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# Security Review

Giorgi Bilanishvili

**The Topic of Russia in the Munich Security Conference Reports**

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## Introduction

The Munich Security Conference has long been considered to be one of the most important forums where politicians and experts from various countries discuss issues regarding international politics and security. It was first held in 1963; however, its scale and format at that time were much different from what they are today.<sup>1</sup>

At first, the Munich Security Conference was considered to be an event where representatives of West Germany met their allies from the US and other NATO member states. That is why to this day it is informally referred to as a gathering of the Trans-Atlantic family. Only after the end of the Cold War was the decision made to invite Russia, Eastern European states and others to the conference.

In recent years the practice of publishing a security report before the opening of the Munich Security Conference has been established. The first Report was published in 2015 and a new one has been published annually ever since. The Report discusses key issues of international security and main trends in the contemporary world which, in a way, also defines the Conference.

## The Russian Federation in the Munich Security Reports

The Munich Security Reports begin with an overview of the most important current topics in international politics. This overview partly sets the tone for the Report itself as well as the Munich Security Conference in general. Then comes the “actors” chapter where several countries and sometimes organizations (such as NATO, the EU, the Islamic State) are reviewed separately.<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that from the six editions of the Munich Security Report published up until now, four of them featured Russia in the “actors” chapter as a separate subsection. The following part of the Report is dedicated to problematic regions where three-to-four regions are covered in separate subsections. And finally, the Report also discusses a large variety of issues such as combating terrorism, climate security, disinformation, cybersecurity, transnational criminal organizations, technologies, innovations and so on.

The first Munich Security Report published in 2015 dedicated its attention to the Russian intervention in Ukraine. Despite the important nature of Russian interference in Ukraine, the tone of the Report towards Russia is mild and assessments are mostly neutral. It is noteworthy that terms such as aggression and annexation are almost not used at all.

- Because of Ukraine, Russia should be considered more as a destabilizer of international security and stability than its facilitator (Munich Security Report, Collapsing Order, Reluctant Guardians - p. 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Data collected from the Munich Security Conference website. <https://securityconference.org/en/about-us/history/>

<sup>2</sup> The largest number of actors, six, was reviewed in the first 2015 *Munich Security Report* while the smallest number, three, was addressed in 2017.

- After the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine and President Putin's subsequent position that Russia must protect Russian-speaking populations everywhere, questions should be asked by NATO member states whether they are ready to protect themselves from such a threat (p. 18).
- Does confrontation between the West and Russia mean that Russia will fundamentally alter its foreign policy and start searching for partners elsewhere instead of Europe? (p. 20).
- By its very nature, hybrid war utilizes various instruments. Despite the fact that the Russian side denied interference in Ukraine, it was regularly sending informal paramilitary groups, spreading propaganda, causing destabilization on the ground, amassing military forces on the Ukrainian border and conducting active diplomacy aiming to deny Russian intervention in Ukraine (p. 34).

In the 2016 Report, apart from the issue of Ukraine, Russian intervention in Syria was also one of the major topics. Therefore, even more attention was paid to Russia in this edition of the Report. Russia's forceful actions designed to boost its influence in international politics were partially noted, stating that such actions increased the risks of new confrontations.

- Talk about the US falling back is probably excessive; however, in terms of two very important conflicts in the world today – Ukraine and Syria, the United States plays less of an active role. There was an expectation that the involvement of the US and its European allies would further worsen the conflict. In reality, the opposite has happened – given the non-involvement of the aforementioned states, the Syrian civil war was further aggravated, creating a fertile ground for Russian military intervention (Munich Security Report 2016, Boundless Crises, Reckless Spoilers, Helpless Guardians, p. 5).
- The goal of the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine was to influence the future of Ukraine by using force. And now, through its military intervention in Syria, Moscow has shown the world that the resolution of the conflict in Syria must happen in accordance with its interests; at the same time, intervention in Syria helped Moscow break out of isolation which it was experiencing due to Ukraine (p. 16).
- Analysis shows that the majority of Russia's military strikes in Syria are directed not against the Islamic State controlled territory but against the positions of the Syrian opposition (p. 34).
- Increasingly frequent military exercises, minor incidents between NATO and Russian jets and submarines and nuclear threats indicate that the Cold War era scenario has come back to Europe. Given the absence of crisis management mechanisms, there is an actual risk of escalation (p. 24).

