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## RUSSIA VERSUS THE WEST

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**ABSTRACT:** Both Russian authorities and Russian society have a sense of harm associated with the position of Russia in the world. They do not agree with the dominant role of the West. To a large extent it is associated with a sense of Russian pride. The consequence of this situation is the growing confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West. Currently, the theatre of confrontation is i.a. the conflict in the east of Ukraine and the war in Syria. The intensification of military tension is also observed, the confirmation of which is the violation of the airspace of NATO members. The author of this article undertook research effort associated with the determination of the fields of confrontation between Russia and the West.

**KEYWORDS:** confrontation, military tension, Syria, Ukraine, Russia

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## ROSYJSKA KONTRA WOBEC ŚWIATA ZACHODU

**ABSTRAKT:** Zarówno rosyjskie władze jak i rosyjskie społeczeństwo mają poczucie krzywdy związane z pozycją Rosji w świecie. Nie godzą się z dominującą rolą Zachodu. W dużej mierze jest to związane z poczuciem rosyjskiej dumy. Konsekwencją tego stanu rzeczy jest wzmagająca się konfrontacja na linii Rosja-Zachód. Obecnie teatr owej konfrontacji to m.in. konflikt na wschodzie Ukrainy oraz wojna w Syrii. Obserwowana jest również intensyfikacja militarnego napięcia, której potwierdzeniem jest naruszanie przestrzeni powietrznej członków NATO. Autorzy niniejszego artykułu podjęli wysiłek badawczy związany z określeniem pól konfrontacji między Rosją i Zachodem.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** konfrontacja, napięcie militarne, Syria, Ukraina

## INTRODUCTION

It is true that the West is unable to understand Russia or enter into a constructive dialogue with this country. It is also true that both countries make accusations concerning their unwillingness to learn about each other, or their frequent use of stereotypes in bilateral relations. This strengthens Russians' conviction that they are unique. Since 2012, Russia has been defining itself as one of the global ideological centres that is a stronghold for traditional,

conservative values, which are the foundations of the authority and the entire society. Moreover, the West is regarded *as washed out of meaning and axiological content, devoid of a strong link with the absolute, enslaved by its attachment to material possessions, atomized and disintegrated*<sup>1</sup>.

The president expressed his opinion regarding this matter during his address to the Federal Assembly:

*Currently, many countries reassess their moral values and ethical norms, and undermine traditions and the differences between people and cultures. Society is now required not only to acknowledge a person's right to his or her freedom of conscience, political views and privacy, but also to accept good and evil without any reservations, treating them equally, even though they are opposing concepts. This destruction of traditional values from above, leads not only to negative consequences for society, but it is above all anti-democratic, as it is based on a narrow view, notional ideas, against the will of the majority that does not accept the on-going changes and the revision of values that has been suggested. We know that there are more and more people all over the world who support our stand on defining traditional values, which have constituted the spiritual and moral civilizational foundations of each nation: traditional family values, true human life, including spiritual life, not only material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity*<sup>2</sup>.

This is repeated as if it was a mantra during meetings with politicians, journalists, experts, and influential figures from the world of science and culture. Russia wants to show in this manner that it is different from the liberal West, whereas liberalism is an ideology of capitalism, which is of transnational character. This anti-liberal stand is combined with Russia's links with anti-system movements in the West. For example, Russia's political and financial support for the French National Front is revealing. The party is headed by Marine Le Pen, who supported Russia's annexation of the Crimea in return for a loan of EUR 11 million<sup>3</sup>. It was the first part of EUR 40 million, which is to be allocated for the presidential campaign in France in 2017<sup>4</sup>. What is more, concerns can also be caused by the statements made by the leader of the UK Independence Party and Eurodeputy Nigel Farage, who admires Putin as a leader and expresses approval for his policy regarding the conflict in Syria. According to him, the EU has "blood on its hands," as it incited chaos in Ukraine, which led to the annexation of the Crimea<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> M. Broda, „Zrozumieć Rosję”? *O rosyjskiej zagadce-tajemnicy*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Ibidem” 2011, <http://dspace.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11089/2722/Broda%20Zrozumie%20Rosj%20C4%87%20C4%99.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (24.02.2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly* 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825> (12.10.2016).

<sup>3</sup> M. Nowicki, *Francuska prawica za kremłowskie pieniądze*, Newsweek Polska, <http://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/jak-rosyjskie-wladze-finansowaly-francuski-front-narodowy-newsweek-pl> (15.12.2016).

