop Scheffer acknowledges his predecessor as chair of the AIV Mr. Korthals Altes, ambassador Borkowski from Poland, ambassador Bužek from Slovakia and minister counsellor of the Russian Federation mr. Zhilko.

In his opening remarks prof. De Hoop Scheffer observes that the title of the seminar refers to changing perceptions. Perceptions matter, also in political dialogue, even if the perception is wrong. In retrospect, the statement in the 2008 NATO communique that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO-members has probably shaped perceptions in Moscow. It might have been perceived as a humiliation and NATO-members underestimated these feelings. He recalls he met with president Putin the day after the NATO-meeting, who stated implicitly Ukraine and Georgia could not become NATO-members. For Russia, Ukraine is a buffer between themselves and NATO and the EU. Nevertheless the EU can support Ukraine to follow a political and economic path of its own choice.



The European democracies perhaps think too much in the short term, whereas Putin thinks in the longer term. Mr. De Hoop Scheffer shares that when he left NATO in 2009 discussions focused on military interventions. Now the discussion is on article 5 (collective

self-defence) again, for instance in relation to cyber warfare.

Mr. De Hoop Scheffer concludes that if there ever was a time for a strong and cohesive NATO, it is now, while maintaining a dialogue with others.

## Dr Cimoszewicz

Mr. Cimoszewicz believes Russia and Europe are strategic partners because of their geographical location and potential mutual needs. For instance, Russia needs access to European market for its raw materials and it needs European technologies and investments. Russia and Europe have common security issues. Russia and the EU should have good relations, but in fact the relations have deteriorated very recently.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 Russia experienced a high degree of political and economic freedom, a situation Russia had hardly ever known before. There was little experience or knowledge how to deal with these freedoms. Much regulation was abolished and some people profited from the subsequent confusion to appropriate a significant part of national assets. The confusion led to economic regression and the public finance system broke down, which for tens of millions of Russians meant a real life catastrophe. Gorbachov was seen as the scapegoat. He was accused of causing the collapse of the Soviet Union. The collapse itself was understood as the result of a conspiracy of external forces. This explanation fitted well with the distrust of many Russians of the outside world, which was usually perceived as hostile to and threatening Russia. When Putin came to power the situation in Russia improved: order was restored and high energy prices led to revenue and allowed the government to provide social services to the population.

Only during recent years the relations between Western countries and Russia have deteriorated. President Putin began to portray the West as a threat to Russia, for example in his speech in Munich in 2007 at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Conference on Security Policy. In Russia resentment grew rapidly, Stalin was among the most admired leaders, more than 50% of Russians regretted the fact that their country had ceased to be a superpower and the measure of a good foreign policy once again became the answer to the question "whether others are afraid of Russia". Western countries

failed to pick up the signals or underestimated them. Europe was still prepared to cooperate with Russia, while at the same time Europe was aware of the decreasing share of Russia in the world economy, which tended to reduce its political importance. This annoyed the Russian leaders. The proposed agreement between the EU and Ukraine caused the total collapse of EU-Russia relations.

The 2011 demonstrations in the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg against the government and the manipulated elections were taken very seriously by the ruling elite. They responded by strengthening authoritarian power, impose discipline on the ruling elite and restricting the opposition. At the international level Russia hardened its attitude towards Western countries, sought more cooperation with alternative groups (BRICS) and promoted its image abroad through, amongst others, hosting the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

The Russian view on history differs strongly from the Polish one. Mr. Putin has said that twice in the history of Europe a long-term peace has been achieved, which was when superpowers, including Russia, agreed on the structure of international relations on the European continent. He meant the agreements of the Congress of Vienna and the Yalta Conference. These were the start of periods of peace and tranquillity. However, in both cases decisions were taken about Poland without taking its interests into account.

