



Royal United Services Institute  
for Defence and Security Studies



Conference Report

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**T**HIS PAPER OFFERS a summary of the main comments and conclusions from a bilateral workshop jointly held by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in November 2016. The focus of the discussion was whether the UK and Germany align in their threat perception and strategic thinking towards Russia, based on their assessment of perceived challenges Russia poses to European security. During the discussion, the debate widened to assess Europe's response to Russia's foreign policy. This workshop brought together a small group of specialists and MPs from the UK and Germany to discuss these challenges. The following recommendations emerged from the discussion:

- It is natural that Western European governments, such as the UK and Germany, have reduced their analytical focus on Russia given the rise of other threats and international conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, analytical capacity needs to be refreshed and deepened, not only to examine Russia's domestic and international activities more holistically, but also to articulate exactly what the threat is that Russia poses to Europe other than a replication of Ukrainian tactics in the Baltics. Understanding the personalities of those creating or influencing Russian policy should be a key part of this analysis, which should also be used to identify appropriate individuals with which to engage.
- A better understanding is required of the information Russia projects to European populations at a national level, particularly in the UK and Germany. Although RT and Sputnik have generally been dismissed as less significant in countries without a large Russian-speaking diaspora, more research should be conducted to understand what – if any – threat Russian media might pose. This also applies to understanding other areas of 'soft power' influence Russia may have, such as through NGOs or political funding.
- There has been a conscious effort at the EU and NATO levels to understand the threat of misinformation from Russia. However, national initiatives tailored to national press to counter misinformation or manipulated stories would also help act as a force multiplier.
- Current EU or NATO efforts to counter misinformation are often too focused on the misinformation debate itself rather than on calling out the false information in a rapid, concise and consumable manner. Countering every biased or manipulated statement is not feasible, so what is considered to pose the greatest threat needs to be prioritised. Humour can be an effective tool in highlighting the absurd nature of some statements.
- Western governments should be stronger at standing up for themselves while countering Russian misinformation. More explicit statements are needed to demonstrate why Russian misinformation is misleading or incorrect.
- Countering misinformation and bias should not be restricted to Russian-backed media outlets. Education in media analysis and critical thinking should be enhanced more generally in Europe.
- So far, the main identifiable European national and EU-wide policy towards Russia has been sanctions. Individual states should think more strategically about how they wish to engage with Russia in the long-term, and how they should ensure that institutional and government-to-government ties are not severed completely. Severing ties would prevent any progress on the bilateral relationship and would also deprive the West of meaningful insights on how Russia thinks and works.

- ‘Dialogue’ is a useful term, but it means nothing without an agenda attached. The UK and Germany should determine how this dialogue should be structured and what goals they wish to achieve from engaging with Russia.

## Understanding Russia

Renewed assertiveness in Russia’s foreign policy has signalled a more decisive approach towards defending Moscow’s national interests as well as attempts to re-shape the world order as the Kremlin sees fit. There has been much discussion about a ‘new Cold War’ between Russia and the West. Although there are certainly lessons to be learnt from history, this phrasing is not sufficient for framing the current rationale behind Kremlin decision-making and, more importantly, the changes in the context of how the West views and reacts to Russia’s actions. It appears that the worldviews of Russia and the ‘West’, until now namely the EU and America, are diverging, although the election of President Trump is likely to shift this balance in favour of Russia’s approach. However, the rules of the game seem to be less clear than before. Sir John Sawers, the former head of MI6, has summarised this by saying ‘we are moving into an era that is as dangerous, if not more dangerous, as the cold war because we do not have that focus on a strategic relationship between Moscow and Washington’. Unlike during the Cold War, there are now ‘no clear rules of the road’.<sup>1</sup>

This could, in part, be because the West has not maintained consistent analytical focus on Russia. This is in contrast to Russia. As one participant said, ‘we are not looking at Russia with the attention that they are looking at us’. That is not to say Russia always gets its analysis right of the West, but it has targeted its thinking towards it. Moreover, the West arguably has fewer tools to implement its strategic and tactical thinking to counter Russian aggression, as it did during the Cold War, mainly because the world order has changed. Another participant said, ‘we have forgotten what works and why’. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia seemed to want to cooperate and integrate with the West. However, in recent years, Russia has become increasingly frustrated with what it perceives to be the Western-dictated world order.

