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PROUD AND PREJUDICED: THE RISK OF STEREOTYPES IN RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

POLICY BRIEF

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Proud and Prejudiced: The risk of stereotypes in Russia-West relations

Joseph Dobbs¹

January 2018

Introduction

“People are looking at Putin as one who wrestles bears and drills for oil... they look at [President Barack Obama] as one who wears mom jeans and equivocates and bloviates.”

Governor Sarah Palin, former US Vice Presidential Candidate, 2014²

Governor Palin’s comments are a microcosm of the role stereotypes play in Russia-West relations. Her stereotypes of the respective presidents, and of strength in general inform which side she settles on in a contest between the Russian President and her own. Had Palin been successful in reaching the Vice Presidency policy-makers would have to ask how these stereotypes of the Russian bear, in part carefully cultivated by Russia, have impacted on US government policy? How far might Palin herself have gone to change

the perceived image of her own government through different foreign policies?

This approach is not unique to Governor Palin, indeed the current occupants of the White House have expressed similar thoughts on Russia and its president.³ In truth actors on both sides of the Russia-West confrontation are prone to a wide range of oversimplifications and clichés. A pertinent question, and the focus of this paper is how does stereotyping impact on Russia’s and the West’s policies towards the other?

The question is an important one, given the state of Russia-West relations at the start of 2018. Even the most pessimistic at the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013 would have scarcely predicted that relations would deteriorate as far as they have in the following years. If either side is hopeful of reducing risk and one day improving relations it is crucial that we become mindful of the perils of relying on stereotypes and easy hyperboles as substitutes for effective, and nuanced, analysis.

In Russia-West relations, and in international affairs more broadly, perception is becoming more and more difficult to ascertain. So-called fake news perpetuates a growing feeling of

1 The author would like to thank his colleagues at the European Leadership Network for their support in the preparation of this paper, and the many policy-makers and experts who helped develop its ideas.

2 Governor Sarah Palin speaks to Fox News’ Sean Hannity in 2014 - <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/sarah-palin-president-obama-vladimir-putin-104218>

3 See “80 Times Trump Talked About Putin”, CNN, March 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/03/politics/trump-putin-russia-timeline/>, and “Mike Pence Defends Donald Trump Comments on Vladimir Putin: inarguable”, CNN, September 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/08/politics/mike-pence-on-donald-trump-vladimir-putin/index.html>

uncertainty that pervades the policy-making community. This paper will focus on the stereotypes and oversimplifications held by a wide range of actors, and how they impact on perception and thus policy in Russia-West relations.

Chapter One will explore the role of stereotypes in international affairs. Chapter Two will question how Russia-West relations specifically have been impacted by a reliance on stereotypes. Finally, recommendations on reducing and overcoming the negative effects of stereotypes are proposed. It is hoped that by understanding the role of stereotypes, policy-makers will be better able to insulate against the risks of mutual stereotyping and the resulting misperceptions and potentially devastating miscalculations.

Chapter One: Stereotypes and their role in international affairs

Stereotype 'steriə(ʊ) tɪp, 'stiəriə(ʊ) tɪp/ *noun*
 "Relatively fixed and oversimplified generalisations about groups or classes of people. In practice, they generally focus on negative, unfavourable characteristics"

Oxford Dictionary of Psychology

In English the word 'stereotype' often has largely negative connotations. In popular parlance a stereotype is akin to an untruth. This is however a stereotype in itself. At the simplest level, to stereotype is to hold an 'oversimplified' and often fixed view.⁴ Stereotypes are, in essence, oversimplifications based on assumption and an absence of nuance. It is this absence of nuance that will unite the stereotypes discussed in this paper, rather than outright untruth.

How do stereotypes work in international affairs?

To stereotype is to be human, and this is as true of diplomats and world leaders as it is the rest of society. Rationality, as argued by Herbert Simon,⁵ is bounded. Complex environments with multiple active policy debates push actors to rely on assumptions. In international relations many stereotypes are either benign or so mildly positive that they are of little concern to most. Whether one ally views another as having a somewhat

⁴ David J. Schneider. *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, 2003

⁵ Herbert Simon, *Models of Man: social and rational*, 1957

exaggerated reputation for friendliness, for example, is unlikely to significantly shape the course of bilateral relations in a way that is concerning.

