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Trust-building in European Security

Why has it proven so difficult to sustain mutual levels of trust between the Eastern and Western flanks of the OSCE? Since neither side is proposing specific trust-building measures, argues Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova, it's no surprise that Cold War suspicions have returned to the fore.

By Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova for ISN

Switzerland and Serbia recently confirmed that 'the most urgent and sensitive security issues' will be at the center of their consecutive chairmanships of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Alongside the promotion of dialogue on arms control, cyber security and related issues, their chairmanships will also be heavily influenced by the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. The anniversary provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the work of the OSCE and its relevance to a post-bipolar world. It is also time to consider why, after the removal of all ideological barriers, relations between Russia and the West are sometimes as problematic as they were during Cold War era.

A Lack of Trust

The most common explanation of the growing divide between Russia and the West is a complete lack of trust. But what exactly constitutes 'trust' in international relations? Is it a political category, an independent variable or just a belief-based willingness to place the fate of one's interests under the control of others? Is it even possible to develop international security cooperation if trust is lacking? Indeed, how can we develop trust in the absence of security cooperation? To help answer these questions within the framework of Russia's relations with the West, it might be worthwhile to consider the evolution of the European integration project.

Generally speaking, Europe's past is a history of mistrust. However, the Second World War brought to light the suicidal absurdity of nationalist rivalry, thereby paving the way first for the European Economic Community (EEC) and eventually the European Union (EU). Franco-German relations are a case in point. Between 1870 and 1945, these states fought three devastating wars. Only in the context of European integration (as embodied by the Elysée Treaty, 1963) have relations between Paris and Berlin changed from mistrust and suspicion to friendship and cooperation.

Accordingly, Europe's recognition of its weakness and its desire to replace confrontation with cooperation pushed the region towards integration. This suggests that trust between states can be achieved through the recognition of concrete common interests which should be preferably codified by solid legal foundations that lead to close cooperation and eventually integration. By contrast, Russia-West relations have gone through several stages since the collapse of the Soviet Union, starting with high expectations, but now experiencing disappointment and dissatisfaction. Currently,

Russia is widely perceived by the West as an authoritarian state that is drifting away from liberal values and prone to neo-imperialist foreign policies.

In this respect, the Yeltsin era is still singled out by the West as the most favorable period in post-bipolar international relations. But why was “democratic Russia” not involved in the negotiations over the expansion of NATO to include former Soviet bloc states? Because ‘trust’ over that period was based not so much on legal foundations, but rather on personal relations between Clinton and Yeltsin. Yet personal relations are never enough for developing trust between nations. For instance, the Bush-Putin honeymoon period ended in 2008 as tensions flared up over the Georgian conflict.

The superficial judgment of Yeltsin made by the West reflects its nostalgia for a weak Russia that it can dictate terms to. Without any good reason, Russia, which was the main driving force behind the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was widely regarded during the 1990's as the defeated party of the Cold War. For its part, the Yeltsin leadership sincerely believed in Russia's rapid integration into the West and wholeheartedly accepted the model of relationship offered by its Western partners. This model was most bluntly described by the prominent British political scientist Laurence Freedman, who wrote that “there is now no particular reason to classify Russia as a ‘great power’... It cannot, therefore, expect the privileges, respect and extra sensitivity to its interests normally accorded a great power.”

Instead, the real breakthrough in trust-building between East and West occurred under Mikhail Gorbachev. But this was not the result of the last Soviet leader's image or his long speeches about ‘new political thinking’, most notably over a ‘common European home’. Instead, it was the development of the most sweeping disarmament proposals in history, unilateral force reductions and the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe that ushered in a new era of US-Soviet/Russian relations. The treaties' unique elements were concrete and unprecedented, culminating in weapons elimination as well as monitoring and verification regimes. By contrast, the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT) 2002 marked a significant departure from the aforementioned Strategic Arms Reduction (START) process. While Moscow and Washington agreed to limit their stockpile to between 1700 and 2000 operationally deployed warheads, neither side could agree on verification arrangements or procedures for cuts and dismantling.

Unfinished Business

During the two decades since the Paris Charter Summit tried to reshape relations between East and West, every one of the ten principles of the Helsinki Final Act (1975), which brought the OSCE into existence, has been violated. As the Kosovo (1990) and Caucasus (2008) crises demonstrate, states now have the opportunity to selectively apply these principles to match their specific foreign policy goals. Another problem is that Russia has still not found, nor been proposed its proper place in the post-bipolar Europe. As long as the EU and NATO are considered the principal pillars of European security, “without Russia” will be always interpreted by Moscow as “against Russia”.

As a result of being placed somewhere in between being an ally or an adversary of the West, Russia will, therefore, always be looking for allies in Eurasia or Asia-Pacific. This is because hard security still matters to Moscow, which feels geopolitically and militarily inferior to the West. And without radical changes in NATO-Russia relations this fear will remain a major source of insecurity across Europe. Moreover, Moscow's current emphasis on legally binding agreements with Western counterparts stem from the bad experiences of the late 1980's, when NATO gave assurances that it would not expand in the aftermath of German reunification but subsequently discarded this obligation.

What should be done?

Thus, the biggest challenge now confronting the OSCE is whether it can turn itself into a genuinely Pan-European security structure or remain an organization in which the West stands apart from the space 'to the east of Vienna'. For the time being, the signs do not look encouraging. Moscow seems obsessed with the idea that the West is planning to dismiss the ruling regime with a "colored revolution" akin to events in Ukraine a decade earlier. For its part, many Western policymakers worry that Russia is building up a new sphere of dominance. Russia and the West also remain at odds over arms control, the trajectory of the Arab Spring, Iran's nuclear program and other high-profile issues. In the past, disagreements and differences were often mitigated by successful arms-control negotiations. However, future talks seem a dim and distant prospect given the severe lack of trust on both sides.

Yet the vicious circle can be broken, if Russia and the West identify and refocus on issues of common strategic interest. These include developing coordinated 'neighborhood' policies – for instance over Syria – promoting stability in Afghanistan post-2014, rejuvenating nuclear non-proliferation activities and expanding trade and high-tech cooperation. Russia should stop its heavy-handed approach to forging a sphere of influence across the post-Soviet space. For its part, the West should stop viewing Russia's attempts to foster voluntary and mutually beneficial integration efforts as neo-imperialism that must be opposed at all costs. It should also acknowledge that it cannot simply impose its model of democratization on Russia, irrespective of the anti-democratic propensities of the current administration.

Finally, the West should re-emphasize to Russia that further democratization and reintegration into the Euro-Atlantic zone would undoubtedly benefit its economic, political and security interests. But it must do so without being perceived as encroaching on Russia's political system, traditions and values. It seems unlikely, however, that neither the US nor Russia is capable of facilitating such dialogue, at least not on their own. This is what makes the work of the OSCE so important. As recent history demonstrates, developing mutual trust between East and West requires collective hard work.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Verified Transparency: New Conceptual Ideas for Conventional Arms Control in Europe](#)

[The OSCE Summit in Astana](#)

[After Kazan, a Defining Moment for the OSCE Minsk Process](#)

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