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**DEALING WITH RUSSIA:
TOWARDS A COHERENT
BELGIAN POLICY**

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This Egmont Paper is the product of an informal Egmont working group on Belgo-Russian relations. The group included, amongst others, Didier Audenaert (Egmont), Sven Biscop (Egmont), Fabienne Bossuyt (Ghent University), Tom Casier (University of Kent and KU Leuven), Marc Franco (Egmont), Ria Laenen (KU Leuven) and Aude Merlin (Université Libre de Bruxelles). The group also benefitted from the input of various officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, each acting in a personal capacity. Alexander Mattelaer (Egmont and Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Laura Vansina (Vrije Universiteit Brussel and University of Warwick) edited the text; they are indebted to all members for sharing their insights and comments. The resulting Egmont Paper does not necessarily represent the individual views of each member of the group; the responsibility for any errors lies with the editors alone.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belgo-Russian relations are mired in paradox. For several years, the relationship between the Russian Federation on the one hand and the EU and NATO on the other has been characterized by mistrust. As a founding member of these multilateral organisations, Belgium has been a full part of the decision-making process that has formulated a hardening stance towards the Russian Federation. Yet on a bilateral level, Belgium has pragmatically upheld what is left of commercial cooperation and cultural exchanges. In order to deal with this paradox, Belgium should formulate a more coherent approach towards Russia that focuses on upholding the European order and security whilst maintaining dialogue and engaging the Russian Federation. This requires the new Belgian government to engage in a delicate balancing act that can be articulated in the forthcoming National Security Strategy, in the Belgian positions in the EU and NATO, and in the bilateral relationship with Moscow. This Egmont Paper aspires to provide both analytical background and novel ideas which can be used to such a purpose.

When analysing Russian foreign policy, it can only be acknowledged that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 fundamentally challenged the rules-based international order. Yet to understand Russian behaviour, it is imperative to reach back in time to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Ever since, Russia's main goal on the international stage has been the re-establishment of its Great Power status. To this end, it has sought to consolidate security buffers in the form of geographical and psychological depth. Most notably, it involved the promotion of the 'Russian World' (Russkiy Mir), the conduct of operations in the grey zone between war and peace, and a fair dose of strategic opportunism. Whilst perhaps understandable, this assertive foreign policy has negatively affected Belgian interests in a variety of ways.

Belgo-Russian relations constitute a true kaleidoscope ranging from cooperation to conflict. Bilateral trade has largely recovered from the 2014-2015 shock resulting from the sanctions regime – even if the trade balance remains a negative one. Cultural and academic exchanges continue, in line with the little-known 1993 Belgo-Russian Treaty on Understanding and Cooperation. Yet politically, conflict has been on the increase. Russia has been actively challenging and contesting the multilateral framework that Belgium holds dear. In addition, Belgium has become the target of Russian disinformation and other grey zone operations. As it is unlikely that Russia will tone down its assertive foreign policy anytime soon, Belgium would do well to articulate a more coherent approach. This needs to clarify Belgian policy priorities, communicate Belgian positions towards the Russian government, and educate the domestic audience about the evolving relationship with the Russian Federation. To nourish this debate, this Egmont Paper puts forward six policy recommendations, namely:

- **Assume more ownership over multilateral decision-making.** Belgium prides itself on its role as a staunch multilateralist, but often shies away from fully embracing the consensus reached within the EU and NATO. Yet there can be no doubt that strength lies in unity with our partners.
- **Maintain and deepen bilateral relations to enrich the multilateral framework.** The 1993 Belgo-Russian Treaty can provide a sound starting point, assuming Russia also honours its own commitments contained therein.
- **Re-develop Russia-related subject matter expertise in Belgium.** Over the past three decades, the study of Russian affairs has atrophied. Yet in the current international context, it is vital that Belgium re-develops its knowhow of Russian affairs and foreign policy issues more generally.
- **Strengthen Belgian domestic resilience to cope with disinformation and a political relationship under stress.** This includes boosting interdepartmental strategic communication efforts as well as endowing the public broadcasters with the mission to inform citizens about the increasingly contested nature of international affairs.
- **Explore the question on which basis the EU-Russia economic relationship can be improved.** Any normalization of the economic relationship cannot be anything but conditional on clear commitments from both the European capitals and Russia to respect each other's legitimate security concerns.
- **Strengthen the Belgian contribution to the collective defence effort.** The mounting criticism from our European allies about the lack of burden-sharing indicates that more efforts will be needed in sustaining deterrence.