The challenge of stereotypes comes when they bias the policy-making process towards a negative, and at times dangerous, outcome. This is particularly true if they aggravate an already existing security dilemma. Consider the case of the British government between the First and Second World Wars. With many in London believing that the Germans had been boxed into an avoidable war in 1914 by British overreaction, the argument made in the 1930s that Hitler's Berlin could be appeased was more convincing. Several stereotypes played their role here alongside the belief that Germany had been wronged. The most misleading being that Hitler was, ultimately, rational and reasonable, and would recognise the concessions made to him and uphold the fragile peace. In part inspired by an oversimplified view of Germany and its leader the British made a mistake that would define the rest of the 20th century.

There are many varieties of stereotypes that impact on international relations, but arguably most fall into two distinct categories: stereotypes of the 'self' and stereotypes of the 'other'. Those of the other shape the way in which governments interpret actions of foreign powers, while those of the 'self' shape the way in which those same governments appraise their own role in events. As argued by Robert Jervis "states not only have to strive to accurately perceive their environments, they must also take into account others' perceptions."⁶ Whether, for example, one country views themselves as being respectful of international law will dictate how they view another's approach to it.

6 Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, Second Edition, 2017

In *The Diplomats' World: 1815-1914*,⁷ it is argued that "in their individual values and perceptions diplomats embody transfer and cultural interactions between states in the sphere of high politics." Mösslang and Riotte were writing of a time in which diplomats were, to a large extent, the sole interlocutors between states. The following century has seen many more actors play their part, such as politicians, military leaders, journalists and electorates. However, the importance of "individual values and perceptions" remains just as true today. These are exacerbated by traditional and contemporary media, including films, computer games and social media, the latter playing a key role in the dissemination of disinformation and 'fake news'.

"There is a tendency, whenever a stereotype undergoes a reversal, for policy-makers to conclude that the position itself was the problem, rather than the fact that the position lacked nuance. This latter is more often at the core of flawed policy."

Stereotypes of the state are tied up in broader cultural values and stereotypes of the people. What impact, for example, did the stereotype that 'Greek people are lazy'⁸ and the stereotype that others in Europe are hardworking have on the negotiations between Athens and its Eurozone partners during 2015 bailout negotiations? Several influential actors, including finance ministers, journalists and voters employed these stereotypes during negotiations, demonstrating how cultural stereotypes can directly influence

7 Markus Mösslang & Torsten Riotte, *The Diplomats' World: A cultural history of diplomacy 1815-1914*, 2008

8 This is a stereotype that can be disproven, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-31803814>

government policy in the international arena.⁹

Stereotypes in international affairs, while often remaining static for long periods, can shift. Britain between World Wars again demonstrates this. London shifted from one oversimplification – which Germany had to be confronted – in the run up to the First World War to its reverse – that Germany can be appeased – ahead of the Second. Often they reverse when the original position is proven to be wrong. There is a tendency, whenever a stereotype undergoes a reversal, for policy-makers to conclude that the position itself was the problem, rather than the fact that the position lacked nuance. This latter is more often at the core of flawed policy. Shifts in stereotypes can be brought about by, for example, changes in government. This is demonstrated by the dramatic shift in the way the United States is viewed from the Obama to the Trump administrations, or by unexpected conflicts as has arguably the case for some following Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and aggression towards Ukraine more recently.

Stereotypes, misperceptions and miscalculations

The challenge posed by stereotypes is in how they frame our perceptions of others and events. A policy-maker who believes another state to be fundamentally peaceful will interpret communications, events and interactions differently to another who views the same country to be aggressive. How a government perceives the Iran Nuclear Deal, for example, will have been shaped by its leaders' underlying stereotypes about Iran and its role in regional and global security. This is compounded by stereotypes of the 'self' and of other actors in the debate. Thus, the more stereotypes a policy-maker subscribes to the more likely that their response to an event will be biased and possibly miscalculated.

