

THE LAST OF THE OFFENDED: RUSSIA'S FIRST POST-PUTIN DIPLOMATS

Kadri Liik

November 2019

SUMMARY

- Russia's new generation of foreign policy professionals bring with them a shift in attitudes that challenges the centrality of "the West" in Russian foreign policy.
- Today's young professionals are often bitterly affected by "disillusionment" with the West, but the youngest of them – people in their 20s – are free of such emotion, harbouring an outlook that is sharply realist and pragmatic.
- Russia's young foreign policy professionals are neither Putin loyalists nor Western-style liberals: they are wary of ready-made ideologies, and prefer to attend to their own consciences.
- Young diplomats' ability to shape policy will depend on the balance of power between 'civilian' and 'power' ministries in Russia (such as, respectively, the foreign and defence ministries), with the former in retreat lately.
- These shifts mean the West should not hold out hope for the optimism of the 1990s to return once Putin departs.

Introduction

On that cold and snowless February evening, Unter den Linden was deserted. A pale moon hung low over the Brandenburg Gate. Opposite, behind the brightly lit windows of the Koerber Foundation, a group of young Russian foreign policy professionals had come to meet their German counterparts. The atmosphere was polite and both sides were curious. But a meeting of minds it was not: the young Germans found it hard to understand, accept, or agree with many of the things that the Russians said. And vice versa.

One remark sparked keen interest on all sides, however. “I think that we are the last offended generation,” said a 35-year-old Russian guest. “We remember the 1990s, the expectations we had, and how these turned sour,” he continued. “Those who come after us will not be affected by that disappointment, and they can build up a new relationship with the West already without that legacy.”

In Russia, the younger generations are slowly entering the corridors of power and assuming positions of responsibility and influence. Partly, this is the Kremlin’s conscious policy: 44 thirty- and forty-somethings have recently been made governors in a move that may be part of Vladimir Putin’s attempt to seed a future power-holding elite, or even bring on his direct successor.^[1] But the process is wider too. Today, half of Russia’s civil servants are aged 39 or below – meaning that they will have only childhood memories of the Soviet Union, at most.^[2]

This matters, because generations matter – not least in countries with dramatic histories, such as Russia. People who lived under Stalinism are different from those who did not. People who grew up during Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s “thaw” became the driving force of perestroika in the late 1980s. By contrast, the generation that was born in the 1950s and entered adulthood in the 1970s became the “most Soviet” generation of all: according to Russian sociologist Ekaterina Shulman, “they were educated by the Soviet system, they invested in it, adapted to its cynicism, and then saw it collapse.”^[3] Members of this generation were of prime working age in the 1990s, and they still operate at the highest levels in the Putin era. This makes them tone-setters of sorts – which can lead observers to conclude that society at large must share their values. But, in reality, younger

Russians will not necessarily have the same worldview.

This paper presents a portrait of the people now entering Russia's foreign policy circles, those who are set to become increasingly influential in the decades to come. Who are they; where do they come from; what motivates them; and what do they think of Russia, the West, and the world? To find out, the European Council on Foreign Relations went to meet them in person, from university students applying for their first job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to mid-career professionals who now have an eye on the top posts – of ages ranging from early 20s to mid-40s.^[4]

These most fascinating of conversations chimed with the claim of the young Russian on that cold Berlin night: the younger the interviewee, the less he or she is affected by a sense of disappointment in the West, and the more their attitudes appear to be governed by a form of *realpolitik* in which the West is just another power in a cold and complex world. Both of these sentiments have developed during Putin's rule, but they are not caused by Putin alone, and they will likely outlast him. The West should not hold out hope that the optimism of the 1990s will return once he eventually departs.

That said, these young professionals are also not unquestioning Putin loyalists. They have their reservations, principles, and coping strategies; their opinions of their leaders are nuanced and, sometimes, contradictory. The annexation of Crimea is illustrative here: those who approve of the action nevertheless do so with evident discomfort. And those who disapprove have their own take on the events of 2014, one that does not coincide with that of the West.

Future Russian foreign policy will not be defined solely by a battle between 'bad' Putinists and a 'good' opposition, but also by professionals whose views have a complex texture and origins. It is these views, and the historical forces that shaped these views, that Western foreign policymakers will have to grapple with in the future interaction between Russia and the West.

Their geography

For at least three centuries, the West has been a focal point in Russia's thinking about itself. The West has been either a model to admire or a force to resist; and a

source of imported ideas and practices in both cases. This has transcended generations. Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons* is supposedly about intergenerational conflict. But, on re-reading it in 2019, one cannot help noticing how both fathers and sons worship Western concepts, authors, and theories, if in sometimes distorted ways. Their dinner conversation is dotted with by now little-known German names such as Büchner, Schönlein, and Rademacher, alongside Goethe, Schiller, and Schubert. The sons quietly shun Pushkin as something old-fashioned and embarrassingly indigenous. Their conflict often boils down to the question of who better understands and emulates the West; and it is the sons who, fresh out of university, have the upper hand by knowing newer and more fashionable Western names than the fathers, who have retired to the provinces.

But this long preoccupation with the West – which has, at times, bordered on obsession – is now changing and transforming. This shift was on full display in ECFR's interviews with Russia's young foreign policymakers: while those in their 30s and 40s have all been shaped by Russia's focus on the West, those in their 20s may, by their own admission, already be living in a different world. When international affairs students – gathered in focus groups held for this research – were asked to draw a model of the world order and indicate Russia's place in it, no special connection with the West emerged. Rather, the drawings depict a fragmenting world replete with different actors. Russia either stands apart from the crush, or amid a jostling crowd of non-Western powers.

While the 'fathers' of Russian foreign policy – members of the establishment, usually aged over 50 – still often refer to the "united West" as a single actor, the young students see the United States and Europe as quite different in character; and their attitudes towards the US are a lot harsher than those towards Europe. "The US wants to stop our development in order to sustain today's status quo and their hegemony," suggests one focus group participant. "We need to completely stop any cooperation with the US, except the vitally essential, and reorient towards Europe," agrees another. The fairly unanimous thinking was that harsh geopolitical competition with the US is here to stay, while relations could improve faster with Europe. This was felt to be especially the case if right-wing forces – "such as those in Hungary or Austria" – gain power in more European countries.

The change that seems to be taking place in the young Russians' mental geography

is not a rejection of the Western orientation in favour of some other worldview, including an explicitly 'anti-Western' focus. Instead, they appear drawn to realpolitik, claiming neither permanent friends nor foes. "The young do not think that anything that the old may hold dear – be it integration with the West, or reintegration of the former Soviet Union – are good things for their own sake," says an interlocutor born in 1979. "These are all means [to an end], and thus can be reviewed."