INTRODUCTION

*Russia (...) is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma;
but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.*

~ Winston Churchill

For centuries the relationship between Russia and the West has oscillated between cooperation and confrontation. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine catalysed the deterioration of trust that had already begun with the 2008 Five Day War in Georgia, if not earlier (cf. Bossuyt and Van Elsuwege, 2021). Hand in hand with this changing trend, a renewed interest in Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy took hold in many Western capitals. Yet somehow, this change received remarkably little attention in Belgium – a country historically keen to maintain good commercial relations whilst avoiding political conflict if possible. The lack of an articulate Russia policy is both chicken and egg of this lacuna. This Egmont Paper seeks to fill this gap by offering a set of reflections on the Belgian relationship with Russia. These are the product of a working group composed of independent academic experts, diplomatic officials and military officers bringing together a wide range of Belgian perspectives on a notoriously complicated issue.

Belgium's relations with the Russian Federation are mired in paradox. On a bilateral level, Belgium seeks to uphold what is left of commercial cooperation. This is exemplified by the dialogue-enhancing discourse of Belgian politicians towards Russian officials (Novak, 2017) and the level of imports from Russia flirting once again with pre-Crimea levels (Gijssbrechts, 2018). Yet as a founding member of the EU and NATO, the country is also a full part of the decision-making process that has formulated a hardening stance towards the Russian Federation. This ranges from the ramping up of EU economic sanctions to military engagement aimed at shoring up NATO's collective defence. Moreover, Belgium is by itself a soft target for Russian disinformation operations. In 2016, Russian officials blamed the Belgian Air Force for causing civilian casualties during an air strike in Syria – an accusation that was quickly proven to be false. Barely three years later, the Kremlin condemned alleged Franco-Belgian plans to stage a poisonous gas attack. This provided an ill-disguised attempt to distract attention from Russia's own bloody involvement in the Syrian conflict. These are but a few examples in a long list of Russian efforts aimed at fragmenting international alliances and destabilizing Western democracies. In effect, Belgium attempts to maintain economic cooperation with Russia whilst at the same time being drawn into political conflict.

In order to deal with this paradoxical situation, Belgium should formulate a more coherent approach towards Russia that focuses on upholding the European order and security whilst maintaining dialogue with and engagement towards the Russian

Federation. This requires the new Belgium government to engage in a delicate balancing act that gets articulated in the forthcoming National Security Strategy, the Belgian position in the EU and NATO and the bilateral relationship with Moscow. This Egmont Paper aspires to provide the necessary background and ideas which can be used to such a purpose. In the first section, this paper analyses Russian foreign policy making, elaborating on its rationale, key features and consequences. The second part elaborates on the Belgian paradox, delving into the consequences of Russian behaviour for Belgium, both on a national level as well as within the context of its membership to NATO and the EU. The third part of the paper outlines a range of policy recommendations and building blocks to nourish the debate on Belgium's international position.

UNDERSTANDING RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Old wine in new barrels

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 fundamentally challenged the rules-based international order. Why is this the case? While the West scrambled for an appropriate response, Vladimir Putin proclaimed Crimea's rightful and long-awaited return to the Russian Federation (Putin, 2014). Even though this event dramatically illustrated the deteriorating bond between the Eurasian giant and the Euro-Atlantic 'other', relations were already cooling down since the mid-2000s (cf. Trenin, 2006). The post-Yeltsin Kremlin interpreted and framed the 2004 EU and NATO enlargements as an infringement on its natural buffer, going against proclaimed (verbal) promises made by Western leaders in the aftermath of the Cold War. The Colour Revolutions in Russia's Near Abroad in the early 2000s targeted authoritarian regimes and fraudulent elections but were perceived as a threat by the Kremlin. Adverse to change outside the constitutional framework – and presumably fearing a spill-over into Russian minds – Putin's regime portrayed these democratic protests as Western-fuelled forces trying to undermine Russia's influence, security and values (Putin, 2015a, 2015b). Responding to the membership applications received from Ukraine and Georgia, the NATO (2008) Bucharest Summit Declaration stated that these countries "will become members of NATO". This amplified Russian concerns about geopolitical entrapment. Against this background the EU's subsequent quest for an Association Agreement with Ukraine only added insult to injury.

Such frictions between Russia and what the country perceives as 'the West' are neither new nor unique. Russia has long viewed the West as an 'Other'. In turn, Western countries tended to consider Russia as a latecomer to modernity. For centuries, the relationship between the two has balanced between cooperation and conflict, driven by a constant search for security and prosperity on both sides. Tsars such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great took a notorious interest in Western culture. The Russian Empire sided with Western allies in conflicts such as the Seven Year's War (1756-1763), the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. It was no stranger to 'Great Power' treaties such as the Quintuple Alliance (signed in 1818 between Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia). Yet Russian leaders also vied with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for centuries. With the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed in March 1918, Russia's participation in the First World War ended early – putting its erstwhile Western allies at risk. The non-aggression pact signed in August 1939 between Nazi Germany and the USSR set the stage for the two-front invasion of Poland one month later. After the Second World War, the USSR lowered an Iron Curtain that divided the European continent for almost half a century – a fact that still rattles European geopolitical memory to the present day.