<sup>4</sup> D. Chazan, *Russia 'bought' Marine Le Pen's support over Crimea*, The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11515835/Russia-bought-Marine-Le-Pens-support-over-Crimea.html> (13.10.2016).

<sup>5</sup> N. Morris, *Nigel Farage: Vladimir Putin is the world leader I most admire*, The Independent, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-vladimir-putin-is-the-world-leader-i-most-admire-9224781.html> (13.10.2016).

The aim of this article is to determine the confrontation fields between the Russian Federation and the West. The goal formulated authorizes to undertake research leading to the solution of the general problem contained in the question: What are the main fields of confrontation between Russia and the West?

In order to solve the indicated problem, theoretical methods will be used in the form of: source and literature criticism, analysis, synthesis and inference.

## **RUSSIAN SENSE OF PRIDE**

The anti-West attitude, a sense of civilizational mission, and patriotism originate from Putin's personal and professional experience. However, it is worth observing that such an attitude was also characteristic of Yeltsin, and it will probably not be alien to succeeding leaders of Russia. They will also be aware of their weakness in comparison with the West, but they will persist in their efforts to obtain a special status for their country in the world. It is difficult to imagine a government or Russian political elites that are reconciled with the thought that the chances for victory in this confrontation are slim in the foreseeable future and that the country could be steered onto a less expensive and more promising path. There was a short period of such thinking in the 1990s; however, it was quickly dominated by the stab-in-the-back narrative, in which the stab in the back was perpetrated by the West. In theory, Russia could become a democratic and friendly country that has good relations with the USA and the EU. However, its sense of pride makes it impossible to happen.

It should be emphasised that Russia is a great civilization that has contributed a great deal to the cultural heritage of humankind. It also has the right to feel that the Post-Cold War World has left it in a situation that is unfavourable, difficult and, in a way, unfair. However, this is not the result of an intentional desire for humiliation or betrayal. It stems from the lost Cold War. Russia does not agree with such a diagnosis. However, the *de facto* system of the USSR, which Russia has inherited, was defeated in the global bipolar rivalry and confrontation politically, economically, culturally, technologically, and militarily. The situation in which Russia found itself is not unique. Valuable experience might be provided for Russia by contemporary France, which has retained its sense of uniqueness and civilizational mission but it maintains good relations with the countries that used to belong to its former empire. It has also come to terms with the fact that its position in the world is weaker. It reformulated its national interests and treats smaller countries on equal terms. The UK is also in a similar situation. Although it still has a sense of uniqueness, it also feels responsible for regional and global matters. At the same time, it is proud of its economy, prestigious universities, strong financial institutions, and the global language.

These elements are not present in the Russian political thought. Russia has the right to veto in the UN Security Council, a considerable military capability, extensive territory, and all the natural resources. However, this is not enough to accept it as a superpower. Regardless of

its own desire, despite forcefully expressed aspirations and demonstration of its power status on all possible levels, this country will not be equal to the EU or the USA, or even China in the foreseeable future<sup>6</sup>.

It seems that the Russian habit of brandishing a sword in foreign policy is of little benefit. Russia's policy towards Ukraine and intervention in its affairs strengthened Ukraine's national identity and increased its society's pro-West orientation. Moscow's relations with almost all its neighbours are tense. Germany, the most important commercial and political partner in Europe, does not accept Russia's actions and supports the sanctions, although they are politically and economically harsh.

With regard to international conflicts, Russia and the West stand exactly where they did during the Cold War – they are adversaries. First of all, Russia waged war against Georgia, in which the latter received unconditional support from the USA and the EU. Before that, Russia and the West had taken opposite stands during the conflict in Kosovo. Admittedly, the war in Iraq in 2003 had divided the West, with Russia joining the countries that were against the invasion, i.e. France and Germany; however, it had continued to oppose the USA. The current arena of confrontation is Ukraine and Syria.

## **CONFLICTS IN UKRAINE AND SYRIA – FIELDS OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

The origin of the conflict in Ukraine is a strategic and geo-political problem of far-reaching consequences, namely Ukraine's integration with either the European Union or the Eurasian Economic Union. However, economy was not at stake here. Russia was worried about its own security, including military threats. It is worth observing that the arms industry located in Ukraine used to be an integral part of the defensive system of the USSR. After the break-up of the communist empire, the connections have continued to exist. Moreover, one cause of the conflict was also to prevent another Colour Revolution, whose ideas and course of events could constitute a significant threat to the political system of the Russian Federation. The overthrow of Yanukovich was perceived as a coup d'état, which was all the more painful and troublesome as the new authorities were immediately recognized by the West. Furthermore, the West was unanimous in condemning the annexation of the Crimea, and it did not accept the Russian version that it was all about respecting the results of a fair referendum. The West also condemned Russia, accusing it of triggering off and fuelling the fighting in the Donbass. In retaliation, the Kremlin stated that the situation in Ukraine was a civil war that had been inspired and financed by the West.