President Vladimir Putin makes particular efforts to analyse people. One good example is that of when the Russian leader brought a dog to a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, despite her fear of them. Putin denied that he knew anything about her phobia,<sup>2</sup> but Merkel believed it to be intentional, later telling reporters, ‘I understand why he has to do this – to prove he’s a man ... he’s afraid of his own weakness’.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the West lowered Russia as a priority post-Cold War as new threats, such as terrorism, rose up the agenda. This is not surprising given the immediacy of other threats and finite resources. Despite acrimonious relations, Russia’s provocative behaviour on issues of

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1. Patrick Wintour et al., ‘Cold War 2.0: How Russia and the West Reheated a Historic Struggle’, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2016.
2. Tim Hume, ‘Vladimir Putin: I Didn’t Mean to Scare Angela Merkel with My Dog’, *CNN*, 12 January 2016.
3. George Packer, ‘The Quiet German’, *New Yorker*, 1 December 2014.

European security and events in Ukraine, one participant said there is still a need to 'present the Russia case' within European governments in a bid for resource allocation.

This reflects a perception among some policymakers in Europe that Russia in fact may not pose a strong and immediate danger to Europe. Therefore, little direct action or forceful retaliation is required, unlike when countering terrorism. However, without strong and refreshed analytical capacity and constant monitoring, it was agreed that true and deep understanding of the potential threat posed will be minimal. This strengthens Russia's hand.

Part of the difficulty in defining the Russian 'threat' is that many of Russia's actions are aimed at testing how far the West will go in responding, as part of its approach of threshold warfare, rather than committing to a direct and outright attack. This makes defining the reality of any danger that Russia poses difficult. As a result, many Western governments have deemed it appropriate to avoid dramatic retaliations that risk providing pretext for escalation. One participant described that, in the long-term, Russia's approach is aimed at 'sapping the will to oppose'.

Part of this approach from Russia, according to participants, is because Russia is acting from a position of weakness. This is mainly viewed in economic terms, particularly economic inter-connectedness. Russia's GDP contracted by 3.7% in 2015, and in November 2016 the government was forced to cut military spending.<sup>4</sup> The number of people in Russia living below the poverty line increased between 2014 and 2015 from 11.2% of the population to 13.4% of the population respectively. The World Bank expected the number of people living below the poverty line to grow by 1.1 million in 2016 to 14.2% of the overall population.<sup>5</sup> Although the economic indicators are looking more positive for 2017, Russia has still refrained from significant economic reform that would make it more resilient against a drop in oil prices.

Inter-connectedness mainly relates to imports. Regardless of the Kremlin's enthusiasm for import substitution in the wake of Western and Ukrainian sanctions, Russia still imports key equipment. For example, a Russian official has said that 90% of all machine tools in the country are imported. The proportion of foreign electronic components of Russia's most advanced satellite projects, such as GLONASS-K, is thought to be at least 90%.<sup>6</sup> Imports are particularly significant for military equipment, despite Russia's impressive modernisation programme. Igor Sutyagin, of RUSI, has noted that at least 826 Russian weapons systems rely on parts from the West. 40–90% of electronic components in Russian weapons systems are imported, and 100% of naval electronic systems are based on imported components.<sup>7</sup>

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4. *Kommersant.ru*, 'Byudzhnet mirnovo bremeni' ['Budget Peace Burden'], 27 October 2016, <<http://kommersant.ru/doc/3126798>>, accessed 27 January 2017.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Vladimir Voronov, 'Import Substitution for Rogozin', Henry Jackson Society and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 2016.

7. Igor Sutyagin, 'Russia's Military Reform: Why the Kremlin Needs the West', *RUSI Newsbrief*, November 2016.

Despite the assessment that Moscow is acting from a position of weakness, participants noted that this seems less relevant given that Russia has identified strengths in other approaches that help it achieve its objectives. Russia's use of a full-spectrum approach that blends conventional and non-conventional tactics to test and weaken opponents' defences is a significant strength. Russia is clearly willing to weaponise multiple areas of engagement.

