

# An Understanding of Europe's Overlapping Political Realities

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the emerging political landscape in Europe and its impact on European security. The first part presents an overall assessment of the situation of the continent, where it is argued that today's Europe has considerably better prospects for forestalling large-scale instabilities in contrast to all preceding periods in modern history. Subsequent parts discuss the problems that may challenge this optimistic conclusion, taking into consideration the various security zones on the continent. The concluding part focuses upon the interaction between these zones and analyses possible implications for maintaining security and stability in Europe.

## FACTORS OF STABILITY

A natural inclination of anyone dealing with the current international relations is to focus upon alarming problems and trends that may bring about tragic consequences for peace and stability and, in the worst case scenario, shatter the existing international order by unleashing war or sowing seeds of chaos. It is also true that Europe –after a short-lived period of the post-Cold War euphoria– has produced

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dramatic, sometimes even horrifying, examples of clashes, conflicts and atrocities reminiscent of the Dark Ages.

However, it seems important not to underestimate the considerable advantages that Europe enjoys today –in comparison, for instance, to most of its history from the 16th through 20th centuries.

First, Europe is not an arena of enmities among the major powers. The importance of this phenomenon can be fully appreciated against the background of the pre-World War I historical record when open and hidden rivalries between France and Germany, Russia and Great Britain, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia incessantly brought about realignments. Indeed, the most important single factor that provoked continental wars was re-configuration of the European political landscape. Today, Europe is free of this burden. The very concept of conflicts among great powers in Europe has radically changed both in terms of substance and as far as its political relevance is concerned.

Indeed, even if the bipolar confrontation in the post-World War II were deemed as the manifestation of rivalry between the two superpowers –The USA and the Soviet Union– the dissolution of the latter has basically removed the issue from the political agenda. Russia is weak and predominantly inward-oriented, and Moscow's assertiveness, although often justified by the argument of Russia's 'great power predicament', is only of a rhetorical character. The USA, on the other hand, seems to have more problems with, rather than advantages provided by, its status as the only remaining superpower. At the same time as its involvement in Europe is diminishing and increasingly becoming a subject of serious domestic criticism, its leadership is becoming more welcomed (even if reluctantly so) than contested by most Europeans. Beyond the USA and Russia, the states of Western Europe that might reasonably be included in the category of major regional powers have successfully embarked on a process of learning how to manage their affairs in a non-confrontational way. Hopefully, this drive will continue even after two major incentives –the memories of the two "hot" continental wars and the consolidating effect of the Cold War– have essentially disappeared.

Second, stability in Europe has always suffered when the disintegration of its 'big components' has given way to an acute competition among other actors over the spoils of the collapsed entities. Suffice it to recall examples of both the distant past –the war over Spanish heritage and other dynastic disputes– and in the more recent history –the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – that provoked struggles for influence over the newly-emerged independent states.

Today, the situation in Europe is fundamentally different, which does not mean that the twenty successor states to all three collapsed entities –the former Yugoslavia,

the Soviet 'outer' empire and the USSR itself— have successfully managed to escape from competing external influences; rather, there are numerous indications to the contrary that do not, in any event, seem to go beyond a 'normal' and not necessarily crisis-prone pattern. It may certainly be argued that, in some cases, external factors were crucial and even played a fatal role, as with the recognition of Croatia's independence which contributed to the breakout of war in the former Yugoslavia. Yet, however plausible this argument is, it points to an exception rather than to the rule. Given the scale and depth of the transformation of the USSR that once embraced over half of the European landmass, it appears striking that, in contrast to the past patterns, external pressures and competitive drives have played only a secondary role in developments concerning the three entities in question.

Third, there are no powerful 'revisionist' or 'rogue' states in Europe. In fact, all the actors on the continent tend to operate as 'status quo' powers, a reality which signifies a shift from the tradition of the past century which continuously witnessed attempts by one or more powers to overthrow the existing international order. Owing to the fact that these were the leading European countries, such as Wilhelmine or Hitler's Germany, the post-1871 France or the post-Tsarist Russia/USSR, stability on the continent was always shaky and easily undermined.

