

# **Coping with Complexity in the Euro-Atlantic Community and Beyond**

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**Coping with Complexity in the Euro-Atlantic Community and Beyond:  
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This Riga Conference companion volume offers reflections on the complex developments and future of the broader Trans-Atlantic area. It focuses on four key themes: security in the Euro-Atlantic community and beyond, Russia-West relations, European order and economic sustainability, and the neighbourhood countries and beyond.

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# THE WEST AND RUSSIA: DESPERATION AND TUNNEL VISION IN CONTEMPORARY WARFARE

## **Gunda Reire**

*Tunnel vision:*

*a condition in which you can see things that are  
straight ahead of you but not to the side*

*/Merriam Webster Dictionary/*

It is complexity fatigue that leads to simplification, groupthink, desperation and a tendency to think only about one thing while ignoring everything else. This wide-spread psychological effect is so pervasive that it even has its tradition in the decision-making of international politics.

The post-Cold War era has ended, but a new name for the existing international setting has not yet been invented. One might think that the main factor of change in the current international environment is the rise of Russia's military performance. This is only partly true, because the methods and tools of Russia's international behaviour have also significantly altered. What we see are fruitless peace efforts, the unwrapping of Russia's "cherished concept of multipolarity at the expense of Western-led multilateralism",<sup>1</sup> domestic tensions in the West and overwhelming uncertainty.

As far back as 1928, Bernays wrote that "human desires are the steam which makes the social mechanism work".<sup>2</sup> And there is only one strong desire if we look at the course of action of the European

Union, NATO, the US and other Western partners and institutions with regard to the most challenging crisis in Ukraine and Syria nowadays – that of achieving peace. Generally, there should not be any objections against such a goal. However, Russia’s active engagement in these crises cannot be regarded as a factor that facilitates a solution. The desire of the West for peace in Ukraine and Syria is so visible and, at the same time, so desperate that it becomes an easy target for political manipulation. Already before the Second World War, in his famous book “Propaganda Technique in the World War”, Lasswell wrote that “peace has come to be regarded as the normal state of society, and not war”.<sup>3</sup> In Russia’s performance, anti-war propaganda has become a war propaganda tool. The holding out of important decisions and Russia’s inconsistent alliances lead the West into deeper obscurity and a tendency to stick to empty promises and unachievable future cooperation mechanisms.

### **COALITION DELIRIUM**

The time when Russia “felt ignored as a great power in Europe and even more as a (resurgent) superpower”<sup>4</sup> has passed. Russia has regained its place in international relations, and its number one tool for securing its place at the table is the creation of uncertainty and deadlocks.

Namely, in the previous two decades, Russia nourished the illusion that it could become a trusted partner with the West. A great deal of hope was put on endless cooperation mechanisms with Russia, including the NATO-Russia Council,<sup>5</sup> which still operates, although all the cooperation programmes have been discontinued, and the EU-Russia strategic partnership of 2011,<sup>6</sup> which lost its value when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Needless to say, “more can be won by illusion than by coercion”.<sup>7</sup>

Now, after the annexation of Crimea, Russia is playing a slightly different game. It spreads contradictory propaganda messages and comes forward with crisis solution mechanisms and then violates them. One day Russia is a friend of the West, ready to cooperate,

but another day – a foe, who announces that the proposal to hold Ukraine peace negotiations in the so-called Normandy format is now “pointless”<sup>8</sup> and that Western nations are responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians at the hands of Syrian President Assad’s forces during the five-year civil war.<sup>9</sup> Such rapidly changing, unfixed international roles are something new for the Western nations, at least in terms of collective security. In turn, it would be hasty to declare that Russia had ever forgotten about the gifts of the balance of power, political realism, geopolitics and ideological buffer zones of influence.