It is the way in which they impact on threat perception that make stereotypes in international affairs most concerning. Deterrence relies, fundamentally, on perception of the risks and rewards of taking a particular course of action. If a state cannot effectively interpret an adversary's capacity and resolve due to biasing stereotypes then a failure in deterrence is more likely. For example, if the other country is stereotyped as 'weak', 'indecisive' and 'risk-averse', especially if policy-makers believe their side to be 'strong' and 'decisive', then there is an increased chance of severe miscalculation. Similarly, if a country or its leader is labelled as "undeterrable", as if often said of modern day North Korea,¹⁰ this assertion - which can be based on stereotype rather than knowledge or experience - can affect policymaking. The balance of power may well be equal but this is irrelevant if states do not perceive it to be so. Equally, stereotypes can perpetuate the exaggeration of risk,

⁹ German Chancellor Angela Merkel came under fire in 2011 for suggesting that Greeks, Spaniards and Italians take too much holiday – See: <https://euobserver.com/political/32363>

¹⁰ Current US National Security Adviser, H.R. McMaster, for example has referred to North Korea as "undeterrable" - <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/north-korea-iraq-war-george-w-bush-trump/547796/>

which too can lead to ineffective policy-making, such as an unnecessary escalation that creates risk where it was not. Both over and underestimation of risk threaten mutual security. This is especially acute in Russia-West relations.

The role of stereotypes in international relations, especially in Russia-West relations, is worthy of greater attention. It would however be a mistake to fall into the same trap of oversimplification by overemphasising the importance of stereotypes on their own. The real risk of stereotyping is in its reinforcement of flawed policy approaches. Negative stereotypes can lead to demonization and the miscalculation of threat, in both directions. Stereotyping, both positive and negative, encourages intellectual laziness by jumping to conclusions and avoiding the consideration of other viewpoints, or information incompatible with the stereotype. Opportunities to improve a situation may be missed, leaving all involved worse off.

Chapter Two: Stereotyping in Russia-West Relations

"If I look back, I think it is fair to say that pretty well every western Government had made various assumptions about the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years and, indeed, the early indications in Mr Putin's first term as President, showing that Russia wanted integration into a global rules-based system."

The Rt. Hon. David Lidington MP, UK Minister of State for Europe, December 2014¹¹

Assumptions were made about Russia in the 1990s that turned out not to be true. Russia was, supposedly like the rest of the world, discovering that the end of history was upon them. That end was liberal democracy. Victory in the Cold War meant the West's rule-based international order had come out on top, and that Russia would integrate into it. Ultimately, history did not end. Moscow took a different path, but stereotypes of Russia that were based on assumptions made in the 1990s persisted long after.

Stereotypes continue to inform incorrect assumptions in Russia-West relations today. Some are hangovers from the Cold War and others from the 1990s. In this chapter three broad stereotypes will be

11 Transcript of oral evidence given by the Rt. Hon. David Lidington MP to the House of Lords EU Sub Committee on External Affairs, 15 December 2014, available online via <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/eu-sub-c-external-affairs-committee/eu-and-russia/oral/16849.html>

explored to demonstrate the importance of oversimplifications in the formulation of foreign policy, in the West and Russia. First, the role of Vladimir Putin in Russia-West relations, and the way in which Western understanding of the Russian President has shifted and informed Western policies. Second, Russian and Western images of the other as expansionist and the way in which this forces a stronger response than would otherwise be necessary. Third, and finally, perceptions that both sides have of the other's critical weaknesses and how they encourage ill-advised action and inaction.

It is however important to note at the outset that this paper is not without its own stereotypes and oversimplifications. The choice of stereotypes, the arguments as to their simplicity and the narratives on which they weigh are all subjective. They can all be torn down in some way. This paper's goal, however, is not to declare the truth but rather to argue that the oversimplification of complex issues and the rejection of nuance lead to sub-optimal policy.

The Role of Vladimir Putin

"Putin is a judo master by training, not a chess master, and that's how he looks at gaining advantage for Russia"

Kimberly Marten, professor of political science at Barnard College and Columbia University¹²

"The threat posed by Mr. Putin's meddling existed before the current U.S. Administration, and may well extend beyond it."