It is true that nowadays some states do not feel particularly satisfied with the current political geography of the continent. None of them, however, appears to consider practical an option of radically revising the maps. The political forces that threaten to overthrow the existing international order may find certain domestic support, sometimes even on a large scale (as in the case of Russian claims over Sevastopol and the Crimea) – but it is doubtful that such appeals can be translated into an official policy that is, in any event, contingent upon so many other variables. In brief, the most traditional threats to stability in Europe –disputes over territory and/or assertive demands by a powerful actor for a 'new order'— do not appear on the horizon.

Fourth, the role of military factors has become considerably less prominent than in the past. True, these factors play (or have played) a significant role in the on-going or recently terminated conflicts; furthermore, it is still generally accepted that military instruments are needed for maintaining stability. However, in a strictly military sense, the balance of forces which used to be a crucial concern for, and was thoroughly monitored by, almost all the actors in Europe, seems no longer to be perceived as a critical variable. Even the review of the CFE Treaty remains a low-profile issue, notwithstanding all the official statements to the contrary. By and large, Europe is now, against the backdrop of its history, less vulnerable to instabilities generated within the military sphere than it was in earlier periods.

Fifth, ideology does not figure among the serious conflict-generating factors that

contain the potential of undermining the overall stability on the continent –as was the case with religious wars in the past and the communism/capitalism dichotomy until very recent times. Today, it is hard to detect any powerful ideological system of values that might provoke a pan-continental upheaval.

There are, however, numerous ideological phenomena that might destabilise the international system in Europe: nationalism, xenophobia, and a revival of interest in state paternalism among certain social groups in post-communist societies whose expectations associated with democracy and private ownership remain unfulfilled. In a similar vein, and as evidenced by the war in Yugoslavia, religious tensions continue to contribute to the breakout of, and perpetuation of, hostilities. However, being mostly of a local character, these incidents are not harbingers of a threat to the emerging pan-European order; what's more, in a broader sense, even though different civilisations do exist and complicate the task of maintaining security in Europe, their predicted clash is not on the continent's immediate agenda.

Sixth, the institutionalised cooperation on security issues is emerging as an important element of a future European architecture, yet it is by no means a panacea. In fact, this very phenomena may engender tensions, rivalry and conflicts among the actors involved. Nevertheless, by gradually consolidating multilateralist instincts in states' behavior as opposed to unilateralism, institutionalised cooperation has had on the whole a positive impact on the prospects of maintaining stability on the continent.

## HETEROGENEOUS SECURITY LANDSCAPE

To sum up, a number of fundamental circumstances serve to minimise the likelihood of a destabilised Europe. However, what considerably challenges this benevolent prediction is the obvious fact that Europe is by no means a homogeneous political space as regards the task of maintaining international security.

However attractive the general thesis of 'indivisibility of security' might seem, Europe is not one, but many, in terms of the security-related status of its components. Among the important parameters that differentiate various actors on the European scene are the character of objective security risks, the way of assessing the substance of vital national interests, the available means of defusing possible threats, a country's role and place in the emerging security architecture, its options of alignment and, more generally speaking, its security interaction with other actors. Accordingly, for analytical purposes, Europe may be roughly divided into a number of security sub-zones – NATO/EU, East-Central Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans/South-East Europe

and Russia/'Russia *plus*'.

## THE WESTERN CORE AREA

The core area of the European security space is indisputably formed by 'the West'. The countries participating in NATO and/or the European Union have reached (or, at least, closely approached) Karl Deutsch's model of an ideal 'security community'. No serious security challenges that they face are associated with possible developments within this zone, and they are sufficiently well-equipped to deal with external challenges to security should they emerge (which is not very likely for the time being).

The security of the West European states is derived, to a significant degree, from the welfare of their respective societies and their social and economic well-being. Viewed from this perspective, the security of these nations is increasingly dependent on their ability to effectively handle domestic agendas, make deep structural adjustments, and harmonise their socio-economic policies through multi- and supra-national mechanisms, such as the EU. Failing or falling short in resolving these tasks would undermine their security more significantly than any traditional threat. Also, these countries are still to display their might in responding jointly or individually to 'non-traditional' risks, such as the uncontrolled flows of refugees, the trans-border activities of organised crime, the illegal transfer of arms, drugs, fissile materials, trans-national environmental challenges, etc.