In conventional crises and wars, there are clear lines between allies, enemies and neutrals. Nevertheless, and not without reason, we assess the current situation as “hybrid”; this is also reflected in the classic understanding of coalitions. With regard to hostile situations, propaganda has “four major objectives: (1) To mobilize hatred against the enemy; (2) To preserve the friendship of allies; (3) To preserve the friendship and, if possible, to procure the co-operation of neutrals; (4) To demoralize the enemy”.<sup>10</sup> This is the classic, yet out-dated understanding of war coalitions. Nevertheless, under the conditions of “hybrid” threats, the West still seems to stick to it.

Meanwhile, with the help of its political and psychological propaganda, Russia tears down the classic understanding of blocs and alliances in international relations and splits Europe by allocating different roles to the countries, depending on their behaviour and contextual situation. So, for example, France was depicted as a neutral country, leaning towards being an ally of Russia when France launched air strikes in Syria.<sup>11</sup> It must be reminded that these came after the deadly terrorist attack on Paris, which ISIL claimed responsibility for. Thus, Russia signalled that it appreciated France’s course of action in Syria, whilst accusing the US of being responsible for the Paris terrorist attacks, because they “might never have happened if the US had “listened” to officials who opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq”.<sup>12</sup> The same country – France – was addressed as an enemy a few months before this event, when Russia began its air strikes in Syria against opponents of the Syrian regime in order to hit rebel controlled areas in the Homs and Hama provinces.<sup>13</sup>

The same pattern of strategic signalling can be observed with regard to the US, which is generally depicted as an enemy in Russia's propaganda. When Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, announced Russia's readiness to help the US and the Free Syrian Army, the US was pictured as a neutral country.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Russia sent a signal that those who consider Assad's government as an ally worth cooperating with are more likely to hope for an improvement in relations with Russia and to facilitate resolution of the crisis, which the US wishes so desperately.

Such signalling creates enormous ambiguity in international relations because it has "multiple, often competing, meanings, or [...] can have multiple possible outcomes".<sup>15</sup> In turn, ambiguity drastically increases the amount of information and the complexity of analysis and decision-making in the situation. A classical cognitive strategy for dealing with ambiguity is to find the so-called "shortcuts" in order to simplify the decision-making process and minimise the amount of information to be analysed. Under such conditions, "tunnel vision" switches on, which is characterised by considering only part of a situation and holding a single opinion, rather than having a more general understanding.<sup>16</sup>

This leads to the conclusion that temptation of belonging to the "peace-loving" party of the conflict is a powerful tool in international relations and that flattery (or the "carrots and sticks" strategy) works. This summer, the Obama administration made a "cognitive shortcut" to prevent being out-grouped, and proposed a new cooperation agreement on Syria to the Russian government. The agreement foresees that the militaries of both countries "would cooperate at an unprecedented level, something the Russians have sought for a long time".<sup>17</sup> Although there are signs that Putin has neither the intention and willingness nor the ability to put heavy pressure on Assad, Obama's desire to leave a significant mark on the history of international relations was evidently so desperate that he followed Russia's rules of bargaining in this coalition game. This logically leads to the next trap – accepting others' solutions as one's own.

## **MANIPULATION BY SUGGESTING THE OUTCOME OF A CRISIS**

One of the most effective tools of configuring the behaviour of another party is “the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, this is a “transmission of suggestions to the enemy”,<sup>19</sup> i.e. ways and means of pushing the other party to accept the imposed course of action as its own. It is possible to observe this modern warfare tool in action in both Ukraine’s and Syria’s conflicts.