## Russian Approach

An added advantage for Russia is the nature of its end goal. It is not necessarily seeking to create a new system that competes directly with and eventually dominates the current Western approach to the world order. Instead, it seeks to undermine and erode confidence in the current Western approach among the West's own populations. As one EU Institute for Security Studies report has noted, after RT<sup>8</sup> was launched in 2005 it was clear there was 'not much appetite for news praising Russia in the West'. There were, however, plenty of potential viewers who were 'willing to consume negative news about the state of the West'.<sup>9</sup>

This doubt then leads to a relativist assessment of 'right' and 'wrong' ways to govern and lead, making the Russian political approach more acceptable and equal to that of the West. A full-spectrum approach, in which military tactics are just one in a range of tools, including cyber, information, political and economic influence, is highly effective for achieving this goal given that many of these tools are used to maximise psychological impact and highlight Western hypocrisy. As one participant noted, Putin and his political coterie are 'willing to fight and are definitely aiming to exploit Western weakness'.

Obfuscation and resulting doubt in the legitimacy of facts is a key tactic of Russia's use of information. As Molly K McKew, who served as an adviser to the then Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's government from 2009–13, has said, 'information warfare is not about creating an alternate truth, but eroding our basic ability to distinguish truth at all'.<sup>10</sup> Some issues, such as Syria, have a more consistent narrative from Russia. However, Russia's reaction to events such as the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines MH17 over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014 demonstrates a different approach aimed simply at confusing the reality in order that no one can definitively be held accountable. RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan has famously said 'there is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible'.<sup>11</sup> Through outlets such as RT and Sputnik, Russia is in some ways using the West's freedom of the press against it, particularly given that the same degree of media freedom is not available in Russia. However, Simonyan would also reasonably argue that outlets such as RT simply provide an 'alternative viewpoint', highlighting the many domestic European news outlets that purposefully select and often manipulate facts to suit their agenda.

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8. At the time it was known as *Russia Today*, but it was later renamed as *RT*.

9. Antonio Missiroli et al., *Strategic Communications East and South* (Paris: EUISS, July 2016).

10. Molly K McKew, 'Putin's Real Long Game', *Politico*, 1 January 2017.

11. *Spiegel Online*, 'Russia Today's Editor-In-Chief: "The West Never Got Over the Cold War Stereotype"', 13 August 2013.

This poses difficulties for the West, as there is little public appetite for the curtailment of media freedom in a manner that could hamper RT's objective. Furthermore, RT and Sputnik are, much of the time, not breaking media rules in Europe. There have been a few obvious violations cited by the UK independent media communication regulator Ofcom against RT, which it and Sputnik have naturally dismissed as biased.<sup>12</sup> The accusation by many Western commentators that outlets such as RT and Sputnik are more biased than others, based on their seemingly more political agenda given Kremlin funding, assists in their narrative that they are being unfairly targeted by Western governments particularly when commentators do not articulate how and why this bias is worse than others.

To some European governments, particularly the UK, outlets such as RT are dismissed as relatively low-impact and insignificant, particularly given their poor ratings. However, sufficient research has not yet been done to confirm this. The outlets were still important enough for the EU Parliament to agree on a resolution noting that the Russian government is:

[E]mploying a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think tanks and special foundations (e.g. *Russkiy Mir*), special authorities (*Rossotrudnichestvo*), multilingual TV stations (e.g. RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values, social media and internet trolls to challenge democratic values, divide Europe, gather domestic support and create the perception of failed states in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy that when searching for information on this particular resolution, the first six hits on Google are RT and Sputnik reports criticising the resolution. Clearly, a better understanding of the impact of these types of news outlets is required.

Cyber attacks have also increasingly become a useful tool to test capabilities, responses and also cast doubt. They are difficult to combat, not only because of the under-development of international norms in this field, but also due to the difficulty in exact attribution and the resulting plausible deniability of any state actors involved. An additional difficulty is that many hackers who may work on behalf of state actors might not be aware of their ultimate employer, particularly as they are often recruited on the dark web. One expert compared the practice with 'sixteenth-century privateering', as 'people are making money out of being cyber subcontractors'. Cyber attacks may be conducted in order to disrupt and test capabilities and also to confuse the public so that motives are not completely clear. By undermining Western confidence towards its own control of cyberspace, national security is in turn undermined.

Cyber has also been used for another Russian foreign policy aim. When justifying the Russian interpretation of events on RT, Simonyan has defended any obvious bias by using the 'well, everyone is doing it' argument. Cyber has been used to go one step further to target Western

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12. *Sputnik*, 'UK's OFCOM "Clearly Biased" Against RT Amid Blocking of Broadcaster's Accounts', 29 October 2016.

13. European Parliament, 'Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties', P8\_TA-PROV (2016) 0441, 2014–2019, 14 October 2016.



governments' political hypocrisy. This goes further in de-legitimising the 'values-based' approach again causing moral doubt.