This mindset does not exclude cooperation between Russia and Europe, but it changes its premise. Indeed, while at first glance some of it may appear quite pro-European in nature, its foundations are in realpolitik. "I think Russia should ultimately be with Europe," explains one young student who had just expressed approval of Russia's annexation of Crimea as a good lesson to the West: "The Europeans understood that they cannot behave with Russia just like that, like in the 1990s." But, for him, this future alliance with Europe would be less about shared values or Russia's orientation than about the logic of future great-power relationships, in which neither Russia nor Europe can aim for first or even second place.

The backdrop to these young foreign policymakers' remarks is inevitably today's dramatically shifting geopolitical power balances. However, there was no sign in this research of any desire for a ['pivot to the east'](#) – and, indeed, discussion of China was laden with uncertainty. The young cohort expresses no trust in Beijing and is wary about the future of the relationship. "I have drawn an American eagle and a Russian bear," explains one student, pointing at his drawing of the world order. "They are fighting, but behind them there silently stands a Chinese with a knife and waits for his time."

Slightly older foreign policy professionals share this view: “Soon we will have a nuclear triparty in the world – China catches up with Russia,” says an interviewee, born in 1979. “China will have aircraft carriers; we will only have submarines. That will be a traumatic moment for Russia’s self-positioning in the world. The young understand that – of the old ones, very few do.” But the relationship remains dependent on a constellation of factors: “If China started behaving as a hegemon towards Russia, then confrontation might be unavoidable – but, for as long as China needs to confront the US, that will not happen.”

The erosion of Western countries’ central place in world politics complicates Russia’s thinking not just about the West and the rest – but also about itself. “This [situation] is unusual for Russia, because it removes the traditional paradigm where all changes were either pro-Western or anti-Western, closer to Europe, further from Europe,” [says Russian analyst Fyodor Lukyanov](#). It may also force Russia to take a closer look at itself: “Our relationship with the West is broken but, in the east, we did not find any cultural closeness – so that forced us to look at ourselves, and we did not like what we saw,” says an interviewee born in 1991.

Were it to be written in today’s Russia, an updated *Fathers and Sons* would be unlikely to have an all-consuming focus on a single idea such as “the West”. This is a shift that has taken place quietly, but its implications could prove to be profound.

Their disillusionment

If the mental geography of today’s students reserves no special place for the West, then those in their 30s and 40s were, and remain, shaped by Western-centric foreign policy paradigms. Many entered adult life with idealistic expectations of the 1990s that they have later come to reconsider – for reasons that vary.

When asked what made them change their minds about the West, many refer to events of the recent past – ones in which Russia’s stance has differed significantly from that of the West. For one interlocutor, born in 1986, this was the 2008 war in Georgia: “That was the first time I was really disappointed in the Western media – they portrayed it as if it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Earlier, I had thought that the Russian media can say anything they like, but Westerners must have some standards.”

Others point to occasions when they believe the West refused to cooperate with Russia: “For many years Russia has offered cooperation on missile defence, but NATO says no – they have a separate system,” says a source born in 1981. “NATO refuses to cooperate with the Tashkent treaty organisation [the Collective Security Treaty Organisation], saying that this is a Russian-led pseudo-organisation. The EU says they cannot talk with the Eurasian Union because this is curated by Moscow.” Others mention real or perceived Western double standards: “Trump says that Golan is Israeli territory – but Crimea is not Russia’s,” says a source born in 1987. “The president of Yemen has escaped from the country, but the West still recognises him as president,” says a source born in 1981. “Yanukovich signed an agreement with European foreign ministers, but the next day they stopped recognising him – even though he was still in the country.”

For some, though, disappointment emanates less from particular events than from fundamental undercurrents: “I came to understand that [countries’] initiatives are motivated by egoistic considerations and there are no universal rules. For as long as free trade benefited the US, it was a universal virtue – but, as soon as it started benefiting the US less, it was less good,” says an interviewee born in 1979. “I realised that there is no altruism, no one gives Russia anything just like that, and the so-called rules-based international order is, in fact, US hegemony. It became fully evident to me only quite recently – once the hegemony started crumbling and the US started doing things they had always criticised. Then they started tweaking their policies towards weakening China – without China having annexed anything or shot down any aeroplanes.”

A recurrent theme is the failure to make the post-1991 Russia-West relationship ‘equal’. The idea – supposedly Mikhail Gorbachev’s – that the West and Russia

could ‘meet in the middle’, take the best parts of the capitalist and socialist systems, and jointly build a better future has influenced many Russian minds, both young and old. And many now feel that the West has treated Russia as a second-rate country, a loser, whose experience and views have no worth. “I knew that something had gone very wrong in our country,” recalls an interlocutor born in 1983, referring to the Soviet Union. “Sometimes I would ask why my mother would not make cake for me, and then I realised we could not buy eggs ... So when we started having contacts with the West, I had high expectations – I thought that they know how to do it, so they will come and help us get it right. But I was not ready to declare our whole life experience worthless. When I went with my parents to the German consulate to apply for a visa, I put on my **young October child** sign – because I wanted the Germans to know that they are giving this visa to a young October child.”

Numerous sources recount similar memories; the sentiment is shared by people of varying ages. “We thought that this was our joint victory over communism,” says a young diplomat. “But then the West said: ‘You lost.’ And, at the bottom of our souls, we actually understand it: we won ourselves, but we lost to the West. But, as we do not admit it publicly, a problem arises which affects the basics of the relationship.”

For some, though, the disappointment has more recent causes: not just the souring of relations since 2014, but also Brexit, the Trump presidency, and the way many in the West blamed Russia for both these phenomena. Despite the unhappy outcome of the 1990s Russia-West courtship, it is in the current era – since 2014 – that this essentially liberal-leaning group has begun to feel that the West is denying them, as Russians, a fair hearing. “It seems to me that, since 2014, the best part of Western intellectuals stopped having empathy towards Russians as people. They said: ‘We’ll punish you for what your leader has done’,” argues a source born in 1991. “It puzzles me that there is no compassion ... The West has lost curiosity towards us – where I’d expect questions, I do not get them, I get accusations instead. Or people wink that, ‘Yes, yes, you are a Russian, what can you say?’ That offends, though some in Russia are happy – they can now say that we have always told you [that] the West are Russophobes.” Others concur: “Stereotyp[ing] of Russians started, in fact, earlier and grew with Putinism,” says a source born in 1980. “A person from Russia, especially if he represents a government-affiliated institution, must be a voice of authoritarianism.” Some are so tired of the role of ‘a

Russian' imposed on them at Western seminars that they have stopped attending them altogether.