The quest for a Great Power status

Russia's primary goal on the international stage is the re-establishment of its Great Power status lost after the demise of the Soviet Union. In the mind of Russian officials, being respected as a Great Power allows a country to achieve both domestic stability and international authority. While this goal has not changed since 1992, the rationale and means have. During the 1990s Russian politicians saw the solution to this problem mainly in internal reforms. The Chechen Wars aimed to consolidate Russian territorial unity, economic modernizations stimulated liberalist reforms and the democratization of the political process was envisioned. Internationally, cooperation and dialogue with the West increased. That the Soviet Union, at that point already on the verge of collapse, signed the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 is exemplary of the Russian Federation's initial edging towards the West.

Yet the economic and political chaos that characterised the reign of Boris Yeltsin – in particular from 1993 onwards – raised questions about the viability of such a course. The first cracks in Russia's path of integration into the post-Cold War order already showed with Yevgeni Primakov's accession as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996. Primakov advocated for his country's return to the great power game and condemned NATO's eastward expansion.

Tables turned further when Vladimir Putin took office in 2000. Shortly after taking office, he instructed the drafting of new foreign policy and national security concepts, which had been lacking in the 1990s, and the upgrading of Russia's military doctrine. During the 2007 Munich Conference, Putin (2007) disregarded "roundabout, pleasant but empty diplomatic terms". He went on to denounce a unilateral US-led world order and proclaim that Russia would defend its national interests on the international stage. Referring to the "unilateral diktat" of the US and Western containment policies (Putin, 2014), the Kremlin has since framed the West as the main barrier between Russia and its Great Power status for more than a decade. This strategy has allowed the Russian government to externalize all responsibility for the existing tensions – both in the eyes of its own population and those international audiences that can be made to sympathise with the Russian cause.

The reasons driving Russia's longing for Great Power status has been the subject of much debate. In our analysis, Russia assertively seeks to consolidate security buffers in the form of both geographical and psychological depth. It perceives both NATO and the EU as continuously challenging and threatening its historical Near Abroad and sphere of influence. Geographically, the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO, and the development of technologically advanced military systems (such as precision strike and missile defence capabilities) have caused Russia's traditional buffer zone between Western powers and its own territory to collapse. In an attempt to preserve this protection, the country has embarked not only on military modernisation programmes, but also on the near constant conduct of operations in the grey

zone between war and peace. Disinformation campaigns, the creation of frozen conflicts in its Near Abroad, cyberattacks and military snap exercises close to the borders of its neighbours are all part of this strategy. The Zapad-2017 exercise, whose scenario was based on a conflict between ‘the North’ (i.e., Russia and its Belarusian ally) and fictional Western states, was a prime example of Russian muscle stretching and intimidation. Evidence of Russian undersea activity nearby international cables also raised serious concern about the security of critical network infrastructure (Brzozowski, 2020; Mooney, 2020).

On a psychological level, Russia tries to strengthen its moral boundaries by actively promoting conservatism, orthodoxy and the idea of a Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*). In his 2013 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin (2013) vehemently lamented “the destruction of traditional values” and religious spirituality. The strengthening ties between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church has made the latter a loyal ally in this strategy. Moreover, incorporating the concept of Russian ‘compatriots’ into official discourse allows the Kremlin to expand these Russian civilizational-nationalist values beyond its borders. According to Putin (2001), “what matters in the modern world is not where you live geographically, what matters is your mentality, your aspirations and the person’s self-identification.” The *Russkiy Mir* consequently encompasses all regions where these compatriots may live. He also proclaimed that Russia has both the right and the means to defend the interests of compatriots. Considering the large number of ethnic Russians living in EU member states such as Latvia and Estonia, these concepts are powerful tools in expanding Russian influence. Putin’s intervention in Crimea showed he means business.

A Russian Grand Strategy?

It would be wrong, however, to think of Russian foreign policy as a one-man master-plan devised by Vladimir Putin. Russia has a knack for ostentatiously demonstrating it can punch above its weight. This attitude of strategic opportunism stems from a mismatch between its ambitious political goals, its highly capable security apparatus and its relatively weak economic position. On the one hand, Russia has been branded as a power in decline. With oil prices reaching a historic low, an ageing population and a continuing brain drain, the Russian economy seems to be in its sunset years. Despite being geographically the largest country in the world, its economy in 2019 situated itself in between that of Italy and Spain in absolute size – although not in relative purchasing power. Its sphere of influence is shrinking, and the country risks soon becoming the junior partner to China, if it is not already. On the other hand, it tries to mask its weak position through a plethora of great power displays. This ranges from an extensive modernization of Russia’s nuclear arsenal over snap exercises and military deployments to cyber and intelligence operations. Most notably, Russia has deployed new intermediate-range missiles, which NATO minis-

