

# Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the West, convinced of its superiority as a civilization, assumed that the international order would now take on a 'liberal' character, that it would remain based on Western values, norms and institutions. The hegemonic superpower, which the United States proclaimed itself to be, took on a universal role – one full of megalomania and conceit – in defence of those values. Yet, because they had never been accepted globally, America's mission was bound to lead to many confrontations and conflicts, and Russia became one of the chief adversaries of the West. Much was expected of it, with no consideration given to the fact that, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia faced problems other than democracy – problems connected with its own survival. The more Moscow objected to Western models being imposed on it, the more the West grew irritated. A paradoxical situation arose in which, after the dramatic experiences of Cold War confrontation, rather than trying to create a community of states ready to build order through cooperation and consensus, the West chose a course of confrontation with a state that, for the first time in many decades, had given up the need for any ideological justification of hostility in international relations. Once again, an approach based on ideological motivations led to a division of the world into hostile groups and spheres of influence. It turns out that Cold War thinking is deeply rooted in the minds of politicians, whatever their geopolitical stripe.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the existing atmosphere of confrontation between the West and Russia, there is a need to dispense for the foreseeable future with the hope of building a liberal order in international relations that would be uniform and universal. One should expect, rather, the rolling out of a diplomatic initiative towards a plural order, which draws on the experiences gained in the period of *détente* of the 1970s. The degree of tension then

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<sup>1</sup> R. Legvold, *Return to Cold War*, Polity, Cambridge-Malden 2016.

was comparable to that of today, but back then political leaders on both sides of the impasse managed to rise above their divisions, respecting the rights of each side and agreeing to a peaceful co-existence.

For this to happen today, what is most needed is a realistic diagnosis of the situation that has lasted now for almost three decades, and which has brought about neither “the end of history” (Fukuyama) nor “a clash of civilizations” (Huntington). These propaganda slogans are clearly confrontational in nature, and have not helped anyone understand the complexities of the modern world or the logic of the changing international geometry. Similarly, a recognition of the real motivations of states is not helped by 19<sup>th</sup>-century analogies to Russia’s imperial identity and the *Realpolitik* it pursues. The fact is, both sides have begun engaging in a geopolitical revisionism, accusing each other of bad intentions. The policy of sanctions and counter sanctions has led to intractability and a standoff in mutual relations, while misperceptions are hampering any understanding of what the real source of the escalation in tensions is. Thus, we are faced with a spiralling conflict over which the parties involved are losing control. If each of them takes an offensive approach, it is not difficult to imagine that, at some place and time, things will come to a head, with incalculable consequences. A certain change in the behaviour of the West towards Russia is expected after the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States, but so far little has changed in how America and Russia see each other.

International diplomacy is thus faced with the problem of how to de-escalate the conflict. Neither the West’s accusations that Russia is solely to blame for the current state of relations nor Russia’s resistance and siege mentality will lead to the desired solutions. Professional diplomats must get back to making arrangements and seeking compromises. It is time to stop idealising one system of values and demonising the other. Different states have truly different paths of development, and are not giving in as easily as some expected to the internationalization of the values of the Western world. China, for example, and its political hybridization are showing that even the most ideological political systems can evolve into pragmatic regimes that defend their own national interests. Progress in international relations is not linear, as the ancients knew. There is no ideological determinism leaving no alternative in the choice of political systems. No one has a monopoly on managing either particular states or the international order as a whole. While many states – including Russia – agree on the basic rules of the game, there are plenty of divergences in how these are to be interpreted and applied in life. The Western states underline the role of shared democratic values and human rights, whereas Russia emphasises the principle of common security. Rather than integrating under

one big ‘umbrella’, the Russians believe that respect for sovereign equality is the basis of a stable international order, and this view is also shared by smaller states that do not want to subordinate themselves to a single political vision or a single interpretation of Western values. Such states include Viktor Orbán’s Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński’s Poland, even though they are part of Western structures. Their examples show that the Western community is not uniform, and that the hope at the beginning of the 1990s for a quick transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (as expressed, for example, in the Paris Charter for a New Europe of 1990) was unfounded. In their naiveté, for a long time Western politicians were unable to grasp that the international order would have to be built on a new compromise, not at the dictate of the only victor. It seems that the time has come to understand the complexity of the identities of many states. It is no longer enough just to establish new institutions or sign new treaties: the consciousness of political elites and whole societies must also be changed – and this will take many generations.