At the initiative of Western countries, many international organizations, such as the UN General Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Organization

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<sup>6</sup> S. Kotkin, *Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern*, "Foreign Affairs", <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics> (10.05.2017).

for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or NATO, approved a resolution accusing Russia of violating international law. What is more, the EU, the USA, Canada, Australia, and many other countries imposed sanctions and other restrictions on Russia, which affected its economy, politicians, administration and the media. The confrontation became more serious. In retaliation, Russia acted to make it more difficult to ratify the Association and Free Trade agreement between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. It also imposed a ban on import of farm produce from the countries that were members of the anti-Russian coalition.

In the summer of 2014, during the proceedings of the 70th anniversary of the landing of Allied soldiers in Normandy, a decision was taken to establish a contact group called Normandy Four in order to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The group consists of representatives of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France. The heads of states and ministers of foreign affairs are in telephone contact and participate in plenary meetings.

In February, 2015, the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and France, as well as the chancellor of Germany signed an agreement whose aim was to resolve the conflict in the Donbass. In September, the fighting came to an end. However, heavy ordnance was not withdrawn and there have been breaches of ceasefire committed by both sides. Consequently, the provisions of this agreement were never fully brought into existence, which is confirmed by reports compiled by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, whose mandatory tasks cannot be fully performed because of various obstacles created by both sides of the conflict<sup>7</sup>.

Also, the members of the Normandy Group have different stances, which stems from the fact that Russia's attitude towards the Crimea has not changed, with its annexation being permanent in the foreseeable future. Russia's aims are also to obstruct the integration of Ukraine with the West, and to maintain a state of frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine. Even if a form of statehood was established in this region, it would be used to exert pressure on Ukraine<sup>8</sup>.

Another arena of confrontation is the conflict in Syria, where Russia became involved militarily in the autumn of 2015. It was the first time that the Russian military had intervened outside the post-USSR territories. This decision is to show the world, especially the USA, that there has begun a new era of Russian foreign policy and that Russia is not indifferent to conflicts in the world and wishes to have a say about the manner they are resolved. Moscow does not want Bashar al-Assad to be overthrown, as it believes that changes in this part of the world that took place between 2011 and 2012, i.e. the so-called Arab Spring, are nothing more than another kind of Colour Revolution, incited by the USA. According to the Kremlin, any victorious colour revolution, in any region of the world, may pose a direct or indirect threat to Russia. It also wants to show that it is a more reliable ally than the USA, which, faced with the public protests in 2011, did not support its perennial ally Hosni Mubarak, which led to his overthrow. However, Russia also desires to achieve a different objective.

<sup>7</sup> A. Wilk, T. Olszański, W. Górecki, *Porozumienie mińskie – rok gry pozorów*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-02-10/porozumienie-minskie-rok-gry-pozorow> (15.10.2016).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

It implies that it is a power that is not only regional but also global. In addition, by becoming involved in the conflict in Syria, it strengthens its position in talks with the West concerning Ukraine. Another significant factor is the conviction that there is a growing terrorist threat from the Middle East, which is dangerous for Russia. Russia is aware that there are Russian citizens fighting among ISIS fighters, who will gain experience and return to their home country. These problems are still part of the agenda of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, and they are considered as one of the most important tasks of Russian secret services<sup>9</sup>. According to different estimations, at least 5,000 Russian citizens swore loyalty to ISIS, and they are actively involved in fighting. Moscow, just like Washington, thinks that it is better to fight terrorist groups abroad.

No one in the world questions the threat posed by ISIS. It seems that after the terrorist attacks in the USA and Western Europe, the security forces developed a fairly effective method of fighting against groups such as Al-Qaeda, which operate in small, scattered cells, with no planning or coordination of actions. However, ISIS is a terrorist organization of a different kind. It has an ambition to establish a state and creates administration and law in controlled areas. Just like any state, it has an ambition to conduct its own foreign policy. Therefore, more coordination of prepared attacks may be assumed. It is worth observing the ideological and propaganda apparatus of this organization, which succeeds in recruiting new fighters and is building up a large group of supporters. ISIS has also clearly formulated political objectives, which include creating a rift in Iraq, obtaining the freedom of action in Turkey and Syria, the weakening of the powers in the region, the establishment of the caliphate and its expansion into the Muslim world, as well as the harassment of the West with attacks in order to create a split among these countries and radicalize the citizens of Muslim denomination<sup>10</sup>.