Despite this, some people still remain bridge-builders and compromise-seekers. Others have always subscribed to a more realist view of international relations – so, for them, what happened is just confirmation of their worldview. And one must not forget the happy opportunists for whom any disappointment would be impossible, as they never had idealistic expectations to start with. “Intellectually, I am a European federalist,” admits an interlocutor born in 1973. “But, through my policy proposals, I have consciously strongly harmed Russia-EU relations, because I defend the interests of Russia and also those of my client [a big Russian state company].” Still, by and large, the “offended” narrative holds powerful sway among many. “Russia and the West are united in disappointment – both think the other owes them something,” comments a young academic, born in 1985.

Their Putin

The two sides may be united in disappointment, but the state of relations between Russia and the West over the last quarter-century is not likely to dramatically alter this when Putin finally leaves the scene. And this is not because Putin's views are uniformly shared. Among the individuals interviewed for this paper, hardly anyone can be considered a true Putinist. “I have never voted for him,” admitted a source that is among the more hawkish voices on the West. Yet it appears that the ideals and relationship of the 1990s will not return. “Maybe it is time for the West to realise that it is not that Putin is bad, but that [Boris] Yeltsin was an exception,” suggested one young diplomat mildly.

How do young foreign policymakers position themselves inside the Putinist system? For those already working, experience of life in the corridors of power has strongly influenced their views and behavioural strategies. Those who now work in state institutions observe a state of inertia and stagnation; for many of them, ‘waiting it out’ has become a survival strategy. “Right now, everyone is tired,” says one ministry interviewee, born in 1992. “The people who are in power too. The regime cannot renew, thus it freezes itself – and, in these conditions, it is quite useless to try to explain or propose anything to anyone. Better to be silent.” His older peers agree: “After the election of 2018, no big reshuffles happened or new

policies emerged,” says a source who works closely with the Kremlin. “Now, all expect that that will happen after the Duma election in 2021, but, frankly, I am not sure at all. It seems that our president is tired as well as comfortable ... [there is] no energy left for conceptual changes.”

Unhappiness with the status quo does not mean, though, that people want to leave either their jobs or Russia. “There are many policies I disagree with – the idea of a sovereign internet, the arrest of [theatre director Kirill] Serebryannikov, and so forth – but I do not want to emigrate, and I do not think that Russia is [part of the] West,” says a source born in 1981. “So, we have become a little bit like internal emigration – we gather with interested people from other institutions, and discuss – so that, once things change, we have established some links that will allow us to be more active and useful.” Many have developed ‘personal missions’ to be useful in the post-Crimea political reality. “I have made it my mission to explain to people that steps [such as the annexation of Crimea] will cost us,” says an interlocutor born in 1980. “I am trying to focus on preventing a war,” smiles another, born in 1987, who works on arms control. “Arms control is less political; on these issues, it is possible to give recommendations.” Another interviewee reflects: “I have made it my mission to keep the foreign coverage of my newspaper an island of sobriety. This matters to me – to stick to objectivity that once was the trademark of my role models, the New York Times and Washington Post, but from which they have now diverged.”

At the same time, there are always those who are only too glad to serve the regime, whatever its policies. They do not bother with ‘missions’: “One’s conclusions and policy proposals need to correspond to the passport in one’s pocket,” says a source born in 1973. “Because, otherwise, you benefit other passports – there is no vacuum in between. Where exactly is the line between constructive criticism and getting viewed as having gone over to the other side? Better not to take the risk. I have my reputation, after all.”

Still, most young foreign policy professionals have complaints about the current situation; and many also express their unease about it – whether through their newspaper articles, their policy recommendations, or, sometimes, even on the street – although they take care to keep their distance from the official opposition. “I went to Bolotnaya [protests in 2011-12], when it was still clearly about election

fraud. But I stopped going once it became the political show of the opposition,” says an interviewee born in 1981. The tendency to keep a distance from the ‘official’ opposition, even when protesting against the authorities in one’s own way, was evident in many interviews.

This cautiousness will be to do with job security concerns, and the personalities of opposition leaders, whose interpersonal feuds can be toxic, and whose associations and affiliations can be unclear. But it is also to do with the historical experience of the perestroika years and the 1990s, for those who saw them. “I have become cautious about public enthusiasm,” admits a source who has a young adult’s memories of the 1980s. “That spark we had back then did not end well ... So, I do not believe in public protest.” The same scepticism, and the assumption that big public campaigns may easily have hidden beneficiaries with secret agendas, is shared by the slightly younger cohort, who were children during perestroika but remember the oligarch-funded media campaigns of the 1990s.

This corroborates the findings of [previous studies](#): people who have been exposed to forceful propaganda – as young Russians are – are not swayed by it, but become highly critical, and distrustful, of any messages they cannot independently verify. In this way, disillusionment with the 1990s is also translating into how the young generation relates to the authorities, as well as protest. “There is a generational change under way, as a truly post-Soviet cohort, see values not in terms of ideologies (still a tarnished concept) but individual conscience,” believes Russia expert Mark Galeotti. “Slowly, this generation and these values will begin to influence governance.”^[5]

However, such views belong to interviewees who already occupy meaningful positions in the establishment and have had the chance to test their thinking and hone their coping strategies. In comparison, the views of students of Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), shaped less by either the disappointment of the 1990s or the fatigue of the present day, point towards greater authoritarianism – stronger than the thinking of older foreign policy specialists, and also [stronger than many in their own age group](#). ECFR’s focus groups agreed – spontaneously – that Russia needs “a strong leader”, while members of one group suggested that the presidential term should be extended to 10, 12, or 15 years. “He can watch the rotation of governments and elected

parliaments, but he will be the person who will steer the country's direction, so as to avoid sudden changes," said one participant. "For a country where there has always been one person at the top, it should stay like this: one person at the top," said another. "Another question is that the rest should rotate and change; we should get rid of corruption – but the person in the top should stay, he is our leader, our [Danko](#), whom all will follow."

That the views of foreign policy students diverge from the views of others in the same age group is not lost on them. Some participants express dismay at the oppositional mood of their generation: "Very many even of my friends view everything in negative tones – that in our country everything is bad; we have no money, development, or resources for our population; we are a dying country, and so forth," said one. "I do not approve of it. And should those people who are very opposition-minded come to power, I expect nothing good."

Most of the students either agreed that Russia needs continuity with what exists today; or else they simply considered continuity the likeliest, if not the inevitable, future. And, while they accepted that some changes to the political system are necessary, they believed that these should be gradual due to "low level of political culture" and the size of the country – "with such a size, there should be fewer rights [for the population]. We are too big for too many rights." A remarkable bleakness persists among the young establishment entrants about the state of the country under Putin, but also about those who criticise the country, whether from within or without.