Senator Ben Cardin, Ranking Democratic Member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 2018¹³

There exist many beliefs about Vladimir Putin's personal role in the decline in Russia-West relations. The Russian President is often seen not only as the most powerful but as the sole and dominant actor in the formulation of Russian foreign policy. There is a degree of truth to this, particularly as Russia operates what can be characterised as an authoritarian regime. Structural explanations for Russian behaviour however often get side-lined in favour of this approach. This oversimplification adds greater importance to other, more specific, common stereotypes of Putin.

¹² What The Martial Arts Taught Putin, Newsweek, June 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/06/13/what-martial-arts-taught-putin-253348.html>

¹³ Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy In Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the use of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 10 January 2018, available online via <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalIRR.pdf>

One common theme in Western commentary on Vladimir Putin is that the Russian president is a ‘master tactician, but a terrible strategist’¹⁴ or a ‘judo fighter but no chess player.’ This belief was common in the years between 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia, and in the immediate aftermath of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. The Ukraine crisis has encouraged this belief’s decline, replaced in part by a narrative of Putin as a brilliant strategist and global puppet-master.¹⁵

Belief that one’s opponent doesn’t have a strategy but is a master at responding to actions frames the way in which events can be interpreted. It implies that the opponent doesn’t have a clear end goal, and is primarily reacting to events rather than shaping them. In case of Russia, this arguably framed Western threat perception. By supporting the idea that Russia’s actions are reactive it undermined arguments of a Russian end goal which may include dismantling the existing European security order.

Consider Western reaction to Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008. Despite strong condemnation of Moscow’s actions, NATO-Russia and EU-Russia dialogues were quickly resumed, and the incoming US administration sought the now infamous “reset” in relations with Russia. Kadri Liik argues that “after Russia’s annexation of Crimea many policy-makers in Europe have concluded that it had been a mistake to let Russia get away with the 2008 Georgian war.”¹⁶ But immediately

after August 2008, the oversimplified view of Russia acting responsively to events rather than as part of a concerted plan justified the treatment of the war as a special case. After Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine it became clear to some that Georgia had not been a ‘one off’ but rather part of a Russian strategy.

Initial Western interpretations of the annexation of Crimea bear similar hallmarks of the ‘tactician not strategist’ concept. It is also clear that Moscow is aware of this perception. Fyodor Lukyanov, in his testimony to the UK’s House of Lords, expresses surprise that on the day of the Crimean referendum European officials were still arguing that Russia was bluffing.¹⁷

Explaining how and why many in the West missed the signs of the emerging Ukraine crisis requires a far fuller explanation than just oversimplification and stereotyping. The belief however that Putin was primarily a tactician rather than a strategist arguably undermined efforts to evaluate the Kremlin’s actual goals and strategy in Europe.

The oversimplification of Putin as an actor also points to another potential simplification, in terms of the agency of the man himself. In a recently released Democratic Minority Staff Report of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Vladimir Putin is the clear focus.¹⁸ This is explained, to a degree, by a desire to “draw a distinction between Mr. Putin’s corrupt regime and the people of Russia.” It is

14 For example, see Hromadske interview with Mark Galeotti in May 2015 via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ml6nZ9kF50>

15 For more on this see Anders Aslund’s review of relevant literature - <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/06/13/what-martial-arts-taught-putin-253348.html>

16 How to Talk to Russia, Kadri Liik, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_talk_to_russia5055

17 The EU and Russia Before and Beyond the Crisis in Ukraine, Report of the House of Lords Committee on the European Union, February 2015, available online via <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldcom/115/115.pdf>

18 Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy In Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the use of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 10 January 2018

however, according to the report, Putin who has resorted “to the use of these asymmetric tools to achieve his goals”, and it is the “threat Putin poses” that is the focus of the report.

Understandably, given the power structure in modern Russia and Putin’s longevity at the top of it, more weight is given to the personal characteristics of the Russian President than arguably anyone else in Russia-West relations. The West’s emphasis, particularly in the media, on Putin is evident in descriptions of him variously as a “tsar”,¹⁹ a “dictator”,²⁰ being “in another world”²¹ and of being in complete control of Russian decision making. The evaluation of the Russian threat became far more severe in 2016 and 2017. Russia began, in the minds of some Western actors, to represent an existential threat and Putin emerged as the central figure in most perceived attacks on the West. This represents a marked change from the belief that the Russian President made good day-to-day decisions but lacked a strategic vision. It demonstrates the ability for stereotypes to shift, and for two conflicting oversimplifications to exist simultaneously or for one to supplant another. This also shows that stereotypes of the self, in this case of Western democracy’s weakness, can interact with those of the other.