ters found to be in material breach of the now defunct INF Treaty obligations (cf. Audenaert, 2019). Furthermore, in a much-vaunted presidential address to the Russian Federal Assembly, Putin (2018) announced the development of a novel generation of strategic missile systems, including unlimited-range nuclear cruise missiles, intercontinental ballistic missiles and hypersonic glide vehicles – aimed at making interception all but impossible. In the past two decades, Vladimir Putin has thus played a relatively weak hand very well, skilfully showcasing military ambition and muscle-flexing as a means to get recognised as a Great Power again (Renz, 2016). But while his strategy has resulted in some considerable successes, Russia has paid a high price by alienating Western countries and thereby accelerating its economic decline.

One of the main pillars of Russia's assertive foreign policy are the so-called grey-zone operations. Such initiatives aim at exploiting an opponent's internal divides through a combination of nonmilitary measures, ranging from political and economic to informational and humanitarian efforts. Preying on the weaknesses of individual democratic countries and eroding their collective cohesion, Russia then moves to fill these cracks to its own advantage. It either propagates its own version of the truth or circulates a number of alternative stories to sow confusion and feed conspiracy theories. The effectiveness of this strategy vis-à-vis the West stems from the plethora of internal divisions within the EU, NATO and their respective member states. On top of this, many Western countries struggle to effectively counter Russian disinformation – Belgium being a prime example. While initiatives such as EEAS's East StratCom Task Force do develop a coherent and factual counternarrative to Russia's disinformation campaigns, this only trickles down to the broader public slowly and incrementally. Unlike most EU member states, Belgium does not participate in the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, for instance. Although the character of these grey-zone operations has changed, the nature of this strategy has remained the same for centuries. Even back in the sixteenth century, the first tsar, Ivan IV 'The Terrible', exploited the feuds between Kazan confederations when fighting in the steppes.

Russia's vaunted pivot to the East is a prime example of its strategic opportunism. Russia and China find partners in each other in their focus on territorial integrity and national sovereignty, and in their shared hostility towards the Western promotion of democracy and human rights. Tightening relations with the People's Republic of China also means Russia has found itself an important ally when it wishes to achieve its goals in the UN Security Council – such as countering criticism of Russian actions in Syria and Libya. Against this partnership background, new plans for energy pipelines and defence cooperation have bloomed. The 'Power of Siberia' pipeline supplying China with 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year constitutes a case in point (Gazprom, 2020). Yet Russian racism towards China, Chinese theft of Russian weapon technology, and competing interests in Africa and Central-Asia also put

constant pressure on the Sino-Russia relationship. One of the reasons Russia strives to regain its Great Power status is precisely to counter US hegemony and prevent being caught up in a Sino-American world order.

When looking to the future, it is unlikely that Russia will tone down its assertive foreign policy anytime soon (cf. Saari and Secrieru 2020). Firstly, Russia has traditionally used its foreign policy to boost domestic unity. With Putin's approval rates dropping, the economy plunging into a recession and domestic protests on the government's approach to Covid-19 increasing, the Kremlin needs a way to bolster national support and boost Putin's popularity. Secondly, NATO and the EU keep focussing on the stick-approach, while preserving the carrot for the post-Soviet states surrounding the Russian Federation – Ukraine being the prime example. NATO is responding assertively to Russian missile development, for instance by means of nuclear deterrence exercises. At the same time, EU economic sanctions and selective engagement remain firmly in place. Thirdly, the development of space, cyber and AI warfighting capabilities continues to put pressure on Russia's geographic security buffer, while measures such as the adoption of a resolution on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by the European Parliament (2019) target the psychological buffer. The logic of competition is therefore palpable.

At the same time, Russia's weak economic position might eventually open opportunities for increasing cooperation. Assuming that Russia can somehow manage to convince its European interlocutors of its sincere commitment to respect the security interests of all EU member states and partners, it is not inconceivable that the EU could offer a more attractive future to Russia than it having to accept its *de facto* subordination to China. Nevertheless, it is important to remain aware that the authoritarian character of the Russian regime contrasts with the political system embodied in the EU and makes it susceptible to dealing with Beijing. Whilst not impossible, a reset of EU-Russia relations remains a tall order. Fundamentally, the crux of the matter is whether Russia is truly interested in such a cooperative relationship: its current strategy of preying on the existing divisions within NATO and the EU is fuelling opposite outcomes. The question remains what the current constellation implies for Belgium.

RUSSIA'S IMPACT ON BELGIAN INTERESTS: COOPERATIVE PARTNER OR UNDERMINING AGENT?

