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THE HISTORY OF NATO–RUSSIA RELATIONS: FROM LOGICAL ROMANTICISM, THROUGH A DIFFICULT PARTNERSHIP, TO UNWANTED CONFRONTATION

They say that politics is the art of the possible. Indeed, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO-Russia relations were accompanied by long-standing efforts to take advantage of the favourable circumstances. The Allies openly celebrated the end of the Cold War and sought to capitalise on the so-called peace dividend. The situation could not have been different due to the fact that for decades NATO's attention (and its resources) were mainly focused on neutralising the threat posed by the Warsaw Pact, which ceased to exist relatively quickly and in disgrace.

At the same time, NATO members made every effort to incorporate the Russian Federation (i.e., the USSR's successor state) into the international security system as much as possible. The shape of the relations between NATO and Russia was (and continues to be) crucial to the stability architecture both in Europe and across the world. Starting from 1990, this process has had several stages.

The first stage, which lasted until 1997 or so, can be referred to as logical romanticism. This romanticism resulted from the hope that the "new Russia" would follow the path of democracy, sever its imperial roots, and proceed to build a modern state that respects its citizens and international law. After all, the tragic experiences of Stalinism,

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Communist Party dictatorship, the gulags, censorship, and the Brezhnev doctrine were rejected by the elites in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and by the majority of society alike. By signing the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, devised by members of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992, Russia recognised the full rights of other states to choose their allies and partners and sought to resolve problems in its relations with its neighbours, which were due to the difficult historical legacy.

Concurrently, the Western states attempted to prevent two scenarios from happening. One of these scenarios involved the hardliners in Moscow seizing power once again in order to reconstruct the USSR and pose a threat to the independence of Eastern European states. The second scenario envisaged the breakup of the Russian Federation. In this context, the intention to achieve the peaceful reunification of Germany was amongst the most important motivations. The coup carried out in 1991 was viewed as a warning against the fulfilment of the first scenario. Strong separatist tendencies (e.g., in Chechnya), for their part, created a threat that the authorities in Moscow might lose control of nuclear weapons and that an economic and social disaster might be imminent, with all its unpredictable international consequences.

As early as 1990 (in a communiqué published following the summit in London), NATO held out its "hand of friendship" to Moscow and other former Soviet bloc states. A special dialogue forum was established: the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). It was almost symbolic that at the NACC's first meeting held in December 1991 the USSR's ambassador announced that, pursuant to the Belovezha Accords, from then on he represented Russia.

In January 1994, NATO approached all OSCE countries, including Russia and other Central and Eastern European states, with an offer involving the implementation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. It included both a collective platform for talks and cooperation, and individual cooperation schemes to be selected by individual partners according to their preferences. It also envisaged cooperation opportunities aimed at aligning the partners' standards with NATO standards (which was attractive to those states that openly sought NATO membership) and cooperation initiatives in specific areas (which was targeted at those states that were not interested in joining NATO).

However, after some fussing and political theatre (e.g., at the last minute Minister Andrei Kozyrev refused to sign the PfP framework document), Russia accepted NATO's offer. Initially, there were a lot of gestures and symbols, including NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner's historic visit to Moscow and the first-ever visit of a group of Russian officers to NATO Headquarters (during which even cooks from the NATO restaurant gathered in the hall to see the famous Russian military caps the size of a frying pan). The ice was being broken during consultations and seeds of cooperation were being sown.

Even if some of the meetings with Russian representatives resembled meet-and-greet events, what mattered were their goals: to eliminate the moat of distrust after the Cold War years and to convince Moscow that good relations with NATO are mutually beneficial. So, debates on concepts for peacekeeping operations were held and the first modest joint exercises were carried out. Russia's involvement in the stabilisation mission in the Balkans provided valuable experience and food for thought. Although today it is hard to imagine, at that time, Russian soldiers were part of the international peacekeeping force under NATO command supervising the implementation of the Dayton Agreement regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 1997–2002, Moscow began to feel more confident on the international stage and deliberately started to emphasise the differences between its own views and the views of the Allies. As a consequence, what followed were serious disputes regarding NATO's air operation in Kosovo, including a military stand-off at Pristina airport. At the hottest moment of this incident, the British commander of NATO forces, General Michael Jackson, backed by London, decided to avoid a direct clash between his soldiers and Russian commandos.