The most prominent example of this took place during the recent US presidential elections. The US government has accused Russia of hacking the Democratic National Committee's (DNC) computer networks in a bid to 'interfere' with the US presidential elections and has since sanctioned Russian individuals, companies and intelligence services. Security firms believed that the hacking group responsible included groups known as Fancy Bear, (believed to be linked to Russian military intelligence, GRU), and Cozy Bear (thought to have links to the Federal Security Service, FSB).<sup>14</sup> The emails, which were later leaked to and published by Wikileaks, showed the hostility between DNC officials and Clinton's former rival Bernie Sanders, despite claiming neutrality in the race. It also revealed detail on what the *New York Times* described as the 'elaborate, ingratiating and often bluntly transactional exchanges necessary to harvest hundreds of millions of dollars from the party's wealthy donor class'.<sup>15</sup> This was an embarrassing revelation for a Democratic Party that has primed itself on a values-based approach to government.

Therefore, Russia has strengthened itself by using tactics that are difficult for the West to respond to in kind. As one participant put it, 'it doesn't matter if Russia is weak, if it can make us weaker'. Another participant said regardless of their position, Russia had been 'good at making the West behave in a weak way'. The West and Russia are not playing by the same rules anymore, particularly as Russia is willing to push boundaries further than the West. One expert noted that, 'the gap between the rules and boundaries for Russia and everyone else is greater than before and is widening'.

Russia also has additional innate advantages over many Western governments, given that the centralised process of decision-making is faster and that the Kremlin is not answerable to the electorate in the same way that more developed democracies are. This allows Russia to out-think and out-manoeuvre the West on the Kremlin's terms. Moreover, Russia looks more purposefully for leverage in its foreign policy relationships that it can use when required. As one participant said, Russia is adept at 'identifying vulnerabilities in other countries and are good negotiators'. Russia may also look for ways to create leverage, shown by its intervention in Syria in September 2015. The West, in comparison, does not necessarily study Russia's own weaknesses in the same way to then use in bargaining.

## Ukraine

That is not to say that Russia always necessarily makes the correct judgement calls in foreign policy. Many in the discussion felt that Russia miscalculated the reaction in Ukraine, particularly the power of the popular protest. By acting the way it did over Crimea and the Donbass, Russia has alienated a large section of the Ukrainian population and in some ways pushed the country

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14. Sam Thielman and Spencer Ackerman, 'US Believes Russian Hackers Are behind Democratic National Committee Leak', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2016.

15. Nicholas Confessore and Steve Eder, 'In Hacked D.N.C. Emails, a Glimpse of How Big Money Works', *New York Times*, 25 July 2016.

into a more pro-EU path, at least in the short-term. There was also the impression that Russia miscalculated the Western response to Ukraine, particularly from Merkel, who had always been able to engage Putin.

Moreover, Russia did not necessarily anticipate how far the Ukrainian government would go in its commitment to cutting off economic ties. Ukraine is trying to wean itself off Russian gas, and it has sanctioned defence exports. This has knock-on effects for the Russian military, which is significantly inter-related with Ukrainian manufacturing. In 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said that Ukrainian components were used in the production of 186 types of Russian military equipment. All Antonov planes have Ukrainian components, and Ukraine was a key supplier of engine components for Russia. In May 2015, Ukrainian company Motor-Sich halted deliveries of engines for combat helicopters.<sup>16</sup> This obviously hit Ukraine's defence industry hard, with an estimated loss of 80% of revenue for the State Space Agency of Ukraine in the aerospace and military industries.<sup>17</sup>

A future challenge for Ukraine will stem not only from domestic issues and any further negative Russian pressure. The European security landscape may also change in light of Brexit and as Donald Trump's foreign policy decisions become clearer. For example, there are concerns in Europe, particularly from the EU, regarding how committed Trump will be to NATO security, given his comments that the US may not come to the aid of a NATO ally if they did not spend 2% of GDP on defence.<sup>18</sup> One participant noted that, as a result, 'Europe will need to be vigilant on Ukraine in case Trump drops interest and support.' Moreover, it was noted that Germany will need to do more on defence.