The key to understanding the Russo-Belgian relationship lies in its paradoxical nature. With regard to Belgium, the country on the one hand keeps up pragmatic bilateral relations with Russia. These mainly focus on trade, although the country has taken care to uphold positive relations in a variety of fields – especially before the Crimea crisis (Casier, 2013: 124). Yet on the other hand, Belgium is an EU member state and a NATO ally. Both international organizations have hardened their stance towards the Russian Federation in the past decade. As a committed multilateralist, Belgium owns its share in NATO and EU decision-making. Far from being a gesture of token solidarity, it is through these organisations that the fundamental principles of Belgian foreign policy get articulated. On the other side of the coin, Russia's own paradoxical behaviour lies in its antagonistic attitude towards multilateral organisations and their member states. While it strategically undermines the coherence of the former by playing on already existing weaknesses and fault lines, the country also nurtures pragmatic bilateral relations with most of their members. The resulting Belgo-Russian relationship thus constitutes a true kaleidoscope: a spectrum of elements that range from cooperation to conflict.

A small but vital cogwheel in the machinery of international organizations

Despite its modest size, Belgium constitutes a soft target for Russian operations. Its membership of NATO and the EU, as well as its role as a host to the headquarters of these organizations, make the country an inherent part of their policy-making processes. Compared to many other European capital cities, Brussels' geographical linchpin role in NATO and the EU has thus sparked a more intense political dialogue with Moscow (Casier, 2013). In this context, Russia both damages and spares Belgian interests within the framework of international organizations and on a national level. While disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks have aimed at destabilising the Belgian political system and fuelling societal discord, economic trade relations have only suffered a relatively mild and time-limited impact from the 2014 EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions.

Diplomatically and politically, Russia has successfully exploited the belated EU-level response to the Covid-19 pandemic, initiating a PR stunt 'From Russia With Love' and sending medical equipment and teams to Italy during the height of the crisis. Italy's relaxed stance on Russia within the EU and NATO constitutes both cause and consequence of Russia's attempt to internally divide these organisations by means of aggressive information operations. Like many other European states, Belgium has

observed that Russian trolls are fuelling societal polarisation on themes such as migration and Islam (van der Noordaa and van de Ven 2018). It has also been the target of high-profile Russian disinformation campaigns in the politico-military sphere. The abovementioned cases of alleged Belgian actions in Syria are prime examples. Not only did the Russian Ministry of Defence falsely accuse Belgium of causing civilian casualties, its spokesperson reacted to the Belgian denials by implying wilful deception or collusion (RT, 2016). By actively promoting conspiracy theories, the Russian government showcased it was testing Belgian political cohesion. Even though the issue was quickly set straight in a special session of the parliamentary committee monitoring foreign missions (cf. De Kamer, 2016: 1-5), it exposed the lack of domestic resilience against disinformation campaigns.

Regarding military operations, Russia continuously challenges NATO's defences by sending Russian bombers and fighter aircraft along the borders of NATO airspace. By taking part in Baltic Air Policing and contributing forces to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, the Belgian military frequently operates within range of Russian missile systems. It is therefore not inconceivable that Belgium could someday find itself caught up in a military contingency it is hardly prepared for. Just like many other EU and NATO member states, Belgium is regularly the target of cyber-attacks that have been all but officially traced back to the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the Belgian government never officially attributed these attacks to Russia, going no further than the former minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Reynders commenting on a foreign ministry server breach that "it was a very strong [cyber]attack, probably from Russia" (Debacker, 2014). By refraining from making official accusations, Belgium could avoid pressure to take legal actions against Russia and escalate matters to the level of an international dispute. More generally, the problem of attribution in grey zone operations constitutes an advantage that Russia gladly capitalizes upon.

On an economic level, Russian influence on Belgian interests within an international framework is dual. On the one hand, Belgium has supported EU economic sanctions on the Russian Federation after the seizure of the Crimean Peninsula. On the other hand, the Russian Federation has imposed its own countersanctions on EU member states. In both cases, these have been implemented with mixed success (cf. de Wilde d'Estmael, 2015). A ban on the export of pears to Russia could only stop about 50% of the goods, the remainder being smuggled into Russia via Lithuania and Belarus (Eurofresh, 2018; Het Belang van Limburg, 2015). Russia also consciously sought to diversify its economy. The Russian milk industry, for instance, has expanded like ripples in a pond since the imposition of the EU sanctions, while Belgian milk farmers struggle to sell their surplus production (Medetsky, 2019). As such, the overall sanctions regime has had only a limited effect in changing Russian foreign policy behaviour.