However, most importantly, this was the period in which the Allies had to decide on the way of dealing with Russia. Moscow was clearly dissatisfied with the formula of its relations with NATO applied thus far, which involved multilateral forums. What was mainly at stake were matters of political prestige—in both NACC and (starting from 1997) the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), representatives of a country that continued to consider itself a superpower had to sit at one table with several dozen states of incomparably smaller potential in international affairs and had to treat them as equal partners.

Due to the fact that at that time NATO's most important task (aside from the situation in the Balkans) involved enlarging the Alliance to include the former Warsaw Pact states, the Allies made an effort to meet Moscow's expectations. This mainly resulted in the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997 in Paris.

Formally, this document continues to be valid despite Russia's obvious violations of several of its provisions, for example, of the pledge not to use force to change the shape of borders. The purpose of this document was to regulate the relations between NATO and Russia by confirming, in the form of political agreements, several principles regarding the security architecture in Europe, including the right of each OSCE state to freely choose its alliance. Moreover, it contains several important concessions to Russia, which were approved by the then-16 NATO member states in order to reduce Russia's opposition to the prospect of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joining NATO. These concessions include the promise not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of subsequent new member states, as well as certain limitations, such as those regarding the permanent stationing of large combat forces from other NATO member states in those countries.

On the basis of the Founding Act's provisions, a special dialogue and cooperation body was established under the name of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). Although its procedural rules were quite complicated (e.g., rotating meeting chairmanship), what mattered was the essence—from then on, Russia had its special cooperation forum with NATO, without the participation of "smaller partners".

Although both practical cooperation and dialogue (among diplomats, experts, and military officials) were developing at a slow pace, certain progress was noticeable. On the NATO side, the prevailing rational assumption was that all opportunities should be used, with patience, to spur the new Russian elite towards a normal, one could even say civilised, path of development. The new Russia continued to be a country in the making, and its democratic forces had to realise on their own that Moscow's constructive role in international relations should be viewed as a boost to the process of its economic development and modernisation, rather than an obstacle.

Initially, Putin's rise to power in 2000 was not viewed as a threat to this process. His advisors included many liberals and some of them

even suggested that he should consider applying for NATO membership. Although this prospect was a pipe dream, this was not due to principles (according to Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, any European state may aspire to NATO membership and this does not exclude Russia a priori) but due to political realities. Russia would have to work hard on its democratic standards and to agree to harmonise its security policy with other states. And this was never going to happen.

The Allies had major reserves of flexibility and patience. Moscow's vocal protests and open attempts to counter NATO in the Balkans did pose a problem, but this problem was not considered fundamental. The spring of 1999 saw—not for the first time and not for the last time either—Russia temporarily withdrawing from its cooperation with NATO. However, relatively soon Moscow resumed this cooperation and even joined the military operation to stabilise Kosovo.

To reach out to the new Russian president, in 2002 the Allies agreed to revise the dialogue and cooperation formula. At the summit at Pratica di Mare near Rome, a new body was established—the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). The speeches offered by the heads of state and government during that meeting were convergent and optimistic: all of them emphasised the new era in NATO-Russia relations and viewed the NRC as an opportunity to forge a new beginning of genuinely ambitious cooperation and rapprochement in key international security issues. Due to the fact that the summit coincided with the dramatic declaration from Islamabad announcing that Pakistan had achieved the status of a nuclear state, the convergence of public reactions to this fact offered by Putin and by other leaders was considered a good omen.

Even more importantly, the Allies—led by the U.S.—were in the process of redefining their priorities in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Moscow's initial support (including for operations targeting extremists in Afghanistan) was appreciated and viewed as another sign of hope that Russia would (at least in some matters) be resolving security problems jointly with NATO, rather than creating them.