To resolve the crisis connected with the expansion of ISIS, two coalitions were formed. One of them consists of the USA and over fifty countries, while the other one comprises Russia, Iran, and Syria. These two coalitions have different objectives and understand terrorism in different ways. According to Moscow, it is only the army of Bashar al-Assad and Kurdish fighters that fight against Islamic terrorists, whereas the moderate Syrian opposition does not exist<sup>11</sup>. In contrast, the USA and their allies claim that they support the moderate Syrian opposition, which is represented by the Free Syrian Army. They believe that their approach to fighting terrorism is broader and more appropriate. This is so because they fight not only against ISIS, but also against Hezbollah, which has links with Iran, and which supports the Syrian government. Furthermore, each coalition has different plans concerning the future of the Syrian president. Russians want him to remain in power, at least in the part of

<sup>9</sup> E. Lukjanov, *SB RF nazval opasnostju dlja Rossii vozvrashchenie v stranu byvshikh boevikov IG*, "Interfax", <http://www.interfax.ru/world/449342> (15.10.2016).

<sup>10</sup> J. McFate, H. Gambhir, Ch. Kozak, et al., *Middle East Security Report 30. ISIS Forecast: Ramadan 2016*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War 2016..

<sup>11</sup> *70th session of the UN General Assembly: Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York*, The website of the President of the Russian Federation, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385> (16.10.2016).

the country where the Alawites constitute a majority. Unlike Russia, the coalition headed by the USA wants him to be toppled, stating that he has completely forfeited the legitimacy of his rule. Barack Obama publicly calls him a tyrant and claims that he should completely disappear from political life. These two coalitions do not trust each other both on the political and operational level in the area of military activity, among soldiers.

Russia's involvement in Syria met with disapproval in the West. It is not possible for these two coalitions to fully cooperate. Their cooperation can only regard the agreement to cease hostilities. Moreover, it is not possible to rule out another conflict in the region, in which the West and East would be on opposing sides. This is openly stated by the president of Russia, who emphasises that it refers to the countries (i.e. the USA - author's note) which lie about their interests in this region<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the relations deteriorated, resulting in the restriction of diplomatic contacts and a decrease in the influence of the Kremlin on international affairs. The seven most industrialized countries in the world refused to meet Russia at the G8 summit in Sochi in 2014. Instead, the "G7" met without the participation of Russia. What is more, the work of the Russia-NATO Council and the talks with the EU were suspended.

In this situation, the Russian diplomatic corps tries to effectively take advantage of slightest disagreements between Western countries. Careful attention is especially paid to the relations between the EU and the USA. The Kremlin hopes it can exploit the course of events in a manner similar to what happened during the crisis related to the intervention in Iraq in 2003, when, as was already explained above, Russia joined France and Germany, which were against the American intervention in this country. Following this line of thought, Moscow hopes that at some point in the future, some countries in the EU will oppose the prolonging Western sanctions imposed on Russia. Their greatest hopes are pinned on smaller member states, whose relations with Russia are of special nature, such as Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, and Slovakia. Some expectations are also directed towards South Korea, Israel, and New Zealand, which despite belonging unquestionably to the Western bloc, did not join the imposition of sanctions. This is why although Russia is considerably isolated, the West has failed to reach its objective fully.

## **INTENSIFICATION OF MILITARY TENSION**

Since the end of the Cold War, the tensions related to military matters between Russia and the West have not been as high as they are now. After the annexation of the Crimea and the war in the Donbass, there were concerns in Western countries that a similar scenario can also be played out in other regions, especially in Latvia and Estonia, where there are largest clusters of population of Russian origin.

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<sup>12</sup> *Congratulations to US President Barack Obama on Independence Day*, The website of the President of the Russian Federation, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49864> (12.10.2016).