Their 2014

When discussing Russian foreign policy, it is impossible to escape the topic of Crimea: the annexation of the peninsula in 2014 was an earthquake for foreign policy professionals in Russia. It is no secret that, in February and March 2014, the foreign ministry was not in favour of annexation. "The MFA thinks of itself as a guardian of international law – we created it, we defend it," says one interlocutor born in 1989. "That is fairly unique – this stance

does not spill over to other institutions, such as [the] Presidential Administration.” Although, today, Russian diplomats are highly skilled in explaining why annexation was just, legal, and inevitable, one pillar of their professional ethos has, in fact, been badly damaged

Even five years on, the shock is still palpable among members of Russia’s foreign policy community, young and old. “I lost my voice as an expert,” says one of the interviewees, born in 1980. “Something had happened about what we had always been saying, that this could not possibly happen because A, B, C ... So, what could I say now? The decisions made I cannot defend; all my opinions have collapsed.” Over the spring and summer of 2014, most of Russia’s foreign policy experts had to adapt to the new reality by adjusting their views to what was possible, and what was not. “[By then] I started giving better predictions,” says the same interviewee. “I had lost my rose-tinted glasses.”

Annexing Crimea may have given Putin a huge popularity boost in society at large but, at the same time, it may also have eroded his authority among civil servants. “Many people’s faith in the leadership suffered a blow,” confirms one well-connected analyst. “[Putin] spoke one thing, and then did another.” In the eyes of some of the young, even including the loyalists, Crimea has blended together with the Trump presidency and Brexit as examples of politicians diverging from expertise. “Since 2014, the words of politicians [have lacked] content. They do not listen to specialist opinions. All these cases from Crimea to Brexit are part of the same phenomenon,” says a young diplomat.

The annexation of Crimea has changed the MFA’s internal climate. “It is impossible to discuss the return of Crimea – it is a criminal offence,” confides an analyst working with the ministry. “And that makes discussions very different from what they were like at the turn of the century, when everything could be discussed.” Such restraint is certainly not absolute: the higher ranks of the MFA have worked closely together for so many years that they know one another’s thinking intimately; among themselves, and

behind closed doors, the discussion will be free. But restraint affects people at lower levels, and their public statements. Those who feel uncomfortable with what happened choose their public appearances skilfully, to retain their own sense of truth. “To say that Crimea is not Russia’s is not possible right now,” admits a young diplomat. “But it is possible to choose whether to speak [publicly] or not, what to focus on.”

Interviewees share stories of people leaving the MFA after Crimea, or changing departments – but these are few, and such moves took place quietly, not as public statements. Still, 2014 has certainly affected how people view their jobs; and it has affected the career choices of young MGIMO students. As one source born in 1989 says: “It was one thing to join the MFA before 2014 – and quite another thing after.”

Their ‘small’ narratives

To a Western reader, the collection of views held by younger Russians about the West, Putin, and Crimea (see box) can appear a surprising assortment. But, inside Russia, the debate – and divide – between the ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’ of the foreign policy community is not necessarily to do with what the young think, but how they think. “The young do not see themselves in history,” says Alexei Makarkin, a teacher at the Higher School of Economics. “They live here and now, with today’s problems.” Independently of him, Fyodor Lukyanov, the 52-year-old chair of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy (SVOP), makes the same diagnosis. “The young lack a strategic mindset,” he says. “They approach issues on a case-by-case basis, with no overarching concepts.”

This tendency was on full display at a SVOP event on 18 March 2019 – by coincidence, five years to the day after the annexation of Crimea. The occasion was a debate on economic self-reliance and import substitution, and its young participants came mainly from economic and business circles – with diplomats scattered among them. Older SVOP members led the discussion. One, a Sinologist, attempted to inspire the audience with the example of China, pointing to Deng Xiaoping’s speech after the Tiananmen Square massacre. “He said clearly that China is not afraid of isolation ... China’s 1989 was our 2014 – we need to be ready

... to live alone for some time. Not that we need to aspire to be alone, but we need to be ready!”

The younger audience members were unmoved by this vision. They responded in a down-to-earth way, and, indeed, focused on pursuing case-by-case approaches rather than allowing themselves to be guided by nebulous concepts. Their concerns were concrete – and bleak. “I cannot find engineers in Russia. We have plenty of lawyers, but no engineers.” “Some Western investments would be of help.” “We can never compete with China in production – our chance could only be new technologies.” “Does anyone remember the last time Putin opened a technical university?” “It all boils down to the quality of state governance.” It is unlikely that many minds were won over by the older Sinologist’s final words: “We are where China was 30 years ago; and now China has ambitions to be a world leader! Have more optimism, children – do not compare yourselves only to Germany all the time!”.

Russia boasts a venerable tradition of grand narratives, so the sudden smallness of them puzzles and worries the foreign policy ‘fathers’. Seeing off the young guests from the SVOP roundtable, Lukyanov mused: “The case-by-case approach would be fine – if there was no feeling that a big crisis is on the horizon.” In fact, the fragility of big narratives might be something that unites the Russian youth with their peers in the West. “German millennials are surprisingly conservative and prone to status quo bias,” writes ECFR’s Ulrike Franke in her paper [“The young and the restful”](#): “The country that gave the world the word ‘leitmotiv’ has trouble defining any kind of political leitmotiv for itself, let alone the EU.”

But if an unwillingness to generate big narratives is something that unites the young Russians with young Europeans, then on many concrete issues their views diverge sharply. ECFR focus group participants admitted that climate change is an issue, but their take on it is pure realpolitik, with no traces of idealistic environmental activism. A “green wave” of the sort seen in this year’s European Parliament election would be impossible in today’s Russia. Insofar as young Russians express concern, it is about individual environmental cases: “Do not let the Chinese poison Baikal,” said one of the SVOP roundtable participants, referring to a planned Chinese water-bottling factory next to Russia’s most admired lake. But, if they do read broader meaning into the environmental debate, they see

suspicious forces at work. “All these ecological conferences coincided with the moment when China started rapid development – I think the ecological agenda is linked to the Western countries’ desire to slow down China,” suggested one student. Another argued that ecological problems are real but, “nonetheless, they are used by Westerners as a convenient pretext to hinder the development of Easterners.” The fairly consistent, and fiercely practical, conclusion among the students was that climate change and a scarcity of resources would lead to bigger tensions in international relations – and that this, in turn, could give Russia new opportunities as an exporter of food products, or a power broker in future conflicts over resources.