As a consequence, 2002 saw the beginning of another stage in NATO-Russia relations involving more intense and substantive, albeit difficult, cooperation that lasted more than a decade. The operating philosophy was simple—there were no taboo subjects. If the political and expert

dialogue at various levels of the NRC resulted in a shared conclusion that cooperation was mutually beneficial, then it could potentially be launched in any field.

This formula was being applied in numerous areas of cooperation. At least four of them deserve to be mentioned.

The first one is the fight against terrorism. Terrorism was viewed as a typical example of a challenge in which both sides "have a lot in common". Therefore, attempts were made—some of them successful—to devise shared technologies to (remotely) detect explosives that could be used by potential terrorists, for example, on public transport (the STANDEX project). Quite successful tests were carried out in the Saint Petersburg and Paris metro systems. Military officials from NATO and Russia were involved in debates on the most effective methods of fighting large terrorist groups. Exercises were held (Polish fighter jets took part in these) and procedures for information exchange and coordination in the event of a passenger plane hijacking were discussed. Paradoxically, these procedures were applied in practice for the first and the last time in 2014, shortly before the Russian operation in Crimea.

The second area of cooperation was Afghanistan. After Moscow's initial support for the U.S. back in 2001, several ambitious cooperation projects aimed at stabilising the situation in Afghanistan were launched. The Allies established a fund to finance the modernisation of (Soviet- and Russian-made) helicopters for the needs of the Afghan army. Joint initiatives were carried out to train officers in fighting drugs. Russia agreed to the passage of transport vehicles used by NATO forces in Afghanistan through its territory.

The third area of cooperation involves emergency situations and other challenges. The Allies (successfully) coordinated some of NATO's counter-piracy operations with Russia. Procedures were devised (Russia took part in three NATO exercises) for mutual help in the event of an emergency in which the life of submarine crews would be at risk. On Russia's initiative, NATO and other partners established the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which continues to operate.

The fourth area of cooperation is missile defence. Despite Russia's subsequent harsh criticism of NATO's plans to build an anti-missile shield system, even in this sensitive area cooperation on the interoperability

of Russian and NATO systems was continued for many years, a threat analysis was carried out and several virtual exercises (in the form of computer simulations) were held.

This intricate mechanism of dialogue and cooperation was put to a serious test in 2008 when Russia used military force to attack Georgia. This dramatic move was preceded by Moscow's increasingly radical rhetoric towards NATO. Other developments included Putin's famous speech delivered in Munich, and the NRC summit held in Bucharest in July 2008 during which the Russian president shocked his NATO partners when he de facto questioned Ukraine's sovereignty (now it is evident that his current destructive obsession with Russia's western neighbour has a longer history).

However, the Georgian escapade did not ruin the prospects for dialogue. Admittedly, the work of the NRC was suspended for many months. But it was resumed after a break. Why? Putting the reasoning of many Allies in simple words: in various NATO capitals the decision-makers tried hard to believe that the conflict with Georgia had its unique causes and that it was a one-off situation that was expected never to return.

Although already at that time most countries located on NATO's Eastern Flank did not share this optimistic assumption, the NATO-Russia partnership train continued to move on because this was what the majority of the Allies preferred. Theory was increasingly out of sync with practice.

The NRC summit held in November 2010 in Lisbon, during which Russia was represented by President Dmitry Medvedev (who, as we know today, was Putin's acting president), was a certain culmination of the relationship between NATO and Moscow. In a joint communique, the summit participants mentioned their intention to achieve a "strategic partnership", which already at that time many observers interpreted as the victory of optimism over a sober judgement of reality.

The years 2010-2014 were a period of difficult cooperation on credit, as it were, when NATO was not yet ready to openly admit that Russia's policy was highly divergent from the model and principles agreed in international documents. There was still hope that Moscow would not abandon the benefits of cooperation and would not cease to accept the rules of positive interaction.