It is not wrong to argue that Putin is personally a very powerful actor but this overemphasis

19 A Tsar is Born, *Economist*, October 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21730645-world-marks-centenary-october-revolution-russia-once-again-under-rule>

20 Joe Biden ups ante by calling Vladimir Putin a ‘dictator’, *CNN*, July 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/28/politics/joe-biden-vladimir-putin-dictator/index.html>

21 Ukraine crisis: Vladimir Putin has lost the plot, says German chancellor, *The Guardian*, March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/ukraine-vladimir-putin-angela-merkel-russian>

distracts from the important focus on structural drivers, both within Russia and in the West. For example, by focusing too much attention on President Putin’s agency, the West risks neglecting the importance of other critical components of Russian foreign policy. National identity, historical narratives, economic balancing, and the structure of Russian politics and national security all play their own important roles. Putin, of course, has made his own significant mark on many of these factors but he is arguably as much a product of them as visa-versa.²² Within the West the role of Putin as a puppet-master behind all negative developments distracts policy-makers away from the broader, and more nuanced, drivers of Russian policy.

Ultimately, one of the clearest ways in which the oversimplification of the role of President Putin impacts Russia-West relations is in how some policy-makers in the West deem it impossible for improvement with Putin in power. Upon leaving his post in 2017 the EU Ambassador to Russia, Vygaudas Ušackas, expressed this view that “Over the course of a six-year presidential term that will follow, it seems probable that the current clash of world views between Moscow and the West will continue.”²³ If a policy-maker accepts the premise that Putin is personally responsible for Russian actions, that his plan is to destroy the West, and that Putin’s place at the top of Russian politics is secure for the foreseeable future, then the conclusion that the current state of relations is set to endure is logical. Any Russian attempts to make overtures to the West may well go ignored or dismissed as part of a Putin master plan.

22 Fiona Hill, *Mr Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 2015

23 West’s rift with Russia ‘will last until Vladimir Putin goes’, *The Guardian*, September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/30/eu-rift-russia-putin-ukraine>

Mutual Expansionism

“[Vladimir Putin] wants to rebuild the Soviet Union.”

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Adviser, March 2014²⁴

“The build-up of the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the endowment of it with global functions pursued in violation of the norms of international law, the galvanization of the bloc countries’ military activity, the further expansion of the alliance, and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to national security.”

Russian National Security Strategy 2015²⁵

For Moscow the belief that Western actions are threatening to Russian security is long-standing. Seeing Russia as an existential threat to the West is something that, until recently, had not been a mainstream position. In the West it has now become commonplace

24 Putin ‘wants to rebuild USSR with Ukraine’ – Brzezinski, EuroNews, March 2014, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/03/07/putin-wants-to-rebuild-ussr-with-ukraine-brzezinski>

25 Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015 – Full-text Translation, available online via <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>

to evoke the perceived expansionist desires of the Kremlin as evidence against any candidate or position deemed as ‘serving Russian interests.’ This much is clear from recent referenda in the Netherlands and the UK, and from elections across the West, such as the 2017 French presidential election during which far-right candidate Marine Le Pen made a controversial visit to Russia.²⁶ Russia’s perennial threat to NATO states, most often the Baltics, is further evidence of the power of the view that Russia seeks to rebuild its former empire. During the UK’s referendum on membership of the EU in 2016, for example, then Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond argued that “the only country that would like us to leave the EU is Russia. That should probably tell us all we need to know,”²⁷ and since the successful Leave vote there have been several allegations of Russian interference in the referendum.²⁸

For the West, the belief that Russia is expansionist is arguably well founded given the precedent Moscow has set with its actions towards Ukraine. Russia, of course, would argue that its own territorial integrity and security are its primary policy drivers rather than a desire to ‘rebuild the empire’. Some in the West have gone further in believing that Russia is also a threat to NATO territory, specifically the Baltic States. Politicians from the three Baltic States have issued warnings of the Russian threat

