



Blind Spots in Russian-Western Narratives on European Security



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How can we get from contested narratives on the evolution of European Security after 1989 to improved understanding within the OSCE? A Russian-German dialogue project discussed this difficult question at two workshops in Moscow and Berlin. The 20 participants managed to find consensus on a jointly drafted [report](#). Innovatively, the project focused on so-called „blind spots”– events that figure prominently in the narrative of one side, but are overlooked or neglected in the narrative of the other side.

Introduction

The competing, radically divergent Russian and Western mainstream historical narratives on the evolution of European Security since 1989 are a crucial impediment to a way out of the common confrontation and the return to diplomacy, dialogue and cooperative security. Using a ‘mediative dialogue approach’, some 20 experts from academia, think tanks and NGOs as well as

journalists and cultural exchange/dialogue practitioners met near Moscow in September and in Berlin in November 2018 to analyze and reflect on the Russian and Western narratives on what went wrong since the end of the Cold War regarding the deterioration of Russian-Western relations. The project was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by the Institute for Law and Public Policy (Moscow) and inmedio (Berlin).

Reconstructing the core threats of the Russian and Western mainstream narratives from a meta-perspective, a number of collective ‘blind spots’ that figured prominently in the narrative of one side but were overlooked or neglected in the narrative of the other side, could be identified. They can serve as ‘bridges of understanding’, by focusing on aspects of a conflict narrative, where a shift of perspective – stepping into the other side’s shoes and relating to the emotional meaning – seems to be comparably easy and possible without compromising on one’s own core values.

If we do not want to let go of a common future, at some point in time we will need to discuss the post-Cold War period without attaching blame for the collapse of the 1990 vision to one side only. That does not mean negating the differences but finding a way of describing and interpreting them from a distance. It is worthwhile preparing for this moment by starting already now to reflect on and analyze the competing narratives.

The dialogue group drafted a [joint report](#) (a Russian version will soon be uploaded). The report was presented at the German Foreign Office on 16 January 2019 and will be presented in Moscow as well.

What Went Wrong since the End of the Cold War?

The Ukraine crisis marks an important turning point in European security. The events in Crimea and Donbas since 2014 challenge the European security order that was established in the end phase of the Cold War in 1989-1990. Almost five years after the outbreak of the conflict, the war in Eastern Ukraine still goes on. But the Ukraine crisis has much deeper roots and is embedded in a much larger Russian-Western confrontation. In particular, it is not possible to understand the current crisis – that some describe as a new “Cold War” – without having a deeper look into contrasting historical narratives that are held in the mainstream public both in Russia and in the West. As was already made clear in the report [“Back to Diplomacy”](#) by the OSCE Panel of Eminent

Persons, chaired by Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, the West and Russia have completely different views on the root causes of the Ukraine crisis and on the reasons why the alleged cooperative spirit between Moscow and the West, as evidenced most clearly in the landmark CSCE Charter of Paris in November 1990, eventually broke down and gave way to a path that led from “cold peace” (Boris Yeltsin, December 1994) to “hot wars” in Georgia in 2008 and currently in Ukraine.

Building on similar projects discussing the historical narratives on European security, our German-Russian dialogue project, funded by the German Foreign Office, applied a different method from conflict mediation. It brought together representatives from Russian and German civil society, think tanks, academia, and journalists. During two four-day workshops held in Moscow (16-21 September 2018) and Berlin (12-15 November 2018), the 20 workshop participants compared the two, competing mainstream historical narratives in Russia and in the West and discovered ‘collective blind spots’ – events that figure prominently in the narrative of one side, but are overlooked or neglected in the narrative of the other side.

The findings presented in the report are the direct outcome of a dialogue process which was moderated applying a ‘mediative approach’. The workshop thus came to a degree of common understanding that allowed the development of a jointly drafted text. It was the mediative approach – focusing in particular on mutual trust-building and intense communication – that channeled the group dynamic among the experts into a creative and productive procedure which generated the finding of collective blind spots. By focusing on blind spots, the German-Russian dialogue allowed constructive debates about the narratives without aiming to put the blame for what went wrong since the end of the Cold War exclusively on the other side. The dialogue rather tried to better understand the other perspectives and develop ‘historical empathy’. The aim of the two workshops was not to produce a shared narrative or to convince others to share a competing narrative, but rather to add more nuances and historical context to the increasingly poisoned and politicized debates on the historical process leading from cooperation to confrontation.

Five Blind Spots in the Russian Mainstream Narrative

→ The Chechen Wars (starting from 1994) mattered to the West far more

- than is recognized in Russia today. The Chechen Wars triggered lively debates in the West and triggered a critical view of Moscow's foreign policy. Since the Chechen Wars are framed in the Russian narrative primarily as military campaigns that clearly fall within the scope of internal affairs, the nature of the Western debate is often missed.
- By in the mid-1990s, NATO was transforming itself from a military defense alliance opposing the Warsaw Pact to a crisis management organization that was primarily focused on threats beyond its traditional territorial scope. "Out of area" operations played a crucial role in NATO's self-perception at the time and deeply changed the mandate and the nature of the Alliance – particularly after the start of the war in Afghanistan in 2001. The Russian mainstream narrative seems to overlook the nature and the degree of NATO's transformation. It can be partly interpreted as a tragic self-fulfilling prophecy that Russia acted on the basis of the traditional paradigm ('NATO is against us') until in a way NATO actually reverted to it.
 - The wars in former Yugoslavia, particularly in the late 1990s with the 1999 Kosovo war, are seen by the West as an interplay of numerous genuine processes that emanate first and foremost from the Western Balkans region itself. The fact that the Western debate about the Yugoslavian Wars was primarily focused on considerations other than Russia seems to be a blind spot in the mainstream Russian narrative.
 - The Russian mainstream narrative tends to overlook how strongly the case of Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the poisoning of the pro-Western Ukrainian presidential candidate Victor Yushchenko resonated in the Western debate. For many in the West, they continue to shape the view of Russia until today.
 - In the Western view the "colored revolutions" in Eastern European countries are seen as genuine dynamics that were primarily described as people-driven campaigns for freedom, justice and democracy. Using these events as an opportunity to exert influence in the region and increase the Western grip on the post-Soviet space is at best a minor position in Western public debate.