Part of the difficulty will be not only to keep the international community engaged but also the Ukrainian government. The negotiations over Brexit may affect the EU's standing in foreign policy, as well as UK priorities. The UK has been a strong donor to Ukrainian reform efforts. However, the EU has in the past also been weak in its communication to Eastern Partnership countries on the importance and benefits behind reform. Commitment to reform and the creation of real national resilience is crucial to any independent survival on the part of the Ukrainian state, and this should remain the focus of international engagement. As one participant mentioned, the 'biggest blow to Russia would be if Ukraine succeeded'. Although the priority is allowing Ukraine a foundation to then make its own choices, rather than dealing a 'blow' to Russia, it is the best way to provide Ukraine with genuine independence and hopefully at some point the ability to engage constructively to both the East and West.

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16. Pavel Aksenov, 'Ukraine Crisis: Why a Lack of Parts Has Hamstrung Russia's Military', *BBC*, 8 August 2015.

17. *vybor.ua*, 'Poteri Ukrainy ot razryva kontraktov s RF v kosmicheskoy i voennykh otraslyakh sostavyat 2 mlrd grn' ['The Loss of Ukraine from Breaking Contracts with Russia in Space and Military Industries Amounted to 2 Billion UAH'], 2 September 2016, <[http://vybor.ua/news/poteri\\_ukrainy\\_ot\\_razryva\\_kontraktov\\_s\\_rf\\_v\\_kosmicheskoy\\_i\\_voennykh\\_otraslyah\\_sostavyat\\_2\\_mlrd\\_grn.html](http://vybor.ua/news/poteri_ukrainy_ot_razryva_kontraktov_s_rf_v_kosmicheskoy_i_voennykh_otraslyah_sostavyat_2_mlrd_grn.html)>, accessed 27 January 2017.

18. Patrick Wintour, 'Nato Chief Tells EU: Spend More to Secure Trump's Support', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016.

## Western Response

As mentioned, the West has fewer realistic tools it can use in a like-for-like reaction to Russia. This is in part because Western governments are more accountable to their electorate. One participant noted that ‘there is no political backing for such a response ... the Western public doesn’t back it’.

Another mismatch in the dynamic is the level of self-criticism in the West compared with its absence among Russian officials. One participant put most of the blame for Russia’s current behaviour on the West itself, saying, ‘we have failed to secure a place for Russia in the European architecture. We never worked out how to do this after the Cold War’. Another said that ‘the main goal should be to bring Russia back to the international rule-based system and European architecture’.

Although such analysis is important and the West should certainly learn from policy mistakes in its relationship with Moscow, the same self-criticism is absent from internal and public policy debates in Russia, indicating that, instead of finding a compromise where both sides admit mistakes have been made, the Kremlin is searching for compromise on its own terms. An over-concentration on such self-criticism also runs the risk of removing any agency from Russia. Part of the difficulty is that now it seems that Russia’s view of a world order is mutually exclusive to that of many Western countries. It is unclear how to make Russia feel it is ‘respected’ enough in international affairs for it to be more cooperative without simply supporting its foreign policy actions and refraining from intervention in international affairs, as Trump has implied he will do. As one participant noted ‘how do you accommodate Russian interests? To do so, it would have meant keeping parts of Europe a grey zone’.

In relation to misinformation, there has been a conscious effort at EU and NATO levels to understand the threat, through initiatives such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. There have been more proactive initiatives at the EU level to counter it, such as the EU Mythbusters twitter feed and the Disinformation Review, established by the European External Action Service East StratCom Task Force.<sup>19</sup> However, such initiatives on their own are not sufficient. Moreover, the Mythbusters feed does not react rapidly to Russian misinformation as such, but tends to retweet on the issue broadly, including long analytical reports from European think tanks. Although valuable, this is clearly intended for a specific audience. Something for wider consumption is required. National initiatives to counter misinformation or manipulated stories would also help act as a force multiplier. This should really apply to both Russian and non-Russian sources – the difficulty of countering the ‘alternative facts’ argument has more recently played out on the US domestic scene.

As part of national initiatives, one suggestion was that Western governments should compromise at times on accuracy or full counter-claims to misinformation to ensure time is not wasted. A workshop participant said, ‘by the time we debate whether it is true or false,

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19. EU Mythbusters Twitter Account, <[https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwtgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwtgr%5Eauthor)>, accessed 11 January 2017.

the battle has already been lost'. Technology and social media have greatly facilitated the effectiveness of misinformation. There should be a sensible balance between the need to explain the misinformation in full with the need to react and counter propaganda. It was noted that this should not be done in a tit-for-tat manner that tries to counter every purposeful lie or manipulated truth, but should concentrate instead on the most damaging ones. Humour, it was suggested, can be an effective tool in highlighting the absurdity of some Russian claims or statements.