To this day, Russian gas and oil exports remain the key factor defining EU-Russia economic relations. Conflicting interests between its member states have led to

fierce debates, especially within the context of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The diverging opinions on the EU's energy policy create the perfect opportunity for Putin to drive a wedge between different member states. Despite the Green Deal and the EU's stated aim to strive towards energy diversification and sustainable energy alternatives, gas and oil imports from Russia remain an important energy resource during the transition period (cf. Siddi, 2021). This does not leave Belgium unaffected. Keen to promote investment security and economic opportunities, Belgium initially vied with the Netherlands to promote Antwerp as a gas hub but without success (Casier, 2013: 128). More recently, the Belgian LNG infrastructure in Zeebruges did become an important secondary hub for Russian gas distribution. In 2015, a 20-year contract was signed with Yamal Trade, providing for the transshipment of up to 8 million tonnes of LNG per year (Fluxys, 2020). However, Belgium's relatively diversified energy imports make it less dependent on Russian gas than many other EU member states. As long as this remains the case, it can help mediating the divisive intra-EU debate over Russian gas imports. At the same time, energy infrastructure often represents a critical vulnerability when dealing with grey-zone threats (Jonsson, 2020).

Towards a long-term roadmap

Belgium has so far refrained from articulating a coherent policy towards Russia. Perhaps this is unsurprising in the light of Belgium's frequent domestic political gridlocks and limited interest in foreign affairs. For many years Belgium has lacked an integrated foreign policy concept, hampering the prioritization of policy goals and the reconciliation between political, economic and security interests (cf. Coolsaet, 2015). Yet can such a haphazard approach be sustained indefinitely when dealing with a country like Russia, which views power as a zero-sum concept and does not hesitate to leverage all instruments of statecraft? The 2020 Belgian Government Agreement signalled that a comprehensive National Security Strategy is to be developed. This points to a renewed ambition to act as a reliable and predictable partner on the international scene.

In recent years Belgium has often sought refuge behind EU and NATO decision-making. This was not only due to the lack of a national foreign and security policy, but also due to significant political reluctance to respond to Russian assertiveness abroad. In reaction to the Skripal poisoning, for instance, the UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats. Belgium was amongst the countries expelling only one, despite hosting a very large Russian diplomatic presence. Whilst the token gesture was perhaps understandable in order to avoid Russian retaliation against Belgian interests (and the small Belgian diplomatic footprint in Moscow), it also showcased how tenuous solidarity can become – even with a close partner such as the UK – when grey-zone operations trigger diplomatic escalation.

Politically, the Russian attempts at destabilizing Belgian democracy go further than mere disinformation campaigns that fuel public discord on controversial issues such as migration, Islam, and (to a lesser extent) LGBTQI rights. Ties between Russia and parties on the fringes of the political spectrum – both left and right – are well-known. During the Crimea referendum, for instance, three members of the Flemish extreme-right political party *Vlaams Belang* acted as so-called ‘independent observers’ of the polling stations. Although the individuals reportedly went against the wishes of their party’s president, Russia could use their presence to support the legitimization of the annexation. Similarly, the Workers’ Party of Belgium *PVDA-PTB* has sought to deflect the blame for causing humanitarian suffering away from Russia in parliamentary resolutions expressing support for aid to Syria (see e.g. De Vriendt, 2020). This suggests that the Russian government apparatus is nurturing a network of influence that can be called upon to obstruct unfavourable decision-making.

On the socio-economic level, however, Belgo-Russian relations remain remarkably vibrant. With respect to bilateral trade, imports and exports have largely recovered from the 2014-2015 shock resulting from the sanctions regime. The trade balance in goods remains overwhelmingly negative, however, with 3.9 billion EUR of Belgian exports vs 9.4 billion EUR of imports from Russia in 2017 (Gijbrecchts, 2018). The Russian company Lukoil is a major investor in Belgian energy infrastructure. Similarly, Russian diamonds constitute an important source of supply for the Antwerp diamond trade. In 2018, the city of Antwerp organised a mission to Russia to celebrate friendship ties and attract new investors, for instance (Business Antwerp, 2018). With respect to cultural exchanges, the situation is somewhat ambivalent. With the support of *inter alia* the EEAS, the Vladimir Potanin Foundation and the Russian diamond company Alrosa, the arts centre Bozar maintains a long tradition of cultural exchanges (Bozar, 2020).

Academic cooperation between universities is generally positive. From a Russian perspective, the Russian Federation is interested in developing its academic outreach to Belgium. It is for example the biggest non-EU user of Erasmus+ student exchanges. On an institutional level, the government-backed *Russkiy Mir Foundation* has sponsored the activities of Russian studies centres at various Belgian universities. Whilst these activities have typically focused on Russia’s rich cultural history, they have also provided venues for scouting the Belgian academic landscape and for shaping Russia’s international image. From a Belgian perspective, senior academics have tended to encourage exchanges with their Russian counterparts. Belgian students, however, seem to be hesitant to travel to Russia due to the country’s negative image. Between 2015 and 2020, less than one percent of the total number of KU Leuven exchange students went to Russian universities within the framework of the Erasmus+ agreements, for instance (Stessens and Vansina, 2020). Last but not least, Egmont itself maintains a structural collaboration with the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences (see Potemkina, 2018).