26 Putin welcomes Le Pen to Moscow with a nudge and a wink, The Guardian, March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/24/putin-welcomes-le-pen-to-moscow-with-a-nudge-and-a-wink>

27 “Only Russia wants Britain to leave the EU, says Philip Hammond”, The Guardian, March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/mar/02/all-alternatives-eu-brexit-come-pricetag-philip-hammond>

28 Russian bid to influence Brexit vote detailed in new US Senate report, The Guardian, January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/russian-influence-brexite-vote-detailed-us-senate-report>

of interference akin to Moscow's alleged actions in Eastern Ukraine.²⁹ Fears of Russia's 2017 Zapad military exercise, that took place in Belarus in September,³⁰ as possible cover for the occupation of Belarus reflected this perception, as well as those of other Russian exercises.³¹

The expansionist Russia stereotype goes beyond the assertion (which seems to be well-documented) that Russia aims to maintain a zone of influence in its immediate neighbourhood. It suggests that, ultimately, nothing but full subjugation of the former Soviet Union territories will satisfy Moscow leaders. This in turn encourages a more forceful response from the West.

From Russia's perspective the unfettered expansion of Western institutions has demonstrated that its territorial integrity is at risk and that Moscow has not been listened to. Professor Sergei Karaganov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, articulated this position in his widely read letter of disagreement to the final report

of the OSCE's Panel of Eminent Persons in 2015. Karaganov wrote that:

"The West continued to pursue a 'Versailles policy in velvet gloves', constantly enlarging its sphere of interest and control. Russia made its views known on all these subjects but no one listened."³²

This arguably shaped the way in which Russia perceived the West's closer relationship with Ukraine in the early 2010s. The belief that Western engagement with Ukraine was aimed at undermining Russia encouraged a far stronger response to the Ukrainian signature to the Association Agreement than most in the West, and many in Russia, would have expected. Indeed, the Ukraine crisis came after a period of relative inaction in terms of pursuing NATO membership for Ukraine.

It would be unwise to argue that there is no truth in either Russian or Western beliefs that the other has desires for expansion, they are both based on understandable evidence and logic. There is however a case to be made that they are oversimplifications. Both perpetuate a decision making process in which the other's actions are construed as imperialistic, and underplay other drivers of policy, including economic concerns and other domestic factors, such as internal power dynamics.

An imperialistic lens has arguably coloured the way in which Western policy-makers have approached the establishment and development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). For some the economic and political bloc of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan represents a nascent economic project in need of development. For others a potential multilateral framework

29 See comments from senior NATO figures and senior government ministers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - Is Russia really a threat to the Baltic states? Al Jazeera, July 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/07/russia-threat-baltic-states-160707054916449.html>

30 Here's what pro-democracy activists in Belarus fear most about Russia's war games, Washington Post, September 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/16/heres-what-pro-democracy-activists-in-belarus-fear-most-about-russias-war-games/?utm_term=.a9534c12a36f

31 Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa & Ian Kearns, Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe more Likely? European Leadership Network, August 2015, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/preparing-for-the-worst-are-russian-and-nato-military-exercises-making-war-in-europe-more-likely/>

32 Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, OSCE, September 2015, <http://www.osce.org/networks/205846>

for engagement in Russia-West relations. But for some it represents an attempt by Moscow to solidify control over its former Soviet satellites.

In 2015 several senior European figures including Commission President Juncker, Trade Commissioner Malstrom and German Foreign Minister Steinmeier all raised the prospect of EU-EEU cooperation. There was widespread opposition to this move from within Europe, and from the United States. Criticism often focused on 'legitimacy' with former US Assistant Secretary of State Kramer writing that "Legitimizing the Eurasian Union would be demoralizing to the countries that were forced to join."³³

The view that Russia has imperial designs thus shapes the way in which some in the West view potential areas of dialogue and cooperation. It also removes agency and strategic interest from the states that have closer ties with Russia. For Russia, the same is true when casting Western actions in Eastern Europe as part of a plot to expand and surround Russia, encouraging the exaggeration of threat and corresponding response.

Mutual Weakness

"We in Russia do not see much value in working with the EU, we do not imagine it will be around in the future."

Former United Russia party official speaking under the Chatham House Rule, early 2017

"Russia doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy."