When Russia began its air strikes in Syria, against the opponents of the Syrian regime, it was pictured in Russia’s propaganda as a game-changer, not only because “The West failed in fighting ISIL, let Russia in”<sup>20</sup> but also because there is “no room for scepticism - Russia and the West share the same goal”.<sup>21</sup> Russia’s propaganda channels were flooded with news on the growing signs that the Western governments had started to change their minds about their role and the future of Assad’s government in Syria. The Western strategy towards Syria had really changed - it was a shift from “evil Assad” to the readiness to sit at the table with Assad’s government and negotiate anti-terrorism issues. This change in political attitude was not accidental; in fact, Russia’s propaganda had been working towards this for several months. The main line was to convince the US and the West that the anti-ISIL coalition without Russia is unable to be operational, that the US is responsible for the conflict in Syria and particularly the rise of ISIL,<sup>22</sup> and that the key to the solution of the crisis is in the hands of Russia. This line of the strategic demoralisation of the West became crystal clear when Putin addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, during the general debate of the 70th session. Speaking about the violent crisis in Syria, he pointed to the Western countries and emphasised that “rather than bringing about reforms, an aggressive foreign interference has resulted in the flagrant destruction of national institutions and the lifestyle itself. Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we received violence, poverty and a social disaster. [...] I cannot help asking those who have caused this situation: do you

realise now what you have done?”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the old tool of demoralising the enemy was put into play: “the keynote in the preliminary spade work is the unceasing refrain: your cause is hopeless. Your blood has been spilt in vain”.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, the illusions of a possible victory and the crisis being solved hand-in-hand with Russia are being nourished. With regard to the illusion of victory, Lasswell spoke about “the close connection between the strong and the good”<sup>25</sup> and the primitive habit of thought that manifests itself in the conviction: “If we win, God is on our side. If we lose, God may have been on the other side”.<sup>26</sup> Not to mention the Russian-speaking propaganda channels, CNN also aired news about “a game-changing two weeks in Syria,”<sup>27</sup> when Russia launched its first missiles in Syria and announced stepping up its bombing campaign against ISIL. Although analysts had already pointed out at the time that many of the air strikes hit western Syrian areas, where there is no ISIL presence, and thus possibly targeting the oppositional forces, the hope for conflict resolution took precedence over analysis of the dynamic and interactive information and situation. Russia promoted the illusion that the resolution of the crisis in Syria depends on Russia’s involvement, and the West became too receptive to this illusory vision.

By hiding behind the anti-ISIL flag, and giving the West the hope for conflict resolution, Russia strengthens its positions in the Middle East and secures the positions of Assad’s government. The so-called Syrian campaign has paved the way for Putin’s wider geopolitical goals. Russia has inspired the Western illusion that it can play a crucial role in Syria’s refugee crisis, violent conflict and anti-terrorism campaign. By pretending to be an ally of the West, in reality, Russia is weakening and dividing the European Union and NATO.

With regard to Ukraine, Russia has one main strategic goal – to prevent Ukraine’s transformation into becoming part of the external border of NATO and the EU. The strategy that has been chosen for achieving this goal is the promotion of the narrative of Ukraine as a failed state and an unreliable partner. Step by step,

Russia has used various information manipulation techniques<sup>28</sup> to convince the West about the disadvantages of returning Donbass and Crimea to Ukraine and the necessity, in the name of peace and prosperity, to grant a special status to these occupied territories. Although world leaders initially regard these with “cautious optimism”, the Minsk agreements give a very disturbing signal to the international community.<sup>29</sup> It could be argued that Putin was the actual winner of the Minsk II peace package. Namely, “territory gained by the rebels in violation of Minsk I appears to be conceded; there is no deadline for the pulling out of Russian regular troops and mercenary forces; Kiev must pay the costs of the occupied territory; and the self-appointed stooges of the Kremlin, who call themselves the leaders of the self-proclaimed “people’s republics”, have gained recognition and a say in constitutional change”.<sup>30</sup>

Ukraine is another source of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity in current international relations. Nevertheless, the recent months have indicated a significant change in the Western-Russian dialogue with regard to Ukraine. Namely, President Putin accused Ukraine of terrorism, as two Russian servicemen were killed in Crimea in attacks in early August 2015. This time, the turning point was not Putin’s announcement that peace talks under the Normandy forum are pointless; this step was predictable. The Western response was what had changed. Instead of trying to launch another type of peace talks, Western leaders showed unseen stamina and cancelled the planned trilateral meeting between Putin, Merkel and Hollande on Ukraine, during the G20 meeting in Hangzhou. Therefore, Putin’s plan to arrange the second Yalta – where great powers decide the fate of another nation, which has not been invited – fell apart.