Furthermore, official national government statements in response to Russia misinformation could be more effective. In October 2016, RT reported that UK bank NatWest had sent notification that it will cease to provide banking services to the media outlet. RT's statement was clearly misleading. NatWest's owner, the Royal Bank of Scotland Group, denied that it had shut RT's bank accounts, claiming instead the redacted notification published by RT actually related to an RT supplier.<sup>20</sup> RT went further and claimed that the bank account closure was a result of UK government pressure to curtail the broadcaster's freedom of speech. HM Treasury sources gave a somewhat muted response, saying that it could not comment on individual cases. However, it made it clear that it was not behind the move and that the UK government had not introduced any fresh sanctions that would affect RT's accounts.<sup>21</sup> A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Theresa May did give a more robust response, but much more could have been done to refute Russian claims that this was a government-backed move to penalise RT, and that in reality it was a decision taken by NatWest based on its own risk assessment.

Essentially, European governments should do more to reinforce their own narrative. As one participant said, 'rebutting misinformation is part of the response, but cannot be the whole picture. It needs to be a positive front-foot narrative that is inclusive of Russian speakers in a European space'. This can be implemented at both the domestic level as well as part of foreign policy initiatives. It may be useful to encourage people-to-people relations among, for example, students and young professionals to ensure an attempt to rectify the tainted image of the West as depicted by Russia is made.

If they are serious about countering Russian misinformation, Germany, the UK and the EU should continue to help Russian-speaking initiatives to counter false narratives. For example, the UK government has provided funding to the StopFake project, which seeks to improve reporting in Ukraine and abroad, as well as spread true news to counter misinformation.<sup>22</sup> As one participant said, 'we need to shape rather than react to the narrative more'.

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20. Jane Bradley, 'NatWest Owner RBS Denies Claims it Has Closed RT's Bank Accounts', *The Scotsman*, 17 October 2016

21. Luke Harding and Shaun Walker, 'Closure of Russia Today Bank Accounts Nothing To Do with Us – Treasury', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2016.

22. British Embassy Kyiv, 'UK-Funded Projects in Ukraine 2015-2016', 13 October 2015, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/uk-funded-projects-in-ukraine-2015-2016>>, accessed 5 December 2016.

There was some debate over whether prominent figures, such as UK or German MPs, should appear for comment on RT. Although this is the individual's choice, one UK MP made the point that if they do not appear on RT, it cuts off an opportunity to get their views across to other audiences. They noted that 'if there is a twisting of quotations, then it can be used as evidence of editorial malpractice'. Although this may be challenging to track, and may in certain contexts risk legitimising media outlets that distort facts, it is at the essence of the principles of freedom of speech that Russia very much recognises as a leverage point.

As mentioned, greater research needs to be done at the national level on the threat from Russian misinformation. The influence Russian 'soft power' has within Europe's own societies is not understood as fully as it should be. RT claims it has 2.5 million viewers in the UK on a quarterly basis.<sup>23</sup> This is not huge, but it is unclear whether this is influencing public opinion in any way, particularly as little is known of those viewing or reading RT online. One strategic communications expert mentioned that the challenge of social media is that many retweet headlines without checking the story's veracity. New communications platforms highlight a potential gap in European education. As one participant noted, 'building resilience in pluralistic society means media education and critical thinking', something that should be built more into formal education. The at times very poor quality of the Brexit debate prior to the referendum reinforces this point in the UK.

This also extends to Russian influence more broadly in politics and society in Europe. Although it carried a rather alarmist tone, the Atlantic Council's report on the 'Kremlin's Trojan Horses' was a good introduction to the ways in which Russia funds political parties and NGOs as a means of soft power in France, Germany and the UK.<sup>24</sup> More could be done to analyse this influence in Germany and the UK in particular. However, it needs to go beyond criticising Russia's approach and identifying 'pro-Russian' elements in European society to better understand the real threat Russian associates, media and funding pose and how that threat manifests itself. It would also be useful to do a comparative analysis of any German and UK funding to Russian NGOs in order to combat, if appropriate, the Russian argument that they are simply mirroring Western activity.