Five Blind Spots in the Western Mainstream Narrative

- It is generally perceived in Russia that the West sees the end of the Cold War as its victory, rather than a painful decision by the USSR. The

fact that free elections could be held, that non-communist governments were elected in many of the Warsaw Pact countries, without the USSR using violence (contrary to the situation in Hungary in 1956 and in Prague in 1968 etc.) and that the Soviet leadership consented to German reunification within NATO are interpreted as (too) far-reaching concessions, for which Russia, as the formal successor to the Soviet Union, had to pay a heavy price (mainly in the form of economic turmoil in the transformation phase) and deserved to get much more in return.

- Although the alleged broken promise that NATO would expand ‘not an inch eastwards’ after German reunification was merely a verbal, non-binding statement and referred only to the territory of the former GDR, Russia has a point in perceiving a broken *spirit*: It had already been decided by April 1990 not to follow up on the ‘CSCE option’ – the idea of pan-European security based on the CSCE (later OSCE). Verbal promises to include Russia in this pan-European security structure, to be designed together with Russia, were not followed up. Later, under Bill Clinton, the US reversed the promise made to Boris Yeltsin in October 1993 of a “NATO partnership for all” (including Russia) instead of a “NATO membership for a few” (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic). The failure to recognize that Russia was unhappy with the post-Cold War order from the beginning must be seen as a Western blind spot.
- Starting with Yeltsin’s presidency, the “economic shock therapy” was implemented in a rush with massive Western support and had disastrous consequences for the population, with a dramatic increase in poverty and decrease in life expectancy. The disillusionment and the humiliation at being the originator of the end of the Cold War, turning to democracy and trusting the West to help to install a free market economy, have thus become a very deep-rooted feeling in Russia. The Western narrative overlooks that this is perceived as a failure of liberal values in general, including democratic principles. This resonates when democratic deficits and human rights violations are criticized by foreigners and results in the perception of being treated in a high-handed manner by Westerners who see themselves as ‘morally better people’ with no consideration of the socio-economic context.
- The constitutional crisis and the use of military force against shelling of the Russian Parliament in 1993 on the orders of President Yeltsin shattered the trust in democracy for large parts of the Russian population. This fact is widely unknown in the mainstream Western

narrative. Extensive Western support for Yeltsin's re-election campaign in 1996 (even if for the sake of stability) in hindsight triggers the perception of hypocrisy when it comes to the West's promotion of democracy.

- The Kosovo War and the fact that Russia was too powerless to have any impact on avoiding the war against a long-term historical ally (especially the bombing of Belgrade) are perceived as a shock. This first military intervention by NATO ended a decade of partnership forged by Yeltsin and Clinton. The wars in the Western Balkans also triggered intensive debates within Russia. The importance the wars in former Yugoslavia have in the Russian perspective, is widely overlooked in the West.

Five Takeaways

- It was generally agreed among Russian and German participants that the Ukraine crisis was not the direct cause of the current confrontation between Russia and the West, but rather one building block in a longer chain of historical events and developments. Many crucial root causes of the current crisis go back to the early phase of the post-Cold War period and indeed to the end phase of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Western-Russian relations were still relatively cooperative despite setbacks (Balkan Wars, NATO expansion, internal chaos in Russia), but became more contested after 1999.
- Historical context can explain many policy decisions that were taken by one side at a particular moment in time and made good sense at the time – but had long-term negative effects on Russian-Western relations. Many Western decisions in the 1990s, for example, were aimed at improving stability in Central and Eastern Europe, but had no anti-Russian intent. By excluding Russia, however, they contributed to a new division of Europe and Russia's isolation from European security.
- Russia did not figure as prominently in Western decision-making in the 1990s and up to 2007/8 as is presumed in the Russian narrative. There is thus a certain imbalance that has to be recognized. Russia was very focused on the West, but Russia did not have a prominent place on the Western policy agenda. The assumption of a consistent and coherent 'Western agenda' should therefore be reconsidered.
- Dialogue about the contested narratives should be separated from discussions about the present situation and future steps. It is easier to

reflect on one's own narrative, maybe even admit one's own blind spots, without having a direct link to current demands. Such an approach would complement the other strategy of disentangling past and present by deliberately deciding not to talk about the past, as in the OSCE's Structured Dialogue.

- A clear added value was achieved by using a mediative dialogue approach, working with a rather small and continuous group for a rather long time (compared to conference-style events), which allows trust-building on a personal level, and rather than sequences of statements, creates space for facilitated discussions including the use of facilitation techniques such as reformulation of statements, in order to bring about more clarity and mutual understanding.

As always, when it comes to this type of 'track II initiatives', the big question is: Can it have a significant effect on the official (track I) level? Evidence from various countries shows that it can have an effect, particularly if different efforts are properly linked and add up. In the framework of the project at hand, links have been created to various actors who engage in different formats on track I level. While we cannot expect that much more than an exchange of pre-prepared statements takes place in highly official meetings, there seems to be room for more flexible settings, e.g. side-events of those meetings. The fact that one of the working groups of the 'Petersburg Dialogue' – a semi-official Russian-German dialogue format – has started a meta-reflection on how the dialogue is done, can be interpreted as a step in this direction.

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