It is obvious that the image manufactured by Russia of Ukraine as a terrorist and failed state went too far, and this caused the reaction of Western leaders to push back. The only unclear question is whether it is necessary to wait for other precedents of a level like this in order to avoid following the rules of the game as dictated by Russia.

It must be emphasised that the recent spirit of the G20 is promising, because, two years ago in Brisbane, Western leaders were also

united in their attitude towards Russia's aggression on Ukraine. After the meeting, the British Prime Minister, Cameron, said: "If Russia continues to destabilise Ukraine, there will be further sanctions",<sup>31</sup> but US President, Obama, announced that "Russia had failed, in spirit and letter, to adhere to the Minsk agreement signed in September" and that "Russia would remain isolated, if it continued to violate international law and to fund and arm rebels fighting its proxy war inside Ukrainian territory".<sup>32</sup> Two years ago, Western leaders found Russia's "pressure point" – economic sanctions. This, without a doubt, is a painful spot regardless of the propaganda spread by Russia about the domestic and international insignificance of sanctions.

### **EXITING RELATIONSHIP DEADLOCK**

There are three main levels of hostile propaganda in modern warfare that aim to gain control over decision-making: physical, affective and cognitive. Taken together, real or perceived physical threats, a combination of fear, anger and other destructive emotions and cognitive overwhelming are typically a very effective mixture. "Cognitively, this kind of emergency can lead to a complexity-reduction through drastic simplification. This works particularly well in complex situations where there are a number of interrelated factors at work, and it is not easy to untangle all the varied ramifications of the process at work".<sup>33</sup>

Strategic demoralisation, and the policy executed by Russia towards Ukraine and Syria, present evidence that it is in Russia's interests to sustain a frozen conflict in Ukraine and a deadlock in Syria. Whilst the West desperately seeks a peaceful resolution, Russia aspires to maintain a standstill, "a position in which it is impossible to proceed or act".<sup>34</sup> Increased ambiguity challenges the multilateralism of the West and leads to the possibility of tunnel vision, and the simplification of the course of action, but Russia's importance in international negotiations ascends.

The causes of deadlocks are different: bluffing and lying

negotiators, certain types of balances of power, diversities of the cultural patterns of parties, parties that facilitate or deter agreement, etc.<sup>35</sup> Although these factors increase complexity, uncertainty, an overwhelming amount of information and heavy decision-making, there are some antidotes for overcoming such situations. The Western countries' desire for peace in Ukraine and Syria is humanistic and logical but, nevertheless, fruitless because of restricted vision and the pressure of time.

Firstly, the threshold of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty must be elevated. An understanding and knowledge about Russia's contemporary warfare strategy and tactics is important in order to avoid living in pre-existing frames of analysis, to avoid looking for easy and quick solutions, to avoid desiring simple and clear rules, and to be more open to dynamic changes in international relations. Secondly, emphasis should be put on multilateral negotiations, and a moratorium should be placed on bilateral or regional negotiations where some important or involved parties are not present. As the recent G20 meeting illustrates, such an approach is both possible and powerful.

Thirdly, under the circumstances of uncertainty, more effective communication and mechanisms for monitoring and assessing the situation are needed. This involves creative and multi-dimensional solutions, independent judgement and the ability to more effectively organise existing information and knowledge.

Fourthly, as recent years show, even deadlocks that are related to the balance of power can be swayed by establishing economic and diplomatic countermeasures, such as economic sanctions and coalitions of like-minded parties.

Finally, it is crucial for the West to maintain the G20 spirit in international diplomacy at large and to stand shoulder to shoulder in both minor and major crises. In this way, one of the most hazardous traps of international decision-making – the polythink syndrome – could be avoided. Coordination and united efforts in the hybrid warfare are crucial. This is the reason why unity is one of the main targets of hostile propaganda.

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