Russia was the first state to openly oppose US hegemony. Instead of unipolarism, in Moscow multipolarism was launched, meaning the creation of a collective system for managing international relations reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Concert of Europe. In this Russia has received support from China, and the creation of the informal BRICS group was aimed at reinforcing this trend towards a ‘democratization’ of the transformation of the international order. Activities favouring a de-concentration of American hegemony were accompanied by Russian accusations that all the democratic changes in the form of ‘colour revolutions’ or ‘regional springs’ had been inspired by the United States and supported by other Western states. On this canvas, enormous mistrust arose, caused on the one hand by the West’s arbitrary subversion of the intra-state, and on the other by Russia’s undermining of the international *status quo*. Each side accuses the other of bad faith and inciting activities detrimental to its opponent. It has become an almost proverbial form of invective to accuse Russia of waging a ‘hybrid information war’, as if the United States and other Western states had no ‘constructive’ part of their own in that ‘war’. Laying all the blame for the ills of today’s world – including liberal politicians’ election losses – on Russia and Vladimir Putin bears the hallmarks of a certain state of paranoia. Misperceptions, that is, viewing the other side based on incorrect assumptions and negative attitudes results in evaluations that are faulty and conclusions that are wrong. Even part of the academic community – on both sides of the confrontation – has succumbed to a mental ‘asphyxiation’ that brings to mind the indoctrination of the social sciences of the Cold War era. In recent years, representatives of contemporary

American political realism such as John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen and Stephen Walt have tried to show the dangers of a Cold War recidivism. In their view, the growing confrontation is not determined by an objective force, but by bad decisions and a zero-sum game logic that has once again caught hold of the minds of politicians in both the West and Russia.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, both sides are guilty of having created new spheres of influence and kindled hostilities.

This is especially visible in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. All the narrations on both sides cast blame on the other side, as if there could be no concept of shared blame for the existing situation.<sup>3</sup> To top things off, Russia has shown a certain determinism in relation to the strategy of the West. Bent on 'stopping' Russia, American and European politicians treated the 2014 crisis in Ukraine not as a cause of – but a pretext for – confrontation. If there had been no Maidan revolt in Kyiv, any other situation would have sufficed as a cause. Certainly there is right on both sides, but Russia does not see how it has contributed to escalating the conflict, applying a perverse logic of Crimean reunification, not annexation – the latter, of course, being in violation of international law.<sup>4</sup> In light of these discrepancies, complaints arise in the West that Russia is seeking to endow itself with separate status and special rights, and is demanding to be treated differently than other states.

Russia believes that the biggest 'sin' of the West has been to intervene in the internal affairs of many states, causing the outbreak of bloody conflicts and dramatic changes in legal regimes that have led to humanitarian catastrophes. Russia sees nothing wrong with its involvement in the Syrian conflict, defending what is widely recognized as a criminal regime. Again, there is a clash between the criteria used for evaluating the interests of the different sides, and without a willingness to compromise that could allow one side to acknowledge that the other might be at least partially right, normality will never be restored.

Each side in today's confrontation blames the other for provoking the conflict. Neither wants to admit that its own actions are contributing to the escalation. The West, with the United States at the forefront, remains convinced of the superiority of its achievements as a civilization, which is an expression of a kind of *missiology*, not to speak of colonial, imperialistic

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<sup>2</sup> B.R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 2014.

<sup>3</sup> R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, L.B. Tauris, London 2015.

<sup>4</sup> O. Zadorozhnyi, *Russian Doctrine of International Law after the Annexation of Crimea*, K.I.S., Kyiv 2016.

arrogance. References to the 'higher civilization' of the West is a complete anachronism today, and is indicative of a return to a colonial mentality. Russia, in turn, along with many other states in the world, not only defends its own achievements, but insists on alternative political models and developmental paths. The result is a new kind of ideological war – though in fact there is no real alternative today to the liberal order; there is only a choice between order and chaos.

An awareness of this may urge the two sides to initiate changes in their existing strategy of taking an entrenched position. On more than one occasion in history, the logic of credible deterrence has led to an uncontrolled arms race and heightened tensions. In their own defence, then, the two sides must employ all their skill and efforts to ensure international security. For now, neither side seems ready for a 'relaxed' dialogue that could restore faith in shared values and interests. Perhaps it will take some kind of extreme 'existential solstice' like World War II or the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 for them to arrive at the conclusion that their own vital interests demand that they cooperate in order to survive.

A realistic view tells us that, in the long run, security and arms control should take precedence over the democratization of further states. Russia shares this view,<sup>5</sup> as do many states of the western and central parts of the Old Continent. One can hope, therefore, that, with a bit of good will, the two sides will finally find common ground concerning what is most important for the world. Focusing on security strategy, and not on vilifying the Russian president, will create much more room to manoeuvre, and the conditions for mutual understanding. After all, this was the basis for the birth of *détente*. When demands that cannot be satisfied appear on either side, it is time for a dynamic re-evaluation of existing strategies. The road from digging in to acknowledging where the other side is right is a long one, but the history of the Cold War shows that the West was once willing to recognize the role of the Soviet Union in solving the world's most serious problem, even though it stood at a remote distance from the West, ideologically and otherwise. The situation today is similar. Russia is demanding to be recognized as having an equal role in 'managing' global affairs. Punishing it by isolating it and excluding it from decision-making bodies only exacerbates the conflict.

