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The Transatlantic Forum on Russia

THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS) AND THE POLISH-BASED THINK TANK CENTRE FOR POLISH-RUSSIAN DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZED *THE TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON RUSSIA* ON NOVEMBER 13, 2015 WHERE EXPERTS DISCUSSED RUSSIA'S CONTROVERSIAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES.

Russia's role on the international stage has taken very different forms since the end of World War II. Its influence and power aspirations were and still are of great interest to the United States as well as Europe. This was backdrop to the daylong forum where experts on Russian culture, history and politics elaborated on Russian - U.S. relations and, in particular, analyzed Russia's role in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

After some welcoming remarks by **Heather Conley**, Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic at CSIS and by **Adam Daniel Rotfeld**, Professor and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, the first panel tackled the question of how history is used as a means when it comes to Russian foreign policy. Moderated by **Śławomir Dębski**, Director of the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, the panelists presented their perspectives on the dangers of how a falsified narrative of one's past results in false politics. With all panelists agreeing on the fact that the historical falsification is a common global problem which concerns states as well as individuals, **Andrei Zubov**, Professor and columnist for *Novaya Gazeta* (one of the last independent Russian newspapers) underlined that Russia's persisting urge to build an empire is pursued at all cost, with no concern of human dignity. To him, any historical narrative should focus on its people instead of the nation's strength, pride or aspirations.

Andrzej Nowak, Professor at Jagiellonian University in Krakow drew a similar picture of Russia. Russia strives for recognition and wants to be perceived as the second pillar of the global security order beside the United States and Europe. According to Nowak, the official Russian national discourse upholds the idea that only as an empire can

Russia guarantee the survival of its people in an "evil world". This explains Russia's aggressive foreign policy towards Syria and its interventionist action in the Crimean Peninsula. Furthermore, Professor Nowak stresses the urgency for a new type of dialogue regarding Russia's past, current and future role in shaping national and international events. At the same time, Western countries need to reassess their existing pre-shaped view of Russia with a better understanding of the motives behind Russia's action.

Professor **Timothy Snyder**, a historian at Yale University, argued that a "culture of discussion" in civil societies is the only cure for conflicts caused by the falsification of historic facts. Due to the absence of this type of open public discourse in Russia, authorities are able to nourish three misconceptions that are used to justify its foreign policy decisions. First, the "naive mood" promotes the idea of the non-existence of the Ukrainian state which is then documented through historic sources dating back to the 19th century. Such cherry-picking of historical facts leads to a public that is misinformed on the true reason for international engagement. Second, the Russian government spreads the belief that the 1930s with major events such as the Great Depression, the rise of Communism in Russia and Nazism in Germany are to be seen as normal historical evolutions and not, as most historians do, as an extraordinary accumulation of concerning events. For Russia, its actions are the natural and logical development in response to events. For example, Russia was only a "realistic" player when it came to the annexation of Crimea - a logical consequence of Ukrainian weakness. This Professor Snyder labelled the "mood of realism". Here the nation state becomes the key actor unlike how Western democratic nations put forth the individual and follow liberal principles. Third, a "nostalgic nationalism" can be observed in official Russian statements, which explains why

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Russian leaders base current national strength on the fact that Russia won the Second World War without mentioning the difference between the former USSR and the Russian Federation. The panelists agreed unanimously on the assumption that the crisis in Ukraine is just part of a bigger Russian plan to shape Europe from a Russian perspective.

The members of the second panel discussed how the "long telegram", which was issued in 1946 by the US diplomat George Kennan during his posting in the Soviet Union, might look like today.

Ulrich Speck, a Senior Fellow at the Transatlantic Academy, started his speech with pointing out that today's Russia should not be compared to the Soviet Union in 1946. Today's situation is different, especially due to the interdependencies of Russia and the West. At the same time Russia's domestic weakness has led to a more active international engagement, thereby taking the focus off internal problems. The regime defends its pro-active foreign policy as a measure of defending its interests and power in the world. According to Speck, Russia needs measurable successes through its international interventions to justify its political power – among these are the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the maintenance of the sphere of influence in Georgia and Moldova, retaking former Soviet influence in the Middle East, the intervention in Syria, etc.

Further Speck highlights that the Western institutionalized system poses a threat to Russia, as it perceives itself as an outsider. The sanctions against Russia are viewed as a symbol of such a threat not because of their economic impact but because of the unity formed by the West. Nevertheless, Speck emphasized that the West needs to maintain dialogue with Russia and not isolate or even ignore it. The importance and strength of Russia, however, should not be overestimated. Russia does not have the same military power as the United States or NATO. Moreover, Russia lacks strong military alliances as demonstrated by the Western allies. Thus Russia cannot be considered a great power according to 19th century notion of power; Russia lacks the necessary alliances and economic power.

The second speaker **Olga Oliker**, a Senior Advisor and Director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS, made the point that Russia is currently sharing borders with

countries that seem less favorable to its regime. In fact, "Russia feels under siege by its neighbors" where the EU to the West and China to the East, as well as the United States across the Bering Sea are trying to weaken Russia's position in the world. Therefore, Russia claims it is trying to challenge US expansionism, such as NATO enlargement. At the same time, the United States seems unwilling to maintain the status quo with Russia and thereby respecting Russia's sphere of interest. Thereby, putting Russia into the position of having to back anti EU movements either from the far right or far left. In her presentation, Oliker went so far as to assert that Russia's ultimate goal is to dissolve the European Union. Oliker stressed that the West can only face up to the Russian challenge as long as it remains united.

The third speaker on the panel was **Marek Menkiszak** from the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw. He focused on three main pillars that form the foundation for Russian politics: perception, power and policy. According to Menkiszak, Russia sees conspiracies on a global level. Events such as the Arab Spring or the 2011 Russian protests against Putin are regarded as US lead and created by the CIA. Russia, therefore, sees itself at war with the United States, only this is on an economic and propaganda level. This "perception" results in the general feeling of being in danger and hence views its aggressive policies as a form of self-defense.

The second pillar, according to Menkiszak, is "power". Power in itself is currently being personalized and centered on Vladimir Putin. The system, therefore, is becoming increasingly autocratic and dependent on Putin. Furthermore, Menkiszak says Putin believes in the conspiracies brought to him by his intelligence services, which therefore make it impossible for him to trust other countries. Building trust between Russia and the West is consequently an uphill battle.

In the case of the third pillar, "policy", Menkiszak implies that Russia has developed long-planned scenarios, which are then implemented impulsively to any given situation. This helps explain Russia's flexible tactics in recent years. Menkiszak concluded by saying Ukraine has a unique and decisive role in that both Russia and the West regard it as its strategic partner.

Despite this rather negative outlook on Russian objectives and strategies, **Walter**

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Mead, Professor at Bard College, concluded in his keynote address that Russia should neither be over- nor underestimated. Even though the country is not a rising power because of its economic, social and judicial problems, Putin is a gambler and can therefore outwit the western alliance which is not always swift to move. Mead points to Russia's tactics to manipulate the EU from the inside by gaining further influence on Eastern European states which then could slow down or block EU decisions in Brussels. To avoid this, western nations must react by countermoves and strengthen their alliances with each other. Also, in his speech, Mead encourages western leaders to think of creative ways to react to Putin's strategies in a constructive way while at the same time keep in mind that there will be a post-Putin Russia.