It is also important to mention the framework of values and norms that are cherished in Belgian civil society. While our country prides itself on its active propagation of human rights, multilateralism and the rule of law, we also maintain bilateral relations with countries that do not adhere to these values. Even when Belgium vocally denounces the violation of human rights, this may not bring about the change that is desired. Especially in the case of a negative trade balance, Belgium consumption actually helps sustaining authoritarian regimes. Naturally, this is not a call for suspending commercial relations with all non-democratic countries. Rather, it is a call to think about the world we want, how Belgium can contribute to this, and what policy Belgium should carry out towards the Russian Federation, both nationally and within the framework of EU and NATO. It is arguably only in such a framework that a more coherent policy can be articulated.

When reflecting on Russo-Belgian bilateral relations, it is worth remembering the 1993 Treaty on Understanding and Cooperation between the Kingdom of Belgium and the Russian Federation (*Verdrag / Traité*, 1998). Signed only two years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this document aspired to cement friendly relations and outlined a comprehensive programme for developing the bilateral relationship via biennial Shared Action Plans. Whilst the treaty remains in place thanks to the silent extension clause codified in Article 16, formal initiatives to update the cooperation roadmap have dried up in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Military-to-military contacts are now quasi non-existent, for instance, and overall diplomatic trust is low. This leaves observers to wonder whether the aspirations underlying this treaty can still be reinvigorated, or whether the treaty should be formally terminated, as many of its obligations – such as those pertaining to the CFE Treaty – have in effect been abandoned already.

WHAT BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A BELGIAN RUSSIA POLICY

A long-term policy towards Russia needs to clarify what are the Belgian policy priorities, communicate Belgian positions towards the Russian government, and educate the domestic audience about the evolving relationship with the Russian Federation. Articulating such a policy would be no mean feat for the incoming Belgian government led by Alexander De Croo. To nurture the reflection process about such a policy document, a number of building blocks can nonetheless be identified.

- **Assume more ownership over multilateral decision-making.** Belgium prides itself on its role as a staunch multilateralist, but often shies away from fully embracing the consensus reached within the EU and NATO, and in particular the unpalatable consequences thereof. Yet there can be no doubt that strength lies in unity with our partners: this is precisely what dealing with Russia requires. As such, the EU and NATO consensus cannot be sacrificed in the pursuit of short-sighted commercial advantage. The Belgian Government Agreement's explicit confirmation that "NATO remains the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence" constitutes an important signal that the country will stand by its allies in any collective defence contingency and use all necessary means to do so. As the Government Agreement has put a new emphasis on arms control, Belgium can use its position as consensus-seeking country to turn around (or at least mitigate) the erosion of the arms control architecture resulting from the suspension of the INF Treaty and the oncoming expiration of New START in 2021. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe serves as a natural forum for discussing what a stable, cooperative and mutually respectful relationship with Russia could look like. In this regard Belgium can build on the experience gathered during its 2018 chairmanship of the OSCE Structured Dialogue.
- **Maintain and deepen bilateral relations to enrich the multilateral framework.** The 1967 Harmel report, in which the former Belgian minister of Foreign Affairs Pierre Harmel introduced the dual-track policy of deterrence and détente, can provide a source of inspiration in this context. Each Ally was encouraged to play its part in improving (bilateral) relations with the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe whilst also bearing the unity and solidarity of the Alliance in mind. In line with the philosophy of the Harmel doctrine, Belgium could reinstate the importance of bilateral relations with the Russian Federation as mechanisms to enrich EU and NATO decision-making. Open and frank discussions – including on Russia's concerns about the political architecture of the European continent – cannot be avoided. The Belgo-Russian action programme that used to feature in the 1993 Belgo-Russian Treaty can provide a sound starting point, assuming

Russia also honours its own commitments contained therein. This includes thinking about opportunities to reach out not only to all relevant governmental authorities, but also beyond, i.e. to Russian business circles and civil society. Cultural and academic exchanges can take place on the principles of artistic and academic freedom whilst showcasing the traditions and sensitivities of both sides.