However, it was as early as then that numerous pieces of evidence began to emerge suggesting that the authorities in the Kremlin had begun to prefer confrontation to cooperation with NATO. There was a clear toughening of anti-NATO rhetoric, including elements of disinformation. This mainly resulted from domestic political calculations—in the wake of protests held in the vicinity of the Kremlin walls and the blatantly rigged elections, the regime desperately needed to identify an external enemy and to use it in its narrative. Moscow began to reject even those projects it had previously promoted. This is what happened to the cooperation programme focused on the missile defence system. Literally a few weeks following the Lisbon summit, Putin began to publicly undermine the idea to combine the capabilities of NATO and Russia in order to respond to challenges posed by so-called rogue states.

Sometimes anti-NATO propaganda created problems for Moscow itself. Lured by the prospect of profits for Russian transport companies, Moscow proposed that NATO use the city of Ulyanovsk as its main transshipment hub for equipment transported from Afghanistan (NATO's combat operation in Afghanistan was slowly coming to an end). However, this proposal sparked protests in Russia. The Communists in particular viewed the location of Ulyanovsk as an insult to the memory of Lenin (who was born there). Having been exposed to many months of discourse focused on caricaturing NATO (at that time I was working as director of the NATO Information Office in Moscow and I assembled a pretty large collection of contemporary Russian caricatures depicting NATO), the Russian public felt confused by the public narrative—why did Russia want to cooperate with NATO if it was such a hostile organisation? To break the resistance, Putin had to personally join in the campaign to emphasise the benefits of Russia's agreement with NATO. He was supported by Deputy Prime Minister (and Russia's former ambassador to NATO) Dmitry Rogozin and other officials.

We all know what happened in 2014, so I will not go into the well-known details of the Russian operation to annex Crimea and the still ongoing operation to separate a portion of eastern Ukraine from the government in Kyiv. The system of constructive NATO-Russia relations was unable to withstand such a blatant violation of international standards.

In April 2014, the Allies took the only possible decision to freeze all civilian and military cooperation with Russia in the framework of the NRC. All joint projects were abandoned—for good it seems.

However, NATO decided not to denounce the Founding Act and maintained the formula of limited dialogue at the level of ambassadors. It should be noted, though, that the purpose of this formula was no longer to develop cooperation but to mitigate the risk of possible military incidents; this risk was mainly caused by Russia's lack of transparency in its military activities and by Moscow's increasingly frequent acts of provocation (one such act involving a violation of Turkey's airspace resulted in the downing of a Russian fighter jet).

As years passed, the value of the NRC ambassadorial meetings diminished despite major efforts on the part of the Allies. Russia's representatives (following the departure of Ambassador Alexander Grushko, Russia was only represented at the chargé d'affaires level) clearly lacked instructions for serious interaction and their speeches began to resemble a Russian TV propaganda narrative rather than a substantive debate. The last NRC meeting was held in 2019, and all subsequent requests from the North Atlantic Council regarding the organisation of a new meeting were repeatedly rejected by Russia.

The annual talks between the NATO Secretary General and Minister Sergey Lavrov (usually held on the side of UN summits) and the occasional conversations between NATO military representatives and the Russian Chief of Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, were focused on polemics and failed to bring any breakthrough. As regards the NRC dialogue, the ultimate nail in the coffin was Moscow's October 2021 decision which de facto severed Russia's relations with NATO and led to the closure or suspension of the Brussels-based Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO, as well as NATO structures in Moscow—the Military Liaison Mission and the Information Office.

Alongside these attempts to maintain some form of dialogue, the Allies were forced to work out a collective and strategic response to Russia's increasing threat to their security. This threat has been mounting for years and involves a recurring pattern of aggressive posturing and military activity (both open and hybrid) carried out in various locations: from Ukraine and Belarus to, among others, Syria and several African countries. Moscow no longer hesitates to directly carry out disinformation

operations in NATO countries, to attempt to influence the outcome of elections, to carry out physical attacks using chemical/biological weapons (the Skripal case), to perform cyberattacks or acts of sabotage in ammunition depots (e.g., in Czechia), etc. The list is publicly known and long, and new items are being added to it, such as the Lukashenko regime's use of migrants to carry out attacks on the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

To put it short, NATO's policy, approved at consecutive summits held in Newport, Warsaw, and Brussels, is referred to as 3D (defence, deterrence, and dialogue). Its basic elements mainly include forward redeployment (on a rotating basis, i.e., still in line with the pledge contained in the Founding Act) of Allied forces to NATO's Eastern and Southern flanks, as well as an increased number and intensity of exercises. Other aspects include long-term domestic reforms aimed at improving the defence capabilities of specific states (including the plan to reach the level of 2% of GDP to be spent on defence annually by 2024), cooperation with the European Union (e.g., in cyberdefence, combating disinformation, improved military mobility), as well as other actions aimed at boosting the resilience of key elements of public infrastructure in the event of a conflict.