Of all the tools that the West had to use in light of Ukraine, the most significant and most direct were sanctions. It was noted that, rather than change Putin's behaviour as many critics of the policy have assumed, sanctions were aimed at making the price higher for Russia to pursue a policy that would harm Ukraine's security. The workshop discussion did touch on whether more could be done with this foreign policy tool. Most participants felt that sanctions should be focused more on individuals, particularly businessmen, who are close to Russia's decision-makers as well as those who were involved in, or supported, Russian action in Ukraine and possibly Syria. One suggestion was that the EU should consider sanctions against journalists and editors involved in misinformation campaigns.

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23. *RT.com*, 'Distribution', <<https://www.rt.com/about-us/distribution/>>, accessed 5 December 2016.

24. Alina Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, November 2016).

A difficulty for these suggestions, however, is the legal premise on which individuals or businesses can be sanctioned under EU law, as the recent case in which Russian construction oligarch Arkady Rotenberg disputed EU sanctions shows. The General Court of the EU ruled that Rotenberg's original listing under EU sanctions in July 2014 was unlawful, because the bloc could not prove he was closely linked enough with those responsible for 'undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine' or 'benefitted from decision-makers who were responsible for the annexation of Crimea'.<sup>25</sup> A key sentiment from participants, however, was that sanctions should not seem to be punishing the Russian people. A central suggestion for the UK was to improve enforcement regarding money laundering originating from Russia or through Russian networks. Law enforcement agencies are working to improve intelligence on this.

One participant raised the fact that a limitation of the EU approach to sanctions is in some ways, and somewhat counter-intuitively, their emphasis on unity. Although consensus among 28 countries is powerful, it at times feels more symbolic than substantive. It may not matter in reality, but Russian media enjoys and highlights the mixed messaging emanating between member states. As one participant said, 'maybe it does not matter if Italian MPs visit Crimea to promote lifting of sanctions and doing business, but it does somewhat dilute the appearance of unity'.

Moreover, the EU has not been able to react to changes in the way that the US has. For example, the US sanctioned additional companies after billionaire oilman and Putin friend Gennady Timchenko and the Rotenberg brothers reorganised their assets, including Arkady selling a stake in companies to his son.<sup>26</sup> The EU is less adaptable, because it is less inclined to test consensus unless absolutely necessary. One participant said, 'if we open this black box with 27 other states, [it] may weaken the sanctions regime'.

Some in the group criticised the EU as a whole as well as individual member states for not having any other strategy or policy plan towards Russia other than sanctions. As one participant said, 'sanctions cannot be a substitute for policy'. Furthermore, monitoring sanctions that have had unintended consequences and that are counter-productive could be stronger. One participant noted that, for example, when the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development agreed to follow the EU sanctions, this stopped finance reaching small and medium-sized companies, which 'ideally the West wants to prosper'.

## The Value of Dialogue

As part of the discussion on the Western response, contrasts were noted between German and UK attitudes towards engaging with Russia. Although in policy terms there is broad agreement, Germany and the UK have different historical relations with Russia, which has had an impact on the importance of relations for each.

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25. Maya Lester, '1st EU Russia Sanctions Judgment – Arkady Rotenberg's 1st Listing Was Unlawful and 2nd Lawful in Part', *European Sanctions blog*, 30 November 2016.

26. Jack Farchy, 'US Frustrates Russian Oligarchs' Cat and Mouse over Sanctions', *Financial Times*, 9 August 2015.

As a result of closer historical and cultural ties between Germany and Russia, Berlin seems to have been more susceptible to Moscow actions, such as a cyber attack on the Bundestag in 2015, which the German government said likely originated from Russia.<sup>27</sup> Germany has also experienced Russian misinformation, as shown by the 'Our Lisa' incident in January 2016. A Russian news channel incorrectly reported that a young girl from a Russian immigrant family in Germany had been abducted and raped by asylum-seekers.<sup>28</sup> Whether the reporting was malicious or accidental, it was enough for Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to criticise the German police. Despite this, one participant noted that German policymaking circles are inclined to believe that there is 'no alternative to dialogue with Russia'. German proposals, such as Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's new multilateral treaty on arms control, reinforce this. Therefore, many in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs believe that both Moscow and Berlin must maintain a dialogue, even though there is 'little common ground'.