If we look at the lessons history has to teach from the era of the thaw between East and West, we can clearly see that, while it paradoxically

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<sup>5</sup> A. Miller, F. Lukyanov, *Detachment Instead of Confrontation: Post-European Russia in Search of Self-Sufficiency*, [http://www.kreisky-forum.org/dataall/Report\\_Post-European-Russia.pdf](http://www.kreisky-forum.org/dataall/Report_Post-European-Russia.pdf) (11.03.2018).

favoured the post-war division of Europe, it led to a gradual dismantling of the Eastern bloc and, by means of “antagonistic cooperation”, to the disappearance of the Soviet sphere of influence. During the presidency of Richard Nixon, the United States understood (largely thanks to the efforts of Henry Kissinger) that no understanding with the USSR (or with Communist China) was possible without an understanding of the sources of their mistrust of the West. The ability to take a critical look at one’s own policy made it possible to resign from identifying enemies arbitrarily, and even more so from taking punitive measures against them. The dual strategy of deterrence and dialogue expressed in the Harmel Report of 1967 demonstrated that Western states could find a way out of the vicious circle of confrontation. Certainly, America’s position at that time was a result of the re-evaluations caused by the Vietnam War, but it was also due to growing contradictions within the Western bloc. Mainly because of Kissinger’s realism, the United States managed to read the intentions of the other side (sides) correctly. Today we are faced with a situation in which everything said by Russian politicians is construed contrary to their intentions. When the Russians warn of a “new Cold War”, this is understood in the West as an admission by the Russians that they are creating such a situation. When the Russians call for dialogue, this is attributed to their cynicism and Machiavellianism. When they demonstrate a will to fend off harassments and threats, this means they are ‘interfering’ in internal matters – including elections – in the old ‘established’ democracies of the West.

The lessons available from the Ukrainian conflict teach that a re-evaluation of the West’s relations with Russia is necessary today, in both the normative and practical spheres. In the first domain, it is clear that the values of democracy, the rule of law and self-determination are interpreted differently not only by opponents, but also within a single grouping. The current renaissance of populism and nationalism in many Western European countries shows that not all citizens of the states that promote liberal democracy are satisfied with the achievements of their states. The victory of Donald Trump in the American presidential election in 2016 might be only the tip of the iceberg, an indication of just how tired Western societies are of bearing the costs of “liberal internationalism”. Against the migrant crisis, there is a growing wave of prejudice towards immigrants from the eastern part of Europe. This undermines the existing openness of the political elites of the European Union and NATO to further eastward expansion.

In the sphere of implementation, there is an enormous dissonance between the declarations made and the will to carry out a real systematic transformation in those states looking for integration with the West. States such as Ukraine and Moldova prove that, despite the rhetorical assurances

made by their political elites, they are unable to eliminate their oligarchic structures or break free of kleptocracy. The reforms made are not bringing the desired effects; those states are just spinning their wheels. In the states of the 'younger' Europe, such as Hungary and Poland, there is a revival of the 'old' nationalism born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a return of authoritarianism disguised as "non-liberal" democracy. Along with Brexit, the European Union is losing its legitimacy to represent the entire continent, which, after all, always was and is a false claim, since there have always been European countries outside the EU. The problem is to preserve the credibility of EU integration in the eyes of those states that are weaker and in need of help at a time when one of the most powerful European nations has turned its back on the organization.

Among Western analysts, voices are increasingly frequently suggesting – in accordance with the teachings of Max Weber – that the ethics of beliefs should be replaced by the ethics of responsibility. This is so, for example, among certain German experts (Matthias Dembinski and Hans-Joachim Spanger<sup>6</sup>). It requires no extraordinary shift in perspective. It is enough to begin with recognizing the *status quo*. Supporters of a thaw during the Cold War fought for similar goals. The idea is to separate ongoing policy from problems that are difficult to resolve in the current situation. Those problems should not disrupt the ongoing dialogue or affect cooperation in many areas of a pragmatic nature. Both sides in today's confrontation should resign themselves to tolerating each other without interfering in the other's affairs, especially through military means, and should respect fundamental human rights. No international institution, and even less so an individual country, can assign itself the role of 'censor of political correctness' with regard to other states. The era of 'police' in international relations disappeared forever once countries began basing their relations on the fundamental principles of international law – sovereign equality and territorial integrity.