Why have NATO-Russia relations reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War? In my opinion, the main causes of this situation are the negative evolution of Russia's policy and the not always correct and frequently belated reactions of the Allies to these shifts in Moscow's approach.

Let's start with Russia. It is beyond doubt that the profound change in Russia's political situation was and continues to be the most important factor impacting Moscow's attitude towards NATO. Putin and the people around him benefit from the autocratic system created (or one could even say perfected) over the years and are mainly guided by their own personal interests, which are not the same as the interests of Russia and its citizens.[1] For example, to be able to justify uncontrolled spending on the military and on security forces (which are indispensable for suppressing all forms of opposition), the government needs to create the image of

[1] Cf R. Pszczel, "Kto korzysta na polityce zagranicznej Rosji? Raczej nie zwykli Rosjanie – i co z tego wynika dla nas," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 2021, no. 2, pp. 117–127.

an enemy. Ukraine and Georgia are insufficient in this context, whereas NATO with its natural leader, i.e., the United States, is a perfect candidate for such an enemy.

What is equally important, regardless of the biographies of the individuals currently in power in Moscow (who frequently have their roots in the KGB and other similar institutions dating back to the Soviet era), Russian military officials play a key part in creating an atmosphere of distrust, or even hostility, towards the Western world. Most of them owe their positions to Putin and—what sounds very logical and relevant in this context—tend to look at the outside world in a manner similar to his. This tendency is based on the trauma associated with the temporary loss of prestige and feeling of shame that emerged when the Soviet Union lost its superpower status and turned into a failed empire overnight. For example, Chief of Staff General Gerasimov remembers well the infamous return of Soviet troops from the former East Germany and other Warsaw Pact countries 30 years ago (the Baltic Military District, in which he served at the time, was disbanded).

This is combined with a stubborn belief (which, unfortunately, was not only maintained but increased, stoked by various conspiracy theories cherished by the current propaganda and by the servile intellectuals supporting it) that a major conflict on the scale of a world war is just a matter of time. Due to the fact that it is Russian officers who have the final say when it comes to analysing external security threats, it is no wonder that the demonisation of NATO is a perfect strategy connecting the crackdown on the opposition in Russia (the internal enemy) with the attack on the West's collective security system, which continues to be accused of wanting to destroy Russia (the external enemy).

Against the backdrop of such a worldview, the past years of Russia's dialogue and cooperation with NATO seem to look like a form of camouflage. Until the end of the 2000s, Moscow simply felt too weak to openly confront NATO. The operation in Georgia in 2008 revealed numerous deficiencies in the Russian command and reconnaissance system, communications, logistics, and even equipment (despite the fact that it almost resulted in Russian troops entering Tbilisi). After more than 20 years of reforms and huge armaments spending, the Kremlin finally felt that it had at its disposal armed forces and other instruments

(disinformation, political corruption, energy blackmail, etc.), which enable it to openly throw down the gauntlet to the West.

When I was working in Russia in 2010-2015, I had an opportunity to take a close look at the process of the Russian government moving away from its attempts to conduct foreign policy using traditional methods. Russia Today, a TV channel initially intended to promote a positive image of Russia, was soon transformed into RT (an element of the Rossiya Segodnya conglomerate), a disinformation centre inciting hatred towards other countries.

Just like other people, I was shocked by the cowardly assassination of the charismatic Boris Nemtsov—it was a bloody example of the steps that those in power were ready to take to prevent the development of democracy. The fate of the poisoned Alexei Navalny and other persecuted opposition leaders (most of whom are now either in prison or in exile) says everything about Russia's political realities.