Still, the western security core is not homogeneous. First, the agendas of some actors are shaped by specific domestic problems, such as separatism (Ulster in Great Britain, Corsica in France, the Basques in Spain, and the Northern League in Italy) and disputes over the distribution of authority between the central and the local administrations (Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and prospectively Great Britain). Second, there are different security priorities and sensitivities in various 'sub-zones'. To illustrate, the Mediterranean countries feel exposed to a threat from the south; the Northern states are concerned about developments in the Baltic Sea area; Germany is especially interested in preventing instabilities in East-Central Europe; and Greece and Turkey continue to distrust each other. Third, the lists of participants in NATO and in the EU are overlapping but not identical, while for some countries the neutral status continues to be an attractive option even in the post-Cold War setting. Fourth, there are traditional 'transatlantic diseases', such as the unfinished (all official declarations notwithstanding) debates over the role of the United States in Europe – burden-sharing, the substance and forms of the 'European defence identity,' to name a few. Finally, after the Cold War the problems of leadership and of disparity among Western Europe's

powers have not become less delicate and tension-prone.

By and large, the NATO/EU-centred security zone in Europe is the main pole of stability on the continent, both powerful and attractive to other international actors. It faces, however, three major challenges. First, its doctrines, equipment, and institutional structures were built in a different era and have to be adapted to a new security environment on the continent. Failure to do so would only increase the strength of inertia at the expense of tasks oriented to the future. Second, in the absence of a clearly defined external threat as the most powerful factor of consolidation, maintaining a mutually acceptable balance within this zone becomes an essential task whose relevance will only increase with time. Third, considerable (if not predominant) attention will have to be given to the issues of external interactions, such as 'power projection' outside the zone itself, the acceptance of new members, and relationships with outsiders. Mishandling of any of these tasks might undermine the sustainability of the NATO/EU zone as a provider of security for the whole of Europe.

## RUSSIA *PLUS*

Russia (or, more precisely, 'Russia *plus*') forms an alternative pole of the European security space. 'Alternative' should not be understood in this context as being in confrontation with, or in rigid opposition to, the Western security community. Although such a possibility is by no means negligible, Russia's problems with European security are of a different character.

First, Russia is not concerned about challenges to its security that emanate from the West *per se*, any statements to the contrary notwithstanding. Rather, its main problem consists in developing and implementing a broader strategy of promoting the country's role on the continent and re-establishing its international status. Anything which is perceived as denying Russia a respectable place in an evolving European security space, or which relegates it to the sidelines of European developments and undermines attempts by Moscow to reassert its waning influence on the continent – provokes a painful reaction and may contribute both to Russia's imposing activism and to its alienation with respect to Europe.

Second, Russia confronts domestic challenges on a scale unseen in most post-communist countries. A poor economic performance amid highly controversial market reforms, the fragility of the budding political system of a country whose territorial integrity is threatened, a rudimentary character of the civil society, a growing criminalisation of the country and a progressive 'oligarchisation' of the regime – taken

together these undermine internal security and make Russia's interaction with the outside world volatile and dependent on domestic developments.

Third, although Russia's territorial space has shrunk by one third as compared with the former USSR, the country remains by far the largest in Europe and is indeed larger than the rest of the continent when looked at apart. This imbalance, defined not only in terms of territory or military might, also affects the European perception of, and thinking about, Russia. However unrealistic the following might seem today, a once recovered, perfectly democratic and non-assertive Russia might one day inspire an inferiority complex in other Europeans. A more likely scenario, though, is that a less democratic and more assertive Russia will increasingly find itself alienated from Europe.

Fourth, Russia extends far beyond Europe. Its security agenda is not only significantly broader than that of most European states but is in many respects of a different character. Suffice it to mention the place in the agenda for Russia's immediate neighbor –the Chinese giant. Furthermore, Russia's sensitivity towards non-European security problems will grow with time, which will inevitably affect Russia's posture as an actor on the European scene. Operating in Europe will not be Russia's only role, even if such a role is considered as the top priority by Moscow. Alternative options will always be viewed as available, even if not particularly attractive; and other Europeans will most probably keep doubts about the extent of Russia's commitment to Europe, despite sincerely welcoming it.