President Barack Obama, December 2016³⁴

Russia and the West hold mutual stereotypes of the other's weakness in at least one critical area. These stereotypes co-exist alongside stereotypes of unmatched strength in other areas. For many Russian specialists Western unity is in doubt, particularly with regard to the integrity of the European Union. For some in the West the Russian economy is perennially close to collapse. There is truth in both of these beliefs, but both dramatically oversimplify the situation. Stereotypes of weakness are arguably as influential as stereotypes of strength when it comes to policy-making. They encourage the underestimation of the intent and capabilities of the other side and the overestimation of the likely effectiveness of certain policy tools, such as intelligence operations, to influence internal politics or sanctions.

In the run up to, and in the aftermath of, the UK's decision to leave the European Union Russia was not alone in thinking that the bloc had a bleak future. Perpetual crisis for

³³ David J. Kramer, Why Europe shouldn't cooperate with Russia's economic bloc, PoliticoEurope, December 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-europe-shouldnt-cooperate-with-russias-economic-bloc/>

³⁴ President Barack Obama's final press conference, December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2016/dec/16/barack-obama-press-conference-live-video>

several years, due to, amongst other factors, sovereign debt and significant migration flows, encouraged regular debates over the future of the EU. Russia however arguably bought into this narrative more than others.³⁵ Developments in the EU in 2017, however, demonstrate that while the bloc is not without its challenges, talk of its impending demise was overblown.

The oversimplification of the EU as being close to collapse encourages Russian attempts to divide the EU and discourages Moscow from seeking better relations with the bloc. This is understandable. Why work hard to develop closer relations with a body that will collapse, especially when it is complex and difficult to deal with?³⁶ Far better to deal with individual, and sometimes friendlier, governments by leveraging bilateral relationships at the expense of the multilateral. Moreover, this stereotype encourages Russian attempts to not only hope for certain political outcomes in the West, such as the election of Russia-friendly governments, but actively seek to promote them. This could include the spreading of disinformation and support for anti-Europe or pro-Russian organisations. The result of this approach, in part desired and in part unintended, has been to further alienate Brussels.

A Russia which is less inclined towards closer relations with the EU (as is arguably in its interest)³⁷ is more inclined to pivot away from Europe and towards increased isolationism

35 Several prominent Russians, speaking under the Chatham House rule, articulated this belief to the author at several meetings in early 2017.

36 Andrey Kortunov, *Hybrid Cooperation: A New Model for Russia-EU Relations*, RIAC, September 2017, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/hybrid-cooperation-a-new-model-for-russia-eu-relations/>

37 Joseph Dobbs and Ian Kearns, *The Strategic Case for EU-Russia Cooperation*, European Leadership Network, July 2016, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/the-strategic-case-for-eu-russia-cooperation/>

or closer partnerships in Asia.³⁸ Perceived EU weakness is not the only contributing factor to what has been a long-standing intellectual trend in Russia, but it does add legitimacy to it.

In the West there is a long-standing narrative that the Russian economy is weak and corrupt, over-reliant on hydrocarbons, and dependent on Western investment. For years, many in the West have worked on the assumption that Russia's economy is on the brink of collapse. "Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters" President Obama told Congress in his 2015 State of the Union Address.³⁹ Yet, in 2017 Russia's economy was expected to have grown by around 1.7%.⁴⁰ Russia's economy is structurally flawed, something that most Russians would agree with. It is however the lack of nuance in the belief of many that Russia would collapse due to falling oil prices and Western sanctions that has arguably discouraged creative thinking on new policy choices.

The oversimplification of Russia's economic state by some in the Western foreign policy community has strengthened the belief that sanctions would cause a change in Russian policy. Not all proponents of sanctions believed that they would impact the Kremlin's behaviour, and there were

europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/the-strategic-case-for-eu-russia-cooperation/

38 See Dmitry Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente*, Carnegie Moscow, April 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/04/09/from-greater-europe-to-greater-asia-sino-russian-entente-pub-59728>

39 Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address | January 20, 2015, available online via <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>