Likewise, feminist views elicit little sympathy. “Russia is a country of winning post-feminism [sic], and that forms part of its soft power,” said one student, only half-jokingly, in a possible rebuke to the Western ‘Me Too’ movement. And the female participants in both groups considered it quite natural that their diplomatic careers would develop more slowly than those of their husbands. “I imagine that my husband will make a faster career than me, as I have to dedicate time to children,” said one. “So, my career will be for my own pleasure. A man needs to be the more professionally advanced one in the family.”

Their alma mater

MGIMO is an institution that is less well understood in the West than it should be. With its 8,000 students and 2,000 staff, MGIMO serves as the alma mater for the bulk of Russia’s foreign policymaking elite – both those at the MFA and foreign policy specialists at other state institutions and in large companies. According to Mark Galeotti, who regularly teaches there, MGIMO is three things rolled into one: “One of the best Russian universities, a finishing school for the elite, and a think-tank for the MFA. Its culture is shaped by interlinkages among the three.” A European parallel might be a cross between France’s *École nationale d’administration* and the Oxbridge universities in the United Kingdom.

Conventional wisdom in the West might assume that such an establishment in a country such as Russia will be under strict government control. But MGIMO is, in fact, a fairly pluralistic place – by virtue of being fragmented, if not for other reasons. “There is a bewildering array of fiefdoms,” says Galeotti. “There are many small and big institutes and centres, often established around single individuals.”

Andrey Zagorsky – a liberal-leaning professor who has taught at MGIMO for several decades – agrees: “MGIMO has been a pluralistic place ever since the 1990s. Students attend my courses as well as those of [hard-line general Leonid] Ivashov.” Asked how this works in practice, Zagorsky smiles: “We do not teach in the same auditoriums at the same time. And it could be that we do not have enough internal discussions.”

Tutors of different tribes and colours are all essentially free to choose their own approach. “Not a single time has anyone in the university administration tried to influence my course content,” says Galeotti, albeit while admitting that his subject – international crime – might be less politically sensitive than others. But Zagorsky ventures into more sensitive areas and does not complain of pressure either. “We discussed Ukraine, the students were surprised – was it really not the work of Americans? I said that I have not seen any such evidence – show me some.” When it comes to exams and papers, the students are free to adhere to their own political views – what Zagorsky looks at and grades is the clarity of argument and how it is backed up. “University needs to teach one to think,” he says. He is happy that, despite his reputation as a strict tutor, his courses are well attended.

The changing political climate in society – following Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 and especially since the Crimea annexation – has had a twofold influence on MGIMO. On the one hand, there is some cautiousness in the air: “This is not entirely different from the current culture of mild self-censorship in many Anglo-American universities, though its roots are different,” says Galeotti. “In both cases, some topics are best not touched.”

On the other hand, Zagorsky notes that strengthening propaganda inspires smarter students to ask more questions: “This is a process familiar to me from the Soviet times!”

Their career paths

Not all today’s young students graduating from MGIMO (see box) will aspire to a diplomatic career. ECFR’s focus groups revealed that many have their sights set on joining state companies instead. Some end up at other ministries or in the private sector, while others do one posting abroad – to establish connections – and then move to a state company. So, which of them go on to become Russia’s diplomats? The answer to that question can depend on whether it is asked inside or outside the ministry.

Some recent graduates who have chosen not to join the MFA are openly sarcastic about those who did: “Only mediocrities went to MFA,” says a source born in 1992. “The thing is that MGIMO gives one a good education, teaches [one] to think independently – but none of this is needed at the MFA,” says another, born in 1989. “Two types of people apply for work at the MFA – those who have always wanted to become diplomats, and others who are risk-averse and yearn for stability,” says an MGIMO graduate, who was born in 1991 and is not at the ministry. Such scathing views are far from universally shared, however. “I know many young diplomats, and most of them are real fanatics – they live for their jobs,” says a journalist who reports on foreign policy. “The MFA has many good people who would like to use their roles to solve something,” confirms a young think-tanker who often works with diplomats.

Indeed, the Council of Young Diplomats, which received ECFR at the Russian MFA, showed no hint of mindless careerism. In conversation, its members seemed less used to discussions with foreign experts than their peers in the private sector or other ministries; and official talking points had penetrated their language so much as to make it somewhat insular – at least until the conversation warmed up. But their questions were sincere and engaged. When asked if they loved their countries of specialisation – almost always a sign of a good diplomat – their eyes lit up, and the answer was a resounding “yes!”.

Of the MGIMO students who took part in ECFR’s focus groups, about half intended to become diplomats. Their motivations varied – most claimed genuine interest, but some confessed that they want “the state to take care” of them. Some were keen to “defend Russia’s interests”, while others were primarily interested in material wellbeing. “Ten years from now, I will have a job, family, a suburban house,” said one participant when asked about his future plans. “Suburbia of which city? Does not matter really – somewhere in Europe.” There was, again, little indication of ‘grand narratives’ guiding the bulk of the students in their life choices.

One emerging trend that the traditional urban-bred foreign policy establishment has observed is the growing number of ambitious provincials among the ranks of young diplomats. Indeed, the older hands follow this with some concern, though they have not yet decided what the implications might be for future foreign policy. “There is some concern that, in their eagerness to ‘make it’, these people might be easy recruits for foreign services,” says an analyst who regularly works with senior ranks at MFA.^[6] At the same time, the young native Muscovite peers of these provincials are openly scornful of their drive to succeed, and suspect the opposite: that this trend could lead to uncritical and opportunistic loyalty to the Kremlin’s questionable policy ideas. “Abroad, they are elite ... they are sent to airports to meet the minister, which gives them a chance to get a photo with [Sergey Lavrov] and send it to their grandmother in the provinces,” is the sardonic view of one interviewee born in 1991.

Indeed, for financial as well as social mobility reasons, the MFA can be disproportionately attractive to people from the provinces. Having spent six years living in a Moscow dormitory and studying an exotic language, such a young

person – lacking the wealth and connections of his or her university classmates – may not find it easy to get a job in Moscow that would pay for living expenses. But at the Russian MFA – unlike Western foreign ministries – it is nowadays possible to start a career with a posting abroad, with no previous stint at the central apparatus. Thus, many such graduates join the ministry, depart for the country of their specialisation, and upon their return have money for a mortgage in Moscow. The unattractiveness of impoverished provinces can be a powerful motivator in itself. “I have an MGIMO friend who comes from a Siberian village called N–,” says an interlocutor born in 1989. “And he says that he would do anything in order not to go back there: ‘If I’m asked to say that Crimea is Russian, I say it is Russian. If I need to say Crimea is Mongolian – fine, it is Mongolian! Only not back to N–.’”