There was the perception that the UK feels much less inclined towards dialogue. There have been some attempts, such as discussions on aircraft safety and the visit of the UK's then Minister for Europe David Lidington in December 2015. However, there has been little meaningful engagement outside continued bilateral cooperation on cultural and educational exchanges. This is understandable given the context and challenges of cooperation. Participants noted that cutting off relations is a useful political tool that creates leverage, but keeping them severed is potentially dangerous. Poor relations do not necessarily mean that ties should be cut completely and permanently. The working relationship between Lavrov and former US Secretary of State John Kerry is a case in point. Although the agreed ceasefire in Syria fell apart, such an agreement was still an achievement and stemmed from Kerry and Lavrov building a direct relationship through regular meetings.

One participant in particular noted that severing all military-to-military contact was a mistake, given that military figures in Russia have been key stakeholders in Moscow's long-term strategy. Severing ties shuts off information channels. If formal government-to-government engagement is not deemed desirable, then making use of think tanks or academic institutions for more informal dialogue is an alternative approach. Moreover, even if it is too challenging to engage with the current Russian administration, ties are required to ensure that connections are in place for future government changes.

Rebuilding some ties, if only to have a direct channel in order to state opposition to Russia's actions and make clear what is required of them, is the first step. Opening up more regular 'dialogue' is also desirable, but the agenda for that dialogue must be defined. Without specific talking points, there is also a risk that engagement simply serves to legitimise Russian actions.

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27. Noah Barkin and Sabine Siebold, 'Germany Says Russia Probably Behind Cyber Attack on Bundestag', *Reuters*, 13 May 2016.

28. Damien McGuinness, 'Russia Steps into Berlin "Rape" Storm Claiming German Cover-Up', *BBC Inside Europe*, 27 January 2016.

## Is Foreign Policy Cooperation Possible with Russia?

There was a lot of scepticism when discussing cooperation on shared interests, such as countering terrorism. Although it is certainly true that both Russia and the West wish to counter extremism and terrorism, there is not necessarily consensus on what the threat looks like, what causes it and the best methods to deal with it. One participant noted that Russia perceives the Western view on counterterrorism as somewhat naive and ineffective. This has been demonstrated in Syria, where Russia is more sceptical than the West on how 'moderate' the opposition fighting President Bashar Al-Assad is. As one participant noted, 'none of the common interests are actually shared. The cases, solutions and outcomes are all defined differently'. That is not to say it is not worth further discussion on this, as the debate on common interests has not yet been exhausted.

Moreover, the success of any form of cooperation is challenging given that there seems to be the additional desire from Russia to undermine the West in order to raise its own international standing. As one participant said, 'if Russian intent is to upend the world order put in place after the Cold War, then there will be limited cooperation'. The difficulties of cooperation on shared interests have clearly been shown after the failure of the already mentioned Syrian ceasefire agreement and proposed counterterrorism initiative brokered by the US and Russia. After the US mistakenly bombed Syrian army positions, and Russia or Syrian government forces were blamed for an Aleppo aid convoy attack, the ceasefire collapsed amidst a surge of Syrian government bombing on Aleppo. Russia's main criticism was that the US failed to separate out the terrorists, such as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham, from the moderate opposition, as per the agreement. This is despite the fact that such a task of separating out the formerly Al-Qa'ida-linked group from other groups would begin only if the ceasefire lasted, and such a task was supposed to be a joint initiative between the US and Russia.<sup>29</sup>

It was noted that there has been cooperation on some international issues of concern, such as the Iran deal in 2015. However, reading this as a signal that Russia is interested in cooperation in other areas for the sake of international security has yet to be proved. Russia has since strengthened its ties with Iran through intervening in Syria. The deal also allowed Russia to look to expanding economic ties with Iran, as many Western countries do. However, this will include advanced weapon systems, such as the S-300 missile defence system. Russia had cancelled this deal amid sanctions in 2010, but reinstated the sale after the sanctions were lifted.<sup>30</sup> Many Western powers also work from a position of self-interest, but if part of Russia's foreign policy goal is to undermine Western power, while providing little room for compromise, cooperation will continue to be difficult.

That is not to say that engagement under the auspices of trying to find areas of common ground is futile. Instead, it is important for understanding Russian thinking, in order to better understand

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29. Vladislav Gordeev, 'Kerry and Lavrov Announce Agreement on a Joint Plan for Syria', *RBC.ru*, 10 September 2016.

30. Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran Deploys Russian-made S-300 Missiles at its Fordow Nuclear Site: TV', *Reuters*, 29 August 2016.



how a working relationship, rather than the absence of any relationship, might function. It is also useful not only to communicate Western points of view but helps in anticipating, rather than reacting, to Russian actions.

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