40 According to World Bank estimates in mid-January 2018

many other arguments in favour of their implementation. However, overconfidence in the effectiveness of sanctions ignores the evidence suggesting that the private sector, not the state aligned elite, is bearing the brunt, and Russia's economy is orienting away from the West. Overconfidence on sanctions also discourages other important foreign policy tools, notably dialogue mechanisms. A West that believes Russian policy can be shaped with economic pressures is less inclined to use diplomatic means.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The examples outlined in this chapter show how stereotypes, or oversimplifications, interact with policy-making in Russia-West relations. Ultimately, through the way in which they frame the likely and the possible, they are a detrimental force on the future of relations, and thus on the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. Mutuality of security requires, as far as it is possible, mutuality of understanding. The presence of stereotypes in Russia-West relations is something that must be better understood, acknowledged and defended against, in order to both improve relations and in order to avoid worsening pre-existing security dilemmas.

A wider debate is needed in both Russia and the West on what constitutes fact, what constitutes legitimate opinion and what, importantly, may be a stereotype. Stereotypes cannot be eliminated, they are natural aspects of human and political psychology. We rely on simplified assumptions to help us process data. They must however be factored into policy-making processes and considered alongside other drivers of foreign policy decision-making. This must take place both as part of a critical reflection of past failures and of the development of future foreign policy.

This paper demonstrates that while stereotypes may be natural and sometimes correct in summarising the motivations and behaviour of particular actors, they may also have a detrimental impact on international affairs, particularly on Russia-West relations. While stereotypes will remain an aspect of foreign policy making, by better understanding them and their role in international affairs, their negative impact could be curtailed and even neutralised. As both Russia and the West continue to move towards what resembles a Cold War, the need to reject simple dichotomies and embrace nuance will become even more urgent.

Recommendations

Both Russia and Western government and institutions should consider the following:

1. **Recognise the role of stereotypes.** Like any addict will tell you, the first step to recovery is recognising that you have a problem. It may well be that some foreign policy positions will remain unchanged, that policy-makers will decide that some, or many, decisions were based primarily on correct assumptions and should thus be upheld. All governments and international organisations would benefit from reviewing to what extent past foreign policy decisions have been informed by oversimplifications, stereotypes or wishful thinking. One possible way to achieve this for incoming governments or parliaments would be to commission reviews of their Russia-West policies, and schedule regular updates. Non-governmental experts should be allowed to input into these reviews but should be more mindful of, and where appropriate open about their assumptions and biases.
2. **Speak more often to your opponents.** The most obvious way in which both sides can better understand the other, and the other's perception of themselves, and thus avoid acting on stereotypes, is through communication. Engagement, at both a civil society and diplomatic level, is not a reward for good behaviour, it is a fundamental requirement for better understanding and, thus better policy. Through improved communication, the stereotypes held by the other side can be better understood and argued against. Meetings must also address widely differing narratives on key aspects of the Russia-West relationship, such as international law, non-intervention, human rights etc. Dialogue should also be encouraged at a Track 2, i.e. non-governmental, level and at younger generation levels.
3. **Reverse cuts and increase funding to foreign policy making bodies.** Stereotype free policy demands effective information gathering and effective diplomats to engage in the dialogue and analysis that is essential for better understanding. Cuts to foreign ministry budgets across the West belie this reality. Governments should invest more in foreign ministries, and in the foreign policy sector and research more broadly, to allow for better training and specialisation for officials.
4. **Institutionalise independent assessments across and between foreign policy structures.** Political and military leaders must ensure that they have received independent assessments of crucial foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis Russia-West relations. Foreign ministries will view things differently to defence or finance ministries, with intelligence agencies too having different perspectives. Governments should establish inter-departmental task-forces, and when possible engage with Parliamentary and civil society figures. Diversity of opinion, and diversity of facts, will better inform policy. The UK's Joint Intelligence Committee can serve, to a degree, as a model for others, being both independent of government policy-making and regularly uses red-teaming.
5. **Engage with allies in debates about narratives and assessments of foreign policy-making.** Allies, for example both at an EU and NATO level, already engage on the formulation of collective policy and consult to a degree on independent actions. This should be expanded to include a discussion of narratives and foreign policy making processes. Allies should institutionalise review processes to evaluate effectiveness, reasons for failed assumptions and develop ways to multilaterally reduce the role of stereotypes.