Mr. Cimoszewicz believes Russia now shows a greater willingness to cooperate, due to the economic and financial effects of the combination of western sanctions and the drop in the oil price. Russia needs the suspension of the western sanctions. In January 2016 the EU has to decide on the prolongation of sanctions. Western governments should understand this is not only about a violation of international law, the occupation of Ukrainian territory, or the victims of this conflict. It is also about coherence, identity and credibility of NATO and the EU.

Mr. Van Staden (AIV) asks Mr. Cimoszewicz to elaborate on the relationship between mounting economic problems in Russia and its foreign policy. The latter states that economic difficulties might force president Putin to come to terms with Western countries. However, Mr. Van Staden suggests economic problems might also stimulate president Putin to score successes through confrontation with Western

countries. Mr. Cimoszewicz agrees; he believes the protests in 2011 stimulated the Russian government to create a new narrative to unite the people and to conduct a tougher foreign policy. References to history are used to promote national unity. Russia did not expect hard economic sanctions in reply to the invasion of the Crimea and involvement in East Ukraine. The third sanctions package, in combination with falling oil prices, hurts Russia. At the present level Russia makes a marginal profit on oil exports. The pressure is visible: Russia wants to show it respects the latest agreement on East Ukraine, paving the way for lifting of EU-sanctions. The objectives of the Russian intervention in Syria are to divert attention from Ukraine and to show the Russian population Russia is a world power.

Mr. Voorhoeve (AIV) refers to the statement by Mr. Cimoszewicz about the speech by president Putin in 2007 in Munich, which Western countries apparently did not take seriously. Did NATO make a mistake when it announced Ukraine and Georgia would become members of NATO in the future? Mr. Cimoszewicz acknowledges Poland supported the statement at the time. Poland underlined that membership of Ukraine depended on support of the Ukrainian population in two ways. Nobody else should take the decision on behalf of the Ukrainians and support among the population should be broad. The latter was not the case at the time. Mr. Cimoszewicz believes it was not a mistake. However, presently he would not support the same statement, since Ukraine and Georgia must first solve their issues with Russia before they can become members. Mr. Cimoszewicz stresses that it is important to understand both your partners and your enemies. Understanding is not acceptance. Russia believes that various countries are conspiring against it and it feels threatened by enlargement of NATO. We should discuss this and make our intentions clear. At the same time, Russia might express these views to push us to prove our peaceful intentions, i.e. extract concessions.

#### **Mr. Smeets**

Mr. Smeets structured his presentation around a number of themes. The first one is imperial defeat. The impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on Russia is underestimated by western countries. Russia was humiliated. Putin has reacted by revising history, e.g. painting Stalin as a glorious leader during war and ignoring the Molotov Ribbentrop pact in education. The



second theme is the fear for a Pax Americana, a unipolar world. Russia needs a multipolar world order for its self-esteem. Tit for tat is an important tactic which Russia employs. The third theme is the creation of an ideological framework which stresses the uniqueness of Russian culture, based on traditional, Christian values. It refers to specific Russian concepts like manifest destiny and historical justice. The fourth theme is TTIP, a new political and trade bloc from which Russia will be excluded. As a consequence Russia has strengthened trade relations with emerging powers, like China. Another theme is regime change. The Russian elite views citizenship as a possible first step towards regime change. In Russia people are subjects, not citizens. This explains Putin's fear of Maidan (Ukraine), which was perhaps a reason for involvement in the Donbass. The final theme is the fact that Russia has leverage in Europe. Putin's view is that in Europe the most peaceful times were after the Congress of Vienna (1815) and Yalta (1945); Russia was indispensable as a balancer and peacekeeper. Presently Russia strives for a similar role. It has influence in many political parties in several member states of the EU, both on the left and on the right. The referendum on the Association Agreement with Ukraine is in fact about the influence of Putin in former Soviet states.