Fifth, Russia is still experiencing considerable difficulties in adapting itself to the country's radically changed geopolitical situation –a phenomenon not unfamiliar to some former European colonial powers. Even in the most liberal-oriented circles in Moscow the loss of superpower status and the sudden emergence of new states on Russia's periphery are sources of considerable unease and confusion, which are often exploited by all the forces that believe that Russia is in an 'imperial predicament'. The post-imperial frustration is exacerbated by the fact that Russia's position with respect to a number of traditional security parameters, such as access to the high seas and availability of critical resources, etc., has significantly deteriorated with the disintegration of the former USSR. Furthermore, new problems of the utmost sensitivity have emerged, above all the plight of tens of millions of ethnic Russians who have suddenly found themselves living outside 'their' country.

Sixth, Russia has a specific agenda with respect to the CIS area that affects the prospects of the European security space in several ways. Russia has built upon its involvement in practically all conflicts within the former USSR, playing both a role of external stabilizer and a promoter of its own predominance in this area which is being increasingly (although only tacitly) recognised as, if not Russia's sphere of influence, then at least as the zone where Moscow has better chances to contain instabilities than anyone else in Europe. At the same time, broadly held discussions on promoting 'integration'

with the former Soviet republics, though by no means reflecting the actual situation within the CIS area, cause apprehension in Europe where Russia is suspected of designing to turn the CIS into its 'velvet empire'. Such a suspicion exists even more so in the light of Russia's obvious inclination to treat the CIS as its exclusive zone of influence to which other international actors should be denied or enjoy significantly limited access.

'Russia *plus*' is a security zone of a variable geometry wherein multiple and often conflicting trends are at work. On the one hand, Russia's swift *rapprochement* with Belarus may result in the incorporation of the latter into the former. On the other hand, the combination of Ukraine's possible further alienation from Russia and Moscow's predictable reaction thereto may become the strongest factor of corrosion of this zone and, in the worst case scenario, evolve into the most serious single challenge to European stability.

## EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

Part and parcel of the Soviet Union's 'outer empire' a few years ago, East-Central Europe is now a potential candidate for inclusion into the Western multilateral structures – NATO, the EU, and the WEU. Remarkably, this transformation has occurred when there have been no real external dangers in the region. After a brief debate discarding the option of a neutral status, their rapid reorientation toward the West has become sort of a psychological compensation for being held in the fifty-year long grip of a 'Big Brother'. As regards rational security considerations, these have been based on theoretically worst-case scenarios rather than on the estimates of a real situation in the region where an important role is played by the dictum that it is necessary to forestall the emergence of a 'security vacuum', which is valid if all previous European history is taken into account, though questionable within the context of the movement towards the formation of a cooperative pan-European security architecture.

The East-Central Europe security zone is not homogeneous. Not surprisingly, all the attempts to foster security cooperation within the Visegrad mechanism have not brought any tangible success. Putting aside a scenario of the restoration of something similar to the Soviet Union that has ambitions to control its former allies, the only factor that unites the countries of East-Central Europe, in essence, has been their exalted desire to join NATO (though this factor has also become important in terms of their competition among themselves). In the rest, their security concerns are of a unique character for which there is hardly a common denominator.

Indeed, for Poland an important issue is the status of the neighboring former Soviet



republics, something the Czech Republic is indifferent to. Prague has been experiencing a good deal of euphoria in connection with its close *rapprochement* with Germany, whereas for Warsaw a similar process (though its relations with Germany are as friendly as ever) is pregnant with painful historical reminiscences as well as anxiety about the post-World War II territorial readjustments. Hungary is, on other hand, more vulnerable to instability emanating from the former Yugoslavia than from other East-Central European states, despite the plaguing issue of the status of the sizable Hungarian minorities in these neighboring countries. Slovakia, meanwhile, appears to be a pariah state in East-Central Europe, which creates certain incentives for its orientation towards the East.

Though not usually included in the zone of East-Central Europe, two former WTO members –Bulgaria and Romania– have signed treaties with the EU identical to those which other ECE countries have. They also enjoy the same status of being Associate Partners with the WEU, participate in the Partnership for Peace activities, and aspire to join Western institutions. While Romania is negatively linked to the countries of ECE through the issue of its Hungarian minority (despite some progress, this issue is still considered by Romania as one of its major national security concerns), Bulgaria appears close to the zone of East-Central Europe.