I was saddened to observe the process of the Russian MFA, which until then had been a professional institution, transforming into the regime's propaganda mouthpiece. Its latest publication, which is a clumsy attempt to imitate NATO's website focused on debunking Russia's disinformation myths targeting the Alliance, is simply pitiful.[2]

I was sorry to sense the mounting fear of continued cooperation with the NATO Information Office in Moscow, combined with forced hypocrisy on the part of many Russian experts and professional think-tanks dealing with international security issues. With growing disbelief and fear for the future of Russian society, I watched the increasing militarisation of education and public life (distortion of history in textbooks, increasingly frequent military parades, glorification of the brutality of Russian security forces and later of the National Guard etc.).

All this resulted from the policy of closing ranks and fooling society into believing that Russia is strong and therefore it can regain its former territories by force (vide "Crimea is ours"), that it is ready to continue playing for the highest stake in the international arena and its most preferred goal is to undermine NATO.

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[2] *Russia–NATO: Facts and Myths, Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO,* https://missiontonato.mid.ru.

NATO's intention to continue cooperation and dialogue with Russia was not its main mistake. Its goals and motivations were (and continue to be) reasonable—they were focused on building a good future and were based on a sincere conviction that the "new Russia" should behave in a rational manner. Instead of spending vast sums on offensive weapon systems and on costly operations in Ukraine or Syria, and instead of supporting dictators on several continents, the authorities in Moscow should tackle widespread poverty (e.g., to survive, most pensioners have to work because their pensions are insufficient, many families cannot afford to cover the cost of university education for their children), attract investments to modernise the country, diversify the economy, fight endemic corruption, etc. If Russia had favourable relations with its neighbours and played a constructive part in international relations, this would benefit the country's development. Effective cooperation with NATO, which is what the Allies were always committed to, would help Russia to improve its security. For example, by jointly combating terrorism, contributing to relief operations following natural and industrial disasters, taking part in the stabilisation of regions that are important to Russia. It's logical, isn't it?

Unfortunately, for many years the Kremlin has followed a different logic. Many Allies simply refused to accept this fact despite clear indications. The year 2008 was the turning point—NATO should have offered a tougher response to Russia's aggression against Georgia. It should not have allowed the Russian authorities to feel that the use of military force to de facto occupy foreign territory could go unpunished and be successful. NATO's minimum response should have been to freeze cooperation, to have sanctions imposed, and to actively condemn the violation of international law. However, the opposite happened. The consequences are now evident and Ukraine is the best example.

The democratic community is always experiencing problems when trying to develop constructive relations with autocratic states. The two sides have a different perception of specific matters, and a different understanding of the value of procedures, agreements and definitions of national interests. If we add to this a certain desire for comfort, the intention to do business with Moscow, poor knowledge of contemporary Russia (former Sovietologists have now retired...), the non-existent concern in many NATO states about the threat posed by Moscow's actions

or even a certain paternalism towards Eastern European countries, it is no wonder that for years the option of putting the problem off prevailed.

One political problem hindering NATO's necessary adaptation to the new reality, in which Russia defines itself as an antagonist rather than as a partner, involves a stubborn desire on the part of many Allies (it is particularly strong in Germany and in southern Europe) to repeatedly attempt to resume dialogue with Russia. They believe that this dialogue should be continued at any cost, regardless of the consequences for NATO's unity. For many years, these attempts have been fated to fail due to the fact that the Kremlin is only interested in obtaining concessions from NATO, rather than in an open exchange of views. Moscow views NATO's exaggerated readiness to resume dialogue not as a sign of good intentions but as NATO's weakness, which in turn spurs Russia to behave in an even more provocative manner.

Difficulties with managing several issues at the same time are another aspect that should not be underestimated. Each NATO country is struggling with economic problems, social challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change. If it were possible, many Allies would prefer not to view Russia's actions as a priority in the context of their security challenges. After all, there are other problems such as China's rising power and the persistent terrorist threat, as well as NATO's internal weaknesses related, for example, to former U.S. President Trump questioning NATO's role, and other tensions between Allies that require attention and diplomatic efforts. All this creates a picture that is very favourable from the Kremlin's point of view, because Moscow would welcome a weakened NATO that is not always willing to respond to the Russian threat the way it did during the Cold War.