Mr. Jacobovits de Szeged (formerly AIV) notes Mr. Smeets has stressed humiliation as a driving force for Russian policy. Would Russian policy indeed be different if the EU had acted more cautiously (enlargement, Neighbourhood policy)? Mr. Smeets observes that Russia did not have a Historikerstreit to assess its position, contrary to Germany after the Second World War. Its imperial idea is based on the need for expansion, not consolidation. Western countries were convinced the middle class could make Russia democratic and it would become a market economy. They believed peace dividends would occur. Contrary to the Russians, western countries did not see international relations as a zero sum game. More consideration for Russian views could have produced outcomes more favourable for all states.

Mr. Voorhoeve (AIV) points out that Russia is demographically in decline and will have a small population compared to many (poor) countries. The Russian economy is dependent on export of oil, but no preparations are made to diversify the economy. Therefore Russia needs enemies, and we help Putin if we declare

him to be our enemy. He is a chess player. Mr. Smeets observes Putin is indeed a chess player, but is he a tactical one or a strategist? Russia also exports weapons, not only oil. A popular uprising is unlikely.



### Prof.dr Verpoest

Ms. Verpoest presented a lecture on Russia and the West: from strategic partnership to parallel integration. As her first slide she showed an illustration from an American journal, depicting Russia as an octopus, stretching out its arms over several neighbours. The illustration dates from 1877 and shows that present perceptions of Russia have historical roots. Ms. Verpoest structured her talk in three parts: a brief chronology of promise and pitfalls, looking for explanations and looking ahead.

#### A brief chronology of promise and pitfalls

In 1991 Russia was an amputated empire and was seen as a regional power. During the 90's it had good relations with the EU, but in fact Russia was economically weak and in political crisis. The relationship was not balanced. In Russia we see an evolution from pro-western goodwill to pragmatism and national interest in the period 2000 -2012. At the same time a gradual deterioration in political relations set in, which was probably underestimated by western countries. Ms. Verpoest mentions three causes of this political development: some critical junctures, developments were obscured by the growth of economic relations and the limits to institutional cooperation.

One critical juncture occurred in 1999: the Kosovo crisis and enlargement of NATO with former Eastern Bloc countries, but EU-Russia relations were still constructive and the war on terrorism strengthened relations. Other critical junctures were the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and the re-election of Putin in 2012. Moreover, the EU became more critical of Russia in particular on LGBT-rights, migrant policy, use of energy as a political weapon and

interference in Ukrainian and Belarussian affairs.

The deterioration in political relations was obscured by the stronger economic ties. For Putin the integration of Russia in the world economy was a top priority. The economisation of relations first overshadowed political dialogue (2004 – 2008) and later complicated political dialogue (2008-2012). This resulted in a new situation of geo-economic and geopolitical competition in the 'Near abroad'.

The third cause for the deterioration in political relations was limited institutional cooperation. The Partnership & Cooperation Agreement came into force in 1997, but was not renewed after its expiry in 2007. It was replaced by four areas of cooperation (Common Spaces) in 2004 and in 2010 a Partnership for Modernization was concluded. However, the present institutional framework is inadequate for a structural dialogue.

Since 2013 the relationship between Russia and the EU has been in crisis. The Eastern Partnership Association Agreements are perceived by Russia as geo-economic meddling in Russia's sphere of influence. Negotiations on renewal of the Partnership & Cooperation Agreement are suspended and the EU has implemented sanctions against Russia. Russia's voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are suspended, as well as the NATO – Russia Council.

Looking for explanations

Ms. Verpoest sees a shift in Russian foreign policy from rhetoric westernization to parallel integration. During the 90's Russia was looking West for legitimacy. It seemed to adopt western standards (EU, Council of Europe, OSCE). But under Putin Russia abandoned rhetoric. In October 1999 a Medium Term Strategy for the relations with the European Union was published, which referred to mutually advantageous pragmatism with regard to the EU. Moreover, new military doctrines and new foreign policy concepts were introduced on several occasions. Together the critical junctures, the end of rhetorical westernization, a more assertive foreign policy (nationalism) and a shift from (passive) criticism of western normative behaviour to active promotion of Russian norms and values resulted in a new situation. Russia does not look West anymore for legitimacy, it creates its own legitimacy as a leading country in Eurasia

and it pursues a policy of institutional mirroring. In fact, we see parallel integration: two economic integration mechanisms (EU and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)) and two security organisations (NATO and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)). Russia has even set up an alternative mechanism for election monitoring (Eurasian Observatory of Democracy and Elections) in competition with the OSCE. Consequently, its geopolitical focus is on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its geo-economic focus is on BRICS and Asia.