The 2017 Report still featured Russian activities in Ukraine and Syria as the main topic. At the same time, it also focused on Russian policies in the Arctic and Moscow's interference in the political life of Western states, including through propaganda, disinformation and the so-called

fake news. Overall, the Report clearly underlines that Russia has become even more active against the West for which it successfully employs hybrid war tactics.

- Russia became involved in the Syrian conflict when the Assad regime was facing defeat. It claimed that it was fighting against the Islamic State, yet kept conducting combat operations against the opposition forces. According to the assessment of human rights defenders, hospitals were regularly targeted and bombarded (Munich Security Report 2017, Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order? p. 10).
- In Ukraine, Russia violated several principles of European security. However, the sanctions imposed against it might be eased, despite the fact that there is no progress in terms of the fulfillment of the Minsk Agreement (p. 10).
- Russia's military activity in the Arctic has increased markedly in recent years. Moscow claims that its actions are moderate and defensive in nature; however, distrust towards these statements is growing in the West (p. 38).
- Russia has proven that it can utilize the weaknesses of open societies in favor of its interests and for putting democratic institutions under question. In January 2017, the US intelligence community published a report which says that it is highly probable that President Putin ordered the launch of a campaign to influence the 2016 US presidential elections (p. 42).
- Populist movements in European states are using the so-called alternative media which regularly spreads messages favorable to the Kremlin or the so-called fake news. It seems that this has had certain results. According to August 2016 polls in Germany, 30% of those surveyed supported the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) while 31% of left-wing voters had more trust towards Vladimir Putin than towards Angela Merkel (p. 42).

The 2018 Report often mentions China and Russia together as countries that have common, anti-Western and specifically anti-US views. It is also stated that Russia's aspiration to become a great power in international politics is to some extent bringing the desired result; however, its domestic weaknesses make long-term success in this regard questionable.

- It is becoming clearer that countries such as China and Russia do not wish to cooperate and have very different views of international order. At the very least, they will attempt to establish their own order which they see as the creation of spheres of influence (p. 9).
- The new US National Security Strategy that was published in December 2017 views China and Russia as autocratic adversaries (p. 19).
- The fundamental conflict between the West and Russia, which is the basis of the current crisis, remains unresolved. Russia aspires to establish a post-Western world order as Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, stated at the 2017 Munich Security Conference (p. 28).

- According to December 2017 polls, 72% of the Russian population considers their country to be a great power which is 31% higher than in 1999. The perception of growing Russian power is certainly not groundless as during the past years Moscow has managed to boost its regional and global influence (p. 28).
- The long-term perspective of Russian foreign policy is less clear. Domestic factors, especially the economy, limit Russia's international influence (p. 28).

Much like the previous year's Report, the 2019 Munich Security Report also underlines that China and Russia continue partnering against the West. At the same time, it also points out that in a long-term perspective, China's development prospects are much clearer than those of Russia. The Report also focuses on the threats of Russian propaganda. A separate chapter is dedicated to the problems faced by the Eastern Partnership states where the focus is on Russian pressure.

- China is a more serious challenge for the US in a long-term perspective; however, Russia is a more proximate and immediate threat. That said, unlike China, Moscow's prospects as a long-term geopolitical adversary for the US do not seem promising (Munich Security Report 2019, The Great Puzzle: Who Will Pick Up the Pieces? p. 8).
- European states are also forced to address joint challenges posed by China and Russia, including those in the West Balkans. Russia is a traditional actor in this region while China is a relative newcomer. NATO and the EU are fighting against Russian propaganda shoulder to shoulder. At the same time, the EU has started implementing new projects connecting countries in order to compete with China (p. 32).
- More recent examples of increased Russian efforts headed by Vladimir Putin include the Skripal Case, the activation of undermining cyber activities, attempts of interfering in the democratic elections of various states and incidents taking place against the Ukrainians in the Kerch Strait (p. 9).
- Several years ago, the Russian government started creating new military capabilities, including land-based aerial missiles which, according to the assessment of the US and other NATO members, violates the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (p. 9).
- The geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia has the most dramatic influence on the states that end up in the middle of it. Specifically, these include Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. At this stage, approximation between Russia and the West is not very likely. Therefore, pressure on the aforementioned middle countries will remain as well (p. 36).