Careers at the MFA are not exactly speedy. Officials who joined in the 1990s or the early 2000s – during the economic slump, when MFA salaries could not compete with others, and the ministry lost people to the commercial sector – may have advanced faster. But this is no longer the case. One high-ranking diplomat, born in 1955, approves of this steadiness – “the need to pass through all levels,” as he puts it. “This makes our diplomatic corps as a whole very stable. You are working with professionals; all speak the same language.”

Younger voices, though, are not convinced. “By the time people need to start making decisions, that skill has atrophied. A person has turned into a Xerox,” says a mid-ranking diplomat, born in 1980, who actually owes his own somewhat faster career to the slump of the late 1990s. “In order to have a meaningful job at the MFA, you need to have been at MGIMO in the 1970s,” groan the youngest – born in 1989 and 1991 respectively – who, for this reason, decided to look for “meaningful jobs” elsewhere.

In addition, there is a whole category of officials whose careers do not just progress slowly but tend to stall before they reach the highest positions: women. Among the 33 percent of MFA employees who are women, [only two number among its 130 ambassadors and two among its department heads](#). Women’s slow progress at the MFA is partly linked to the generally masculine culture of Russian diplomacy. “It starts during freshman year at MGIMO,” says Anton Tsvetov, who has researched Russian diplomacy. [“At the welcome lecture, one hears: ‘Welcome to future diplomats and wives of diplomats!’”](#) But, at the same time, it is also rooted

in the ministry's internal logic of assignments. "At 22 years old, when they graduate from MGIMO, a boy is an adolescent, but a girl is a grown-up," says one young professional, born in 1991. "However, if she is good with languages, then the likelihood is that she will join the translation department." Once there, it is hard to move on to the more politically significant jobs; and, even if this happens after some years of interpreting, the men have still had a faster start. "This is really not worthy of a country that gave the world its first-ever female ambassador," says a young – male – interviewee who was born in 1983, in reference to Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai.

Paradoxically, young Russian diplomats are likely to be less exposed to the outside world and its inhabitants than their former MGIMO classmates who choose a different career path. While the latter may continue their studies in the West, or find a job that takes them abroad regularly, diplomats need to advance up the ranks before they are able to talk directly to foreigners as a regular part of their job. "Young diplomats posted abroad spend 95 percent of their time inside the embassy," says a source born in 1991. "At Moscow receptions, there are many second and third secretaries from Western embassies, but their Russian [counterparts] would never be below first secretary. So, Western diplomats will have 15 years of international networking behind them by the time ours only start."

What sort of diplomat does this long lead-in time create? By the time younger officials start talking with their foreign colleagues, they have usually been socialised into the MFA system and worldview. "After ten years at the MFA, it is impossible to have the same views you had when you joined it," says a non-MFA source, born in 1989. "You change. You hear that there are spies everywhere: first year, you laugh at it; second year, you smile; third year, you stop smiling; and, fourth year, you start believing it. By age 35, people have either become part of the system or left."

Their MFA

To what extent can the MFA's 'young guard' actually influence Russia's foreign policy? The answer greatly depends on the atmosphere and arrangements inside the ministry, as well as the position that the MFA – but also other 'civilian' ministries – occupy in Russia's decision-making process. And in this regard, the

situation could be better.

In recent years, but especially since the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia's military operation in Syria in 2015, the MFA has become much less central to policymaking than it used to be. The Presidential Administration and its security council are increasingly prominent. It is not diplomats that have the upper hand in these bodies but officials from the intelligence services and the Ministry of Defence. This is not necessarily new: there have always been inter-agency conflicts but, in the past, there were also more institutional checks and balances. "The MoD has always been telling miraculous tales about its new weapons, and what one can do with them," says one former diplomat. "The MFA has always been more cautious. And the KGB usually sided with MFA." In Putin's Russia, however, power is personal, institutions are increasingly hollowed out, and such checks and balances as there once were have stopped functioning. "There is the inter-agency process and the inter-personal process – and the inter-personal tends to cancel out the inter-agency."

The situation is aggravated by a lack of turnover. "When [Andrei] Gromyko became [Soviet foreign] minister, he was open to information," recalls a retired ambassador. "But, towards the end, he was convinced that he knew everything." These days, people feel the same about Putin: "He [has been] in power for 20 years; he wants to manage things himself; he believes he knows everything – maybe with the exception of some details about, say, Fiji."

All this has had a profound effect on the MFA and its people. "Foreign policy is militarising," says an expert working with the ministry. "Many files move elsewhere; the MFA only executes decisions taken elsewhere – that creates a demand [on] other types of diplomats [too]." He continues, pensively: "A diplomat is creative when he has some autonomy. Then he grows professionally; an atmosphere emerges; initiative moves from the bottom up ... That presumes that the MFA as an institution also has some freedom and autonomy. Another approach, however, is the MFA as an army: it obeys orders and initiative is punished. Decisions move from the top down; the lower levels only have the right to articulate them ... And who is a diplomat? Is it a person who defends Russia's positions in any circumstances and is effectively a propagandist? Or it a person who seeks solutions to the problems the country encounters in foreign policy? The

latter case implies some empathy; skill to view problems through partners' eyes – and that is again linked to autonomy.”

On those two axes, the expert says, the MFA has moved visibly towards the army model: “Right now, there is a demand for soldier-diplomats rather than problem-solvers – for propagandists rather than empathetic minds.”^[7] A former diplomat puts it even more harshly: “What we have is combative public diplomacy,” he says. “Everyone aims just at personal results – to avoid reprimands, and to stick out as a good soldier.”^[8] It does not help that there is also a near-total lack of rotation between the MFA and the world around it: it is practically impossible to join the ministry from the outside at a mid-career level. “The MFA is like a steel tube – one can enter it from one end and leave from the other, but not in the middle,” [write Tsvetov and Oleg Shakirov](#).

Such insularity strengthens people's ability to “speak the same language” and contributes towards a homogeneous corporate culture. The latter – though legalistic and, at times, tedious – makes the MFA fairly predictable and reliable, especially in [comparison to the more adventurous special services and freelance policy entrepreneurs](#). In intra-Russian policy debates, the MFA can be a voice of sanity. But even so, its lack of turnover contributes to a shortage of ideas, and people “turning into a Xerox”.

Are Russian diplomats happy to identify as ‘soldiers’ rather than problem-solvers? Or to become a “Xerox”? The answers to these questions vary widely. It is indeed likely that many have internalised the current combative talking points – or have always adhered to Soviet-style canons. “I know people in the MFA who still believe that Katyn [the Soviet massacre of Poles] is a conspiracy,” says a young diplomat. And it does not depend on age: “There are many who are young but Putinist through and through.”