Looking ahead

Ms. Verpoest identified three challenges: hybrid warfare and compartmentalisation of foreign policy, the risk of geopolitical othering and mutual perceptions. With respect to hybrid warfare and compartmentalisation of foreign policy she refers to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In these military conflicts propaganda plays an important role, as well as a trade war. Russia denies its involvement. The challenge is to deal with an unreliable partner. Compartmentalisation of foreign policy is visible in Syria. The Russian intervention is advantageous for Putin in Russia and in the relations with the EU, as it can be a bargaining chip in lifting sanctions. The direct effect is that Russia is now involved in the talks on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the EU and Ukraine, the EU is normalizing its relations with Belarus and the question is whether the EU will accommodate Russia's request to allow the EEU a place at the table.

The second challenge is geopolitical othering, resulting in further polarization. As examples Ms. Verpoest mentions the July 2012 'foreign agents law', which is detrimental to NGO's such as Memorial and Soldier's Mothers and the June 2013 Law on gay propaganda. Furthermore in December 2013 Putin said in his State of the Nation address that Russia supports conservative, orthodox values. In January 2014 a Russian report on Human Rights in the EU was published. A Russian official observed in that context that the EU aggressively promotes non-traditional, neoliberal values.

The third challenge is the influence of perceptions on Russia's relations with the West in the long term. Ms. Verpoest notes that Russian propaganda can be very effective; there was a quick rise in public support for

military action in Syria. She also refers to scientific research on the perception of the EU in 10 strategic partner countries. In 2014 Russia is the only country where there is an abrupt change in the perception of the EU; the public is adamantly opposed to a leading role of the EU in regional politics. The EU's only reply so far is a weekly newsletter to counter Russian disinformation.



### Questions and answers with participants

Mr. Brouwers (journalist, Volkskrant) observed that Ms. Verpoest did not refer to the domestic protests that took place a few years ago. Mr. Brouwers believes these protests are the reason for the course Putin has taken over the last few years, not humiliation by western countries. Ms. Verpoest agrees this was another important factor. The protests probably triggered a more proactive policy, including promoting nationalism, rewriting textbooks, stressing the unique moral Russian values et cetera. Nevertheless, western countries have underestimated the impact of these developments.

Mr. Eijvoogel (journalist, NRC) adds that within the Russian government the diversity of opinions was higher five years ago than presently. Ms. Verpoest agrees, but this is not a new development. For instance during the Vienna Congress (1815) Russia was hostile to foreign influence and the government consisted of representatives of a small inner circle. It is not specific for the Putin era. Mr. Cimoszewicz points out that polls show president Putin enjoys high support among the Russian population, while everybody is aware of the power structure and corruption. The in-group has very good reasons to quell competition and diversity. The EU weekly

newsletter shows how badly prepared we are. Many Russians do not speak any foreign language, so how can we reach them? Mr. Smeets reminds us that Putin celebrated his re-election in 2012 as a personal victory in difficult circumstances, not a victory of his team. This indicated a shift from a government with internal fights over competing (economic) interests to a government based on the personal power of the president. Political change will come from within the political elite, not from pressure outside the government. This makes political change hard to foresee.