### **Russia in the 2020 Security Report**

The main topic of the 2020 Report was the weakening of the West on the international arena. A new term was coined in the Report title – Westlessness, and later the overview of the weakening of Western positions in international politics was also put under the same title. It was precisely

this new term that set the tone for various subsequent publications and assessments dedicated to the Munich Security Conference.

In their already existing assessments on this topic, representatives of Russian expert circles almost unanimously pointed out that the weakening of the West has already taken place. They said that the Munich Security Conference Report was simply an admission of this fact.

It must be pointed out that Russian political elites consider the Munich Security Conference to be one of the opportunities to popularize the Russian view of international politics. With this aim and already for the second year in a row, a roundtable entitled the Priorities of Russian Foreign Policy in the Era of Confrontation between Leading States has been held in terms of the Munich Security Conference. The organizers of the roundtable discussion are Yevgeny Primakov of the National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Primakov Readings forum (Примаковские чтения).<sup>3</sup>

When speaking about Russia's political interests, it should also be pointed out that this year the Munich Security Conference website published the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group's (EASLG) plan on the resolution of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> This plan received rather harshly critical assessments as some of its formulations are in accordance with Russian interests. The plan paints the situation in Eastern Ukraine as a domestic Ukrainian problem while Moscow is distanced from the conflict. One of the harshest and most critical statements with regard to this plan was made by the Atlantic Council, signed by 29 former diplomats, public servants and experts.<sup>5</sup>

As for the topic of Russia in the 2020 Security Report itself, the title of the subsection dedicated to Russia – Russia: Putemkin's State, is rather noteworthy, as it clearly underlines Russia's main characteristic – excessive activity in international politics despite its unfavorable domestic political and social-economic situation.

Apart from this, it must also be underscored that the 2020 Report describes the growing partnership between China and Russia even more clearly, yet considers Russia to be the junior partner in this cooperation. In several places, the Report also mentions Iran together with China and Russia which underlined the potential of increased cooperation between these states. Also,

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<sup>3</sup> „Международный круглый стол ИМЭМО РАН и форума «Примаковские чтения» на Мюнхенской конференции по безопасности 2020.“ [https://www.imemo.ru/index.php?page\\_id=502&id=5655](https://www.imemo.ru/index.php?page_id=502&id=5655)

<sup>4</sup> “Twelve Steps Toward Greater Security in Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic Region,” [https://securityconference.org/assets/02\\_Dokumente/03\\_Materialien/EASLG\\_Statement\\_Ukraine\\_FINAL.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/03_Materialien/EASLG_Statement_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> “Flawed Peace Plan for Ukraine Doesn't Pass Muster,” <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/flawed-peace-plan-for-ukraine-doesnt-pass-muster/>

the 2020 Report speaks about Russia's destructive actions, including those directed against the West.

- Moscow's approximation with Beijing is especially important. Moscow has renewed arms trade with China and has invited it to participate in the Vostok-2018 military exercises, itself joining the July 2019 Chinese aviation patrol of the East China Sea (Munich Security Report 2020, Westlessness, p. 34).
- Russia and China are cooperating quite closely within the UN Security Council. China often supports Russia's positions, including using its veto power together with Russia to block the Security Council resolutions regarding Syria (p. 13).
- The first joint maritime exercises conducted by China, Russia and Iran in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman is a message to the United States and the world (p. 13).
- The experience of relations with China, Russia and Iran confirms that the formulation of the trans-