- **Re-develop Russia-related subject matter expertise in Belgium.** Over the past three decades, the study of Russian affairs has atrophied. This has resulted in a drainage of knowhow on Russia and the post-Soviet sphere in academic, policy and political circles. This trend continued even after the annexation of Crimea, as attested for instance by the decision to abolish the Slavistics programme at the KU Leuven (cf. Defoort et al., 2016). Yet in the current international context, it remains vital that Belgium re-develops its knowhow of Russian affairs and foreign policy issues more generally. This can be done via the active engagement of politicians, diplomats, military officials and academics in international Russia-related networks, investing in centres of Russian knowledge, and bolstering public interest in news media.
- **Strengthen Belgian domestic resilience to cope with disinformation and a political relationship under stress.** The nefarious activities of the Russian Federation in the information domain are well-documented, but public awareness thereof remains scarce. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, for instance, Belgian State Security has investigated propaganda disseminated by various foreign powers and concluded that such propaganda mainly originates from Russia (VSSE, 2020: 8). Unified governmental responses to disinformation operations, easy access to trustworthy information and general awareness-raising about the competitive landscape of the modern information environment are in order. This includes boosting interdepartmental strategic communication efforts as well as endowing the public broadcasters with the mission to inform citizens about the increasingly contested nature of international affairs. Initiatives such as *EUvsDisinfo*, the flagship project of the EEAS East StratCom Task Force, or the Estonian *Propastop* blog could serve as examples. Another measure would be for Belgium to formally join the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid threats.
- **Explore the question on which basis the EU-Russia economic relationship can be improved.** There is little point in damaging the remaining commercial relations further if sanctions are proven to be an ineffective instrument in changing Russian behaviour – especially now that both the EU and the Russian Federation are hard-pressed to respond to the COVID19-induced economic shock. When considering sanctions, a thorough cost-benefit analysis should be made before deciding on either sector-based collective or Magnitsky-type individual sanctions – especially considering the peculiar character of the Russian regime. At the same time, any normalization of the economic relationship cannot be anything but

conditional on clear commitments from both the European capitals and Russia to respect each other's legitimate security concerns. Such a discussion – both within the EU and between the EU and Russia – would be a worthwhile diplomatic undertaking. Meanwhile, prudence about bilateral trade ties being leveraged for achieving political advantage is in order. With respect to critical infrastructure (such as energy and digital networks in particular), vigilance about network integrity remains paramount.

- **Strengthen the Belgian contribution to the collective defence effort.** In the absence of major breakthroughs, the relationship between the Russia Federation and the Euro-Atlantic institutions and their member states will remain a difficult one over the long haul. The fundamental question for Belgium is whether its present position with respect to collective defence – with its national contribution being limited to air policing, nuclear sharing and largely token contributions to the enhanced Forward Presence – is sufficient. The mounting criticism from our European allies about the lack of burden-sharing indicates that more efforts will be needed in sustaining deterrence. If Belgium wants to stop the erosion of its own diplomatic voice and uphold the rules-based order, it is imperative to invest in the different instruments of statecraft – from development cooperation over the diplomatic network to defence. The fact that Russia respects military power and despises weakness only adds to this importance. Improving the readiness of the Belgian armed forces is therefore key – not only for expeditionary operations in the European southern neighbourhood, but also for more demanding missions along NATO's eastern flank. In this context, the re-introduction of a Ground-based Air Defence system is well-warranted. The wider challenge will be to ensure the full interoperability of the Belgian Motorised Brigade with its NATO partners and to switch back to a multi-brigade structure as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION

While the distance between Moscow and Brussels measures some 2500 km, there are good reasons to consider the relationship with Russia of central importance in the development of the future Belgian National Security strategy. In a material sense, the Russian Federation remains the only state posing a direct and potentially existential threat to the European political order as we know it – including both the territorial integrity and economic well-being of EU member states and NATO allies alike. Even when Belgium chooses to treat Russia with respect, Brussels can still respectfully disagree with Moscow over a plethora of issues. These range from the widespread instability plaguing the Eastern neighbourhood and the Middle East to the future of the European political order itself. Without neglecting the importance of other critical international dossiers, such as the future of global trade, the rise of China and the management of the post-COVID19 aftermath, the paradoxical nature of Belgo-Russian relations and the many questions it engenders need to be tackled.

This Egmont Paper has sought to provide the conceptual building blocks for articulating a new Belgian policy towards Russia. This requires honing our understanding of Russia's foreign policy objectives as well as of Belgium's own bilateral and multilateral interests relating to Russia. It also entails a delicate balancing act of arbitrating between competing policy priorities. Yet Belgium can build on many strengths. These include most notably its role as consensus-seeking linchpin in both the EU and NATO. In addition, the 1993 Belgo-Russian Treaty has already created a framework for deepening bilateral outreach. This can be revamped as well as reconsidered: ultimately this depends on the willingness of both parties to deliver on their respective commitments. Possibilities for nourishing the bilateral relationship in order to enhance mutual understanding do exist. Yet in order to engage in such bilateral dialogue in the first place, the toolkit of Belgian foreign policy instruments and its societal resilience need to be strengthened. Larger questions such as the future of EU-Russia economic relations and the evolution of NATO's deterrence posture may always lurk in the background, yet to participate in these debates Belgium needs a clear understanding of its own role in the world. It is to that fundamental purpose that this exercise has sought to contribute.

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