## THE BALTIC STATES

In contrast to East-Central Europe, the three Baltic states have more substantial reasons to be concerned about their national security. Their geo-strategic vulnerability, rudimentary military potential, the presence of a sizable Russian-speaking minority, and the problems associated with their status give serious grounds for fears of their becoming objects of external pressure which may be difficult for them to withstand.

The Baltic states declared their aspiration to join NATO, and this intent has provoked an extremely painful reaction in Moscow. There is a strong psychological component involved (as regards the territory of the former USSR, not its 'outer empire'), as well as concerns about the ramifications for Russian security in view of these countries' aspirations to join NATO. Concerns such as access to the Baltic Sea (sharply limited since the disintegration of the USSR), the maintenance of ties with the strategically important enclave of Kaliningrad, the effectiveness of air defence systems, and the overall military infrastructure that is developing in a north-west direction can hardly be regarded as absolutely unfounded and so are, in this respect, unlike the concerns that affect East-Central Europe.

In this zone there emerges a classic 'security dilemma'. From the standpoint of

security, the Baltic states have many more reasons to aspire to be under NATO's umbrella than East Europeans; yet, this very intention has the potential of provoking a much more severe crisis than that related to the first round of NATO expansion.

The situation here calls for a good deal of delicate diplomatic effort. Key moves would be those that lead towards a gradual relaxation of tensions between Russia and the Baltic states over, first of all, the problems related to the Russian diaspora and territorial issues, and other moves leading towards an overall build-up of cooperative links. Another important step would be the development of a broader regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea basin. The third important parameter to consider would be the maintenance of a balance between the growing involvement of Western countries (including the US, which is doing so, in fact, for the first time) and the demonstration of this involvement's non-provocative character with respect to Russia.

Though this zone seems more homogeneous in terms of security than East-Central Europe, distinctions among the three countries must be kept in mind. Lithuania does not have problems with Russia, as the latter has with Latvia and Estonia, over its Russian-speaking population and territorial issues. At the same time, however, Lithuania is Russia's main partner (or object of Russia's eventual pressure) as regards the transit links to the Kaliningrad *oblast*. In addition, Lithuania's relations with Poland are of particular importance regarding security – relations marked by a controversial historical experience. Finally, among the Baltic states themselves there are also territorial problems, though these, seemingly, require but routine diplomatic efforts to resolve.

## THE BALKANS/SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

In terms of security, South-East Europe is the most unstable zone on the continent. The war in the former Yugoslavia demonstrated the extraordinarily explosive potential for spontaneous territorial disintegration based on ethnic-religious arguments. The war's conclusion, though it enabled to restore the credibility of international peacemaking efforts to a certain extent, has not led to the formation of a stable political environment in the region. The future of Bosnia is unclear. Ample potential remains for further ethnic conflicts, the danger of forced migration of significant masses of population, and the threat of a conflict's spill-over to neighboring countries.

Shaky also is the emerging balance of power both inside the former Yugoslavia and in its vicinity – indeed, for the entire region of South-Eastern Europe. Precisely because the old security equilibrium, fragile as it was, happened to be destroyed, one may expect a strengthening of mutual suspicions among all countries in the region in light of the

circumstances that as old mutual claims have resurfaced and new ones emerge almost no country feels secure in the days ahead. This is fertile stuff for a spiraling of events that could lead to military confrontations, despite regional arms control efforts.

Noteworthy to a certain extent, too, is the above description's relevance to the countries in the region that, due to their membership in NATO and/or the EU, can be included in the "Western zone of security" –Greece and Turkey. Their bilateral relations (territorial waters, Cyprus, etc.) appear to have entered a new and lengthy phase of antagonism. Turkey feels not only its growing isolation from Europe but an estrangement on Europe's part, which, in turn, limits Europe's ability to influence developments in Turkey. Against this background, Greece appears interested in seeking other partners with whom a *rapprochement* would be possible on the grounds of concern over Turkey, an interest that creates additional incentives for Greece's interaction with Russia.