At the same time, many hanker for the more creative side of diplomatic work, and feel uneasy about the items in Russian diplomacy's emerging soldier-diplomat toolbox, such as point-scoring on Twitter – even though the MFA and some of its embassies make heavy use of it. “Twitter diplomacy ties our hands,” laments a young official. “It shrinks the space for diplomacy.” “Twitter does not help classical diplomacy,” agrees a senior diplomat, born in 1955. “It simplifies ideas and does not

help understanding. But that is a new reality.”

Public relations “does not come naturally to a diplomat”, says a mid-ranking diplomat, born in 1980. “I think we are all still experimenting, trying to find out how to be with it.” But he argues that public point-scoring and playing to the audience are also logical by-products of the current antagonism of the Russia-West relationship. “As we do not manage to agree with the West about anything, the concept that a diplomat’s work is to come to an agreement [simply] erodes. People forget it, and so they start ‘looking into the eye’” – a reference to a young Russian diplomat at the United Nations, who caught the world’s attention in 2017 by [furiously attacking the British ambassador](#). Distrust, expulsions, and rupture of contacts post-2014 also contribute to this casting around for new methods. “We would talk directly with our partners, not via public statements, but often we lack a channel. It is different for diplomats who work with the Middle East – they are doing real work, not playing to the audience.”

The end of disillusionment?

What will these generational changes mean for the future of Russia’s foreign policy, and for Russia-West relations? This question preoccupies the ‘fathers’ of Russian foreign policy – and it should preoccupy the West too. “Is there a new constituency of liberals emerging,” asks one – presumably referring to the cautious figures in the system who have developed personal missions and value conscience over ideology. “Or do we see a generation of cynics ready to serve any master? Or should we get ready for a technocratic nationalism generally hostile to the West?”

Russia’s future foreign policy will, of course, be set by the future president, and will depend on a complex set of unknowns: the personality of the leader, the nature of the regime, and the global context. Any regime will find people to serve it. “It is not what these young people think that will define the future Russian foreign policy,” says an MGIMO teacher. “Rather, the future foreign policy will define who of them will advance in their careers and who not so much.” Even so, the arrival of a new generation will bring with it the influence of beliefs forged in a furnace different to their forebears’.

Future foreign policy decision-makers’ experiences with the West diverge

drastically from those of their predecessors. For diplomats of the Soviet era, the West was an enigma: personal exposure to it was all but non-existent, but professional contacts were of high value. To this day, retired ambassadors' faces light up when they recall some breakthrough at complex negotiations decades ago. "We managed to agree," they will say, beaming with pride.

But, for the younger generations, the opposite is the case. Personal exposure to the West is now abundant, and often positive. "I was studying at Cambridge in 2014, and one day my dean invited me out to [check] no one was harassing me because I come from Russia," states an interviewee born in 1992 who recalls his time there fondly. But, for today's diplomats – unlike those of the Soviet era – professional breakthroughs with the West for are all but non-existent. One London-based diplomat relates, sadly: "The biggest thing in our bilateral agenda is to agree about visas for our own employees, and even that is not going very well." Or take one government official, born in 1986, who worked on relations with Poland in 2009: "It was Putin's personal order to be friendly with Poland. We travelled to Smolensk, to prepare the presidential visit, it really was very foggy there. ... And later it all came to nothing," he reflected, referring to the slump in Polish-Russian relations that started after Putin's return to the presidency, in 2012. Today, Russian officials look to the Middle East, not the West, for examples of policy success stories – although even there the glory belongs more to the military than to diplomats, again showing how the MFA has been side-lined within Moscow's institutional web.

There is unlikely to be an automatic rise in Russia-West cooperation once the young generation takes over. "The young have seen more [of the West], so they are less idealist about the West, unlike the Soviet people, for whom the West was a miracle," says a young interviewee, born in 1980. Rather, evolving generational change appears to be drawing Russia away not just from its European dreams of the 1990s, but also – crucially – from its centuries-old fixation on the West. In the minds of many of Russia's future power brokers, the world to come is a bleakly realist one that is of a piece with a maxim attributed to Alexander III: Russia's only true allies are its army and navy. For the youngest Russian entrants into the world of diplomacy, the West is but one power in the world. It has not "offended" them, so there is little in the way of disillusionment with it. But, perhaps because of this and the young generation's aversion to ideology and close scrutiny of conventional

truths, there may be more opportunities for the two sides to become partners in future – working together to protect their own interests in a pragmatic way.

Footnotes

[1] Figure from Nikolai Petrov, Chatham House, 25 October 2019.

[2] Data from lecture by Ekaterina Shulman, King's College, London, 8 October 2018.

[3] ECFR interview with Ekaterina Shulman, Berlin, 17 January 2019.

[4] Please see the methodology note in the annex for more details.

[5] Email exchange between the author and Mark Galeotti, 31 October 2019.

[6] ECFR interview in Moscow in March 2019.

[7] ECFR interview in Moscow in April 2019.

[8] ECFR interview in Moscow in March 2019.

Methodological note

This paper is based on 18 in-depth interviews with young foreign policy professionals, who work for various ministries with a foreign policy function - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the economics and transport ministries and the Government Executive office. Interviewees also include staffers to politicians, employees of large companies, and individuals working for think-tanks, academic institutions, and media outlets. The age of the interviewees ranged from late 20s to mid-40s; they are all identified only by their year of birth. Most interviews took place in December 2018 and February-April 2019, in Moscow and several European capitals.

All interviewees represent the 'civilian'; side of foreign policy. Missing from the picture are the young in uniform: people who work for intelligence services and the Ministry of Defence. Given the current prominence of these institutions in Russian foreign policy, this is a significant caveat.

In addition to the interviews, the paper has benefitted from group discussions - such as the author's meeting with the Council of Young Diplomats at the Russian MFA (19 March 2019) and the lecture and discussion at MGIMO on 11 April 2019. The author also had the privilege to 'eavesdrop'; on several intra-Russian discussions among young foreign policymakers, such as the discussion on sanctions organised by the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy (18 March 2019).

The youngest cohort - the MGIMO students - shared their views in two focus group meetings conducted by a moderator from Levada Centre (20 March 2019). The focus group students, and participants in some intra-Russian discussions, were not aware of a Western observer's presence at their debates. The rest of the interviews or meetings may have been slightly affected by interpersonal chemistry, or knowledge that the ultimate consumer of the information is a Western reader.

About the author

Kadri Liik is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Before joining ECFR in October 2012, she was director of the International Centre for Defence Studies in Estonia. Her publications for ECFR include: “Defender of the faith? How Ukraine’s Orthodox split threatens Russia” (coauthored, 2019), “Winning the normative war with Russia: An EU-Russia Power Audit” (2018), “What does Russia want?” (2017), “The new power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East” (coauthored, 2016), “How to talk with Russia” (2015), “Russia’s pivot to Eurasia” (2014), and “Regime change in Russia” (2013).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to send her heartfelt thanks to everyone in Russia’s foreign policy community – young, old, or in between – who agreed to share their thoughts and feelings. I have treated them in good faith and done my best to present them correctly.