The rub, however, is that the sides in the conflict – such as Russia and the West – must acknowledge previous violations of those principles as a 'closed chapter', since mutual accusations are unproductive. It may be that, if not for the intervention of Western countries in Iraq and Libya, and their activities supporting the self-determination of Kosovo, Russia might not have had a pretext for recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, not to mention for annexing Crimea. *Faits accomplis* cannot be undone. Their normative power must be acknowledged. The incantations

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<sup>6</sup> M. Dembinski, H.-J. Spanger, "'Plural Peace' – Principles of a New Russian Policy", *PRIF Report* 2017, No. 145.



and moralising of naive idealists is of no avail here. The *status quo ante* cannot be restored. Since the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, through the many regulations passed by the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the UN, up to the Responsibility to Protect resolution of 2005, states have agreed to respect both sovereignty and human rights. In practice, it has turned out that, under the guise of humanitarian intervention, states have engaged in common theft, getting rid of unbearable dictators but at the same time leading completely stable and thriving countries into ruin. The interventions of the Western states have caused unimaginable humanitarian catastrophes, of which the crowning example is the tragedy of the people of Syria. Laying all the blame at the feet of Vladimir Putin is not only contrary to historical truth, it also attests to the thick layer of hypocrisy that covers Western politicians, and shows how it is possible to build a favourable narrative about oneself by perpetually accusing the other side.

Russia, of course, is not blameless. By coming out in favour of the right to self-determination of the peoples of Abkhazia and Ossetia, and of the Russians in Crimea, it undermined its own credibility as a guarantor of stability in the post-Soviet space and as one of the main decision-makers in the UN Security Council (100 member states condemned the annexation of Crimea). But for every problem there is a solution, even if, in the short term, the impasse is having a paralysing effect. If the parties in dispute agree to the principles arising out of international law, with some good will from their leaders they may quickly find some kind of *modus vivendi*. After all, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century various ways were created of reconciling aspirations for independence with respect for the principle of territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination. Thus, apart from recognition of the total independence of the population of a given territory (e.g. South Sudan), conditional independence is also possible (e.g. Bosnia and Hercegovina or Kosovo), as is autonomy (South Tyrol), federalism (of which the best example is Belgium), confederalism (proposed as a means of resolving the conflict in Cyprus), and condominium status (Andorra). History also provides examples of solutions based on mandates, trusteeships and protectorates, remnants of which still exist. Not all solutions have proved their worth in practice, e.g., status as a 'free city' (Gdańsk, Rijeka). By employing useful solutions at diplomatic conferences and international organizations, it is possible to prepare proposals for resolving the impasse. However, the time must be ripe for effective diplomatic initiatives. The European Union can play a fundamental part in this. Less can be expected of the OSCE, which, due to a lack of determination and political will among its members, is no longer able to accomplish what it did during the period of *détente*.



Though in this context alarmist associations with a “new Yalta” arise, one should not underemphasise the opportunities that may exist for reconciling different positions on one fundamental matter: both the West and Russia have the right to protect their ‘vital’ interests. Acknowledging this as a starting point for negotiations on how to resolve the conflict in Ukraine may open the road towards a compromise that would involve Ukraine taking part in a number of initiatives aimed at transforming it, but not necessarily incorporating it into Western structures. After all, the European Union spoke on this issue some time ago (15 December 2016) when it refused to grant Ukraine the status of a candidate state. The examples of Georgia and Ukraine have taught NATO that there is a ‘red line’ that it cannot cross without provoking an aggressive reaction from Russia that may include the use of military force. It is worth, then, considering models from the Cold War era when, in response to the inter-bloc confrontation of the time, certain states benefited from having neutral status, or adopted a policy of remaining neutral (such as Austria and Finland). Perhaps in the current situation such solutions – which Henry Kissinger pointed to immediately after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine – could again prove useful, at least during a transition period.

There is no doubt that a basic condition for breaking the impasse in Russian-American relations is for both to take a critical look at their own strategies, which so far have led nowhere. The societies of the countries of Europe expect their leaders to come up with a new philosophy of joint security that will revise the dogma about the systemic infallibility of the West, while a ‘plural order’ will make it possible for states that have different identities and ideological preferences to coexist.

This collection of reflections on today’s international reality from the point of view of a Central European researcher is intended to draw attention to the rapid changes taking place in the international system, and the implications thereof. At the same time, employing a realistic approach, I would like to communicate just how lasting hierarchies of dependence and *Realpolitik* are in international relations.

The texts that follow arose out of my research work of the past few years. They were presented at various academic events and made available to readers in different forms – as presentations at conferences, articles in periodicals, and chapters in anthologies. In book form, I hope to share my viewpoint on a number of problems whose importance extends beyond the boundaries of Polish foreign policy.

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