However, eventually, NATO—even if somewhat weakened—has reached the point at which it decided to confront the problem called Russia. We found ourselves in a situation of unwanted confrontation. However, the difference is that now, once Putin's Russia has revealed its true face, it is considerably harder for the Allies to mobilise the political will and the necessary resources (e.g., regarding defence spending) to confront it effectively. A lot of time has been lost. It is true that the potential (i.e., the military, technological, and especially the economic potential) of the 30 NATO members significantly exceeds that of the Russian Federation. In numerous aspects, Russia can be compared with

some of the Third World countries, although over the years of its formal cooperation with NATO it has built a highly dangerous and offensive arsenal of means (including military, information, energy-related means), which today it can apply to quite effectively blackmail various NATO capitals. In other words, NATO's political will and unity are the key to neutralising Russia's destructive role.

WHAT ABOUT POLAND?

For Poland, genuine cooperation and dialogue between NATO and Russia do not pose any threat of their own. On the contrary, successful implementation of the partnership project with Russia would be most beneficial to countries like Poland, i.e., Russia's near neighbours shouldering the burden of bad historical experiences and fearing that the Russian sphere of influence in the region may be restored.

However, to measure this success one would need to rely on objective facts and not on the intention to see the image of Russia as it should be, rather than as it really is today. The rift between reality and wishful thinking has resulted in a dangerous geopolitical situation affecting NATO's current relations with Russia, and as a frontline state Poland is particularly vulnerable to this threat.

Today, partnership is ruled out—it is Russia that does not want one and is pushing for controlled confrontation. The build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders (a manoeuvre that has been ongoing since last spring) and Moscow's threats against Kyiv are contributing to the emergence of a new highly dangerous episode in Europe's history. The essence of Putin's demands or rather blackmail—formally expressed by the Russian Foreign Ministry in December[3]—involves expecting the politically impossible from NATO. Moscow is provocatively demanding, for example, that the decision regarding the open-door policy for Ukraine and Georgia (made at the Bucharest summit) be annulled, and that unilateral disarmament of neighbouring states, including Poland, be carried out.

[3] *Zayavlene MID Rossii o dialoge s SShA i drugimi stranami Zapada otnositelno vyrabotki garantiy bezopasnosti, Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoi Federacii*, 10 December 2021, https://archive.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4991520.

These demands cannot be met and the Kremlin's game indicates that Putin is raising the stakes with each passing week. His aim is to incapacitate not only Ukraine but also NATO as a whole. Paradoxically, Putin fears that time is not working in his favour. Russia is plunging into social and economic stagnation, its revenues from the sale of non-renewable energy sources will not be eternal, and in its autocratic system no modernisation alternatives are in sight. As a leader convinced of his prominent role in history, the resident of the Kremlin is thinking of making great gains before he leaves office. These include regaining control of Ukraine and other parts of the former empire and dismantling the strategic institutions of the Western world. In implementing this project, his greatest assets are: the ruthless pursuit of his goal and his strong armed forces modernised over the years of sham cooperation with NATO. At present, what Moscow has at its disposal are major financial reserves and a whole array of instruments to put pressure on the outside world. This spells a dangerous prospect. Especially for the countries located on NATO's Eastern Flank.

To me, it is beyond doubt that NATO has no time to lose to contain an increasingly aggressive Russia. The new Strategic Concept should openly name Russia as an enemy state, with all the political and practical consequences of this move.

In this difficult period, Poland and other states of the region need to work particularly hard to convince all Allies, including those who view dialogue with Russia as a goal in itself, that maintaining NATO's unity is the best method for preventing the situation in which unwanted confrontation may turn into a genuine conflict. This would be a truly tragic end to NATO-Russia relations whose beginnings 30 years ago did not spell such outcomes. Contrary to the opening sentence of this analysis, Václav Havel was probably right when he said that "politics is not the art of the possible, but the art of the impossible". The Allies need to master this art better than Russia.