Mr. Trojan (AIV) remarks Russia should be concerned about developments in Asia. The United States will conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with many countries bordering the Pacific Ocean. China will in response create the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with the members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Russia risks to be left out, while Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP), TPP and APEC together represent 90% of world trade. Mr. Smeets agrees and wonders whether it was wise for Mr. Putin to cancel his attendance at the recent APEC-summit. Mr. Barth (AIV) asks how we should evaluate the relation between China and Russia. Ms. Verpoest says Russia will focus on Eurasia, the former members of the Soviet Union. It will deal with its Asian interests through Central Asia. Russia is balancing between Europe and Asia. China is not supporting Russia. The Chinese reaction to the European sanctions against Russia was lukewarm. The gas contract between Russia and China is probably not very advantageous to Russia. Mr. Cimoszewicz adds that Russia expects too much from its Eurasian partners. The EEU is not a serious alternative to the EU. He also believes the benefits for Russia of the Russian-Chinese gas contract are limited.

Mr. De Jong (Netherlands Helsinki Committee) agrees that drawing red lines is important, but there is a risk that western measures will be to the detriment of the people in Russia who aspire to democracy and human rights. Ms. Verpoest finds this a valid comment. Russian voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have been suspended. Should the suspension be renewed, Russia could withdraw from the Council of Europe altogether, denying its citizens access to the European Court of Human Rights. In this case continuation of sanctions could harm the Russian population.

Ms. Starink (freelance journalist) claims that conspiracy theories and propaganda play an important role. Mr. Cimoszewicz agrees, both in Russia and in Poland. Often authorities do not understand how important it is to release reliable information early on, in order to prevent speculation and conspiracy theories. Western countries should make an effort to make more information available to the Russian people in a language they can understand, also on local topics. He suggests the EU could start a project for this purpose, which should be very transparent for it to be credible. Ms. Van der Mark (Municipality of Diemen) asks how perceptions at the local and regional level can be influenced. How should we take perceptions into account when maintaining relations at local or regional level? Mr. Cimoszewicz refers to the example of negotiations between Poland and Russia on right of transit for inhabitants of Kaliningrad. It allows Russians from Kaliningrad more freedom to enter parts of Poland and they can now make up their own mind about parts of Poland that border Kaliningrad. We should also keep in touch with independent organisations and people in Russia, even if this sometimes presents dilemmas.

Mr. Voorhoeve (AIV) reminds the participants that president Theodore Roosevelt said on international relations: speak softly, but carry a big stick. This is how we should deal with Russia. Putin always hits his adversaries at their weakest point. Our Eastern NATO alliance partners ask for more prepositioning and we should listen to them. We must keep the promise of the alliance, otherwise it will fall apart. We need to define our interests more clearly and act, without creating the impression we view Russia as the enemy.

Mr. Van der Togt (Clingendael) refers to a report on a seminar on the EU and the EEU. The EEU is economically not strong and internally divided. It is more promising to work with individual members, as Russia does. Russia cannot rely on China, these countries have different interests. We could work more with China. Ms. Verpoest agrees the economic importance of the EEU is limited, but it is an example of institutional mirroring. Armenia was to conclude a treaty with the EU, but chose at the last moment for the EEU. The EEU is of geopolitical importance. Russia is the dominant power in the EEU and the CSTO. Allowing the EEU a role in negotiations on Ukraine would be a mistake, it will block progress.

Mr. Van Benthem van den Berg (formerly AIV) believes all major players want to avoid escalation. Otherwise there would not be a conference in Vienna on Syria. Mr. Cimoszewicz believes all want to avoid escalation over Ukraine, but we need to stick to our principles. Making concessions on our principles will not make things easier.

Mr. Ramaker (AIV) wonders how Putin's career developed. Twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of him, a little later he became president of Russia. Is he still the puppet of a certain group, when did he become his own man? Mr. Cimoszewicz believes Yeltsin was afraid one of two popular political parties might win the elections when he was president, which would have threatened his interests. Putin was appointed prime minister and dealt with mysterious explosions in Moscow. His popularity rose quickly and when president Yeltsin resigned, he became his successor. Ever since, he has definitely been his own man, rather than a mere puppet.