Recent events in Albania have displayed still another facet of the situation in the region: the possibility of the collapse of post-communist regimes in the region. Even though such an extreme scenario is not very likely to recur, it is evident that many political regimes in the Balkans are much less stable than those in East-Central Europe, as the recent political crisis in Bulgaria illustrates.

Given that South-East Europe is fragmented in terms of security, it is difficult to expect that the South-East zone will be incorporated in the pan-European security zone any time soon. At the same time, however, due to its dramatic experiences, the region has become a testing ground for the development of mechanisms of external intervention (peacekeeping and peace-enforcement). A remarkable feature of the latter trend is the broad participation of many European countries, as well as the first experience of mutual cooperation between NATO and Russia towards implementing and stabilizing the peace in the zone.

## CONCLUSIONS: PATTERNS OF INTERPLAY

1. All five security sub-zones in Europe are heterogeneous. Participants in each of them share some security interests or confront similar threats, but the participant's specific security concerns and sensitivities are by no means mitigated by an existence of a 'common cause'.

2. As the basic organizing principle of 'commonness', the role of security (in its traditional meaning) is diminishing. Nevertheless, the more traditional pattern is still relevant in the case of the Baltic states as is its contrary –the absence of security– which continues to play a similar role in the Balkans. The other sub-zones mentioned here are mainly built upon the political orientation of their participants.

3. The delimitation of the five security sub-zones has a relative character. There exists a certain overlap of sub-zones, as with Russia/Kaliningrad in the Baltic states or with Greece/Turkey in South-East Europe. Also, the participation in some zones is characterized by certain shifts, with Slovenia moving closer to East-Central Europe, Slovakia out of it, Bulgaria and Romania hedging their bets, and Ukraine gradually withdrawing from 'Russia *plus*'.

4. All the sub-zones seem to have a transitional character and may evolve into something different from their present configuration. East-Central Europe is on the verge of becoming part of NATO, although the period of adaptation will be, by necessity, gradual, thus allowing the sub-zone itself to continue to exist for some time to come. While the prospects for the Baltic states to endure are considerably high, in the Balkans the prospects are that the continuing turmoil will either lead to another outburst of hostilities or (hopefully) open the way to a more structured regional arrangement –since the existing one is both fragile and imposed by force. 'Russia *plus*' , meanwhile, contains two elements of uncertainty; one is related to Russia itself, and the other is to its zigzag relations with its post-Soviet neighbors, above all with Ukraine. Finally, as the NATO/EU zone is likely to expand, its viability will largely depend on its ability to change and adapt to different security related situations.

5. Three major areas of potential conflicts can be identified in Europe, each having its own particular scenario, probability of escalation, and consequences for continental stability. The probability of new hostilities in the Balkans is the greatest one, since the region remains internally unsettled and contains numerous inceptions to conflicts; however, the tensions can also realistically be expected to be contained within the area. In the zone of the Baltic states, a drastic change in the status quo as a consequence of NATO expansion into the area might represent the most dangerous implications for stability in Europe. Nevertheless, a sufficiently prudent policy by most of the actors involved holds the promise of preventing such a development. The most unpredictable situation may emerge in the triangle Russia-Ukraine-the rest of Europe; at work here are both incentives for preventing a serious destabilization and factors influencing moves in the opposite direction.

6. The NATO/EU zone operates as the most significant security provider in and for Europe. It has gradually turned into an important factor of external influence over the most unstable zone on the continent, i.e., the Balkans, and also represents the main pole of attraction for East-Central Europe and the Baltic states. However, the zone's perceived domination is a matter of serious concern to Moscow, which considers unacceptable that a central role in making critical decisions on the issues of European security is played by institutions to which Russia does not have access.

7. Viewed from this perspective, the controversial issue of NATO enlargement is seen as most of all related to the evolving political organization of Europe, rather than

to security *per se*. Russia's fears persist, however, about having its status downgraded, and about itself becoming marginalised and disengaged from its potential allies in the post-Soviet space. It is therefore important to focus on all three of the following elements in order to prevent any destabilizing consequences from occurring –by giving Russia a voice in European security to be heard and respected; by offering Russia full-scale involvement in European affairs, even in those which have traditionally been considered the exclusive domain of Western interests; and lastly, by engaging Russia in the post-Soviet area in full respect towards its sensitivities, operating there together with Russia and not against it.