These concerns were increased by the high number of exercises near the borders of NATO countries, constant testing of operational readiness, intense activity of the air force and the navy, acts of what can be regarded as provocation, as well as statements made by politicians and state media journalists. It is worth quoting controversial, even in Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a State Duma deputy. It is possible to assume that this politician's line of thought is also shared by some political circles in Russia. The following statement comes from one of the programmes broadcast on Latvian television:

*The active participation of Latvia in NATO might be too costly in case of a real military conflict between the West and Russia. The nearer NATO comes to the borders of the Russian Federation, the more likely it is for such a conflict to break out .... We are not going to ask you for permission to launch strikes in Europe where they will be necessary. And you are here, just next to us. Do you realize that a bomber carrying nuclear bombs will reach St. Petersburg within four minutes? It will need a quarter of an hour to reach Moscow. And what about us? Do you think we will tolerate that? Do you think we will tolerate the fact that NATO is dropping bombs on Moscow using military bases in Latvia? We will never allow that to happen! Before the decision is taken to launch air strikes on Moscow, we will destroy entire Latvia. Nothing will remain. There will be a crater, a smoking crater! Not even a single airplane will take off from Latvia towards Moscow. The same will happen to Estonia and Lithuania<sup>13</sup>.*

In response to such a narrative and the intensification of Russian exercises, NATO member states emphasised the significance of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and in this spirit, they conducted military exercises whose scenarios required military reactions in accordance with the provisions of this article. This, in turn, provoked Russia, which was not indifferent and responded with similar actions, especially by activating its air force and navy. The tensions were also reflected in diplomatic statements. Russian Federation ambassador to Denmark Mikhail Vanin stated that those countries that would allow installing elements of the American Ballistic Missile Defence within their territories or territorial waters might become objects of a nuclear attack. This statement was related to the decision taken by Denmark to equip a few frigates with radars, which enabled the vessels to become part of the Ballistic Missile Defence system. This was the first case of Russia threatening a NATO state with the use of a nuclear weapon. Naturally, the increased military capability located by both Russia and NATO near their borders did not match the concentration of military ordnance during the Cold War. However, there exists a credible threat that the turn of events might be unexpected, which might lead to incidents of military nature, including a real conflict.

<sup>13</sup> Rēders, Zhirinovskijj: *ot Latvii ostanetsja dymjashchijjsja kotlovan, Latvijas Sabiedriskie mediji*, <http://www.lsm.lv/ru/statja/analitika/jirinovskiy-ot-latvii-ostanetsja-dimjaschijsja-kotlovan.a189014/> (10.05.2017).



## CONCLUSIONS

Faced with such an anti-West policy, it is worth asking a question whether Russia has an alternative to its present European orientation. In the past, it wanted to be a power in the Pacific Ocean. However, it was defeated by Japan, which thwarted its ambitions. Moreover, it also failed to obtain the status of an Asian power, and one should not expect, considering the economic expansion of China and its assertive foreign policy, that there will emerge a beneficial political configuration for it. As a result of the sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of the Crimea, Russia is trying to find other priorities for its political and economic activity in Asia. These efforts can be seen, for instance, in the long-term agreement on the delivery of hydrocarbon fuel to China. However, high-sounding partnership with China is not bringing the expected results. No Chinese capital or investments flowed to Russia, which would have compensated for the Western sanctions. Furthermore, China has its own geopolitical ambitions and is building up its own strength in Asia. This can be illustrated by China's assertive, sometimes belligerent, actions in the South China Sea and its territorial claims in this region. In Asia, Russia does not stand a chance to stop China's economic domination. The concept of a new Silk Road is a project of Chinese expansion that will not bring tangible benefits to Russia.

The only achievable objective might be a strong position in the region, in Europe and the post-USSR sphere, even though some countries from this area are gravitating towards China. It should be observed that no post-USSR state will equal Russia in terms of its military capability. Moreover, except for the Baltic states, the remaining countries are economically dependent on Russia. However, this will not be enough to obtain the status of a power. Russia has failed, at least so far, to achieve the planned level of integration within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union. Despite the gradual admission of new members, the economic strength of this integrative structure is, and it is likely to remain so for a long time, too small. Russia constitutes a large and attractive market. However, doing business there is highly risky, which can be demonstrated by disputes and scandals connected with take-overs of economic entities as a result of legal changes or questionable criminal charges. Some countries belonging to the post-USSR sphere, which conduct pro-West policy, such as Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, would like to do business with Russia, but on condition that they are supported by the West, which they regard as an insurance policy in the political, economic, and military dimensions. On the other hand, the countries that are economically dependent on Russia, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, are aware of the fact that the close relations with Russia are risky, and they are afraid of even greater dependence. Strong and formalized links raise concerns, as the Russian economy does not show the hallmarks of development and modernization, which makes it extremely vulnerable to the uncertainty of the contemporary world. Concerns are also voiced regarding possible territorial expansion and the repetition of the Crimean scenario.

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