Thanks for memorable conversations are also due to the Council of Young Diplomats at the Russian MFA, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy.

The paper was financially supported by the German Federal Foreign Office and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the activities in Moscow also by the Moscow office of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. The focus groups with MGIMO students were expertly conducted by Alexey Levinson from the Levada Center. Thank you all!

Finally, the author owes gratitude to a number of ECFR colleagues: to Joanna Hosa for her support throughout the research process, and to Adam Harrison for his endless patience during the editing.



Appendix



How do you understand the events of 1989 and 1991 – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union? What do these mean for you?

(With year of birth.)

- 1973** Gorbachev was badly educated, he did not understand the complexities of international life. But I do not feel the West deceived the Soviet Union. No – you cannot blame a wolf for eating a lamb.
- 1979** The end of the cold war was good, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe. The USSR, composed of 11-12 republics, should have stayed; and history would have been different: no NATO expansion, bombing of Yugoslavia, no war in Iraq, Libya, Ukraine.
- 1980** The socialist system and the state are different things. I do not regret the collapse of socialism, or the loss of central Asia ... But I do regret the loss of Belarus and Ukraine. Not because they cannot be separate ... but I grew up thinking that we should be together.
- 1980** 1989 in Berlin – it had to happen, of course.
- 1980** If about 1945 there is some clarity – what happened and why – then about 1989 there is not. Many people think that it was unfair, or an accident, and hence revanchism.
- 1980** It was a consequence of the failure of the economic system built by the Soviet Union. It did not work; and it continues not to work in Cuba and North Korea.
- 1980** It was the defeat of the Soviet Union. In the cold war the defeat was also cold, but it was defeat nonetheless.
- 1981** A tectonic shift of history. But everything happened as it had to. The Soviet system was ineffective. I am happy I do not live in the Soviet Union. But I'm sad that the opportunity to build a common Europe was missed – I think it existed.
- 1985** I remember how the flag of the Soviet Union was lowered in the Kremlin. All around me people were happy, but I, for some reason, felt sad. And I felt sorry for Gorbachev. Many got freedom. Russia got pain.
- 1985** Politically, it was a great loss. The USSR was comparable to the US; Russia is not.
- 1986** Just a picture from a history book. Like the nineteenth century.
- 1987** That's just history.
- 1987** It was an end of an epoch; and a missed opportunity. At that time it was possible to integrate Russia into the West, but the West integrated only those who were easy to integrate, and didn't bother with the rest.
- 1987** At that moment, Russia realised it had done things wrong, but the West got a confirmation that they had done everything right. They had no reckoning, although, in reality, both sides had engaged in unethical things.
- 1991** Just a historical fact, no more. The event that I remember and that influenced my thinking was 9/11.
- 1992** It was a transition into a new historical epoch, neither good nor bad.
- 1992** The collapse of the Soviet Union gave many people amazing opportunities, but for Russia it is a loss. We threw away everything we had, ended up with an impoverished population and oligarchy. A huge setback.

What makes a country a great power? Do great powers have special rights?

(With year of birth.)



1973 Responsibility makes a great power.

The world is returning to its natural state; and it'll be natural that the great powers have greater rights. This is reality; in the twenty-first century it will manifest in contemporary ways. **1979**

1980 Great powers have great obligations. As concerns rights ... they do not have any special rights over smaller countries, but ... then other great powers should exercise the same restraint; and not use the small states for selfish interests.

Great powers are the ones that have more potential than others; it is usually based on a combination of political, military, economic and/or demographic strengths. **1980**

1980 In theory rights are the same for all, but in practice we see that some are 'more equal'.

Sometimes I look at Finland, which decides little in world affairs, but whose citizens are the happiest in the world. And then I think that it might be good for Russia to drop its great power ambitions for at least a few decades. But that won't happen. **1981**

1985 Yes, great powers do have a special status. They have rights and a duty to regulate international life. But they should refrain from telling other societies how they need to live – attempts to do that will lead to failure.

There will always be powers that consider themselves great and find parameters to justify that, but, overall, great power is concept that will stay in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, many human interactions bypass states, and states will struggle to stay relevant. That will be the defining tension. **1987**

1987 Every country that calls itself a great power does so in order to gain rights to harass others.

Great power status is based on territory, economics, demographics, role in international relations. It does not give one special rights, but it gives the possibility to set norms and responsibility to shape the international system. **1987**

1989 A great power is a country that is in a position to influence the rules of the game; the organisation of international life; and whose consent is necessary for any major decisions.

Great powers have great responsibility. **1991**

1992 Great powers do have special rights.

Who are the Soviet or post-Soviet Russian foreign policymakers you respect?



Primakov. He understood that the West was neither friend nor enemy, but a problem one has to address."

Ryabkov. He always explains very precisely what we are doing, why, what is important, and what not."

Molotov remains a secret ... his wife was repressed, but he continued serving."

Kosygin. He had no vanity, but did a lot for the country."

Chernomyrdin. He was in the right place in his time."

Dobrynin. He was one of the brightest diplomats there have been."

Primakov. He was a great Arabist."

Lavrov. He is a good professional, with great human qualities."

Gromyko was of course important ... But I am not a fan."

Valery Gergiyev and Andrey Zvyagintsev. They are doing more for Russia and its prestige in the world than anyone in the government."

Igor Ivanov. I think his service is underestimated right now. He did a lot of good – look, for instance, at regulation in Adjaria."

Primakov. Politicians are all imperfect ... But Primakov had some integrity, and he was always being himself."

Oleg Grinevsky. He negotiated the Vienna Document. One of the bright characters at the MFA."

Dobrynin. He played a positive role in his time."

Anatoli Adamishin. He helped a lot with Euro-Atlantic relations."

Mikhail Fridman. He brings young Westerners to work in Russia with the Alfa Bank fellowship, and that is good."

"I like many Russian diplomats, as professionals as well as people. Starting with Lavrov, continuing with his deputies – Ryabkov, Grushko ... Lavrov really has assembled a very good team."

"None. Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia? Sorry, there is no one I respect."

"I am trying to learn from everyone how not to behave!"

The question was asked in group discussions as well as interviews. At group discussions, the names most often mentioned were those of Andrey Gromyko and Anatoly Dobrynin, but the interviews resulted in a much wider selection of names and also some thoughtful reflections.

ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. www.ecfr.eu

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR November 2019. ISBN: 978-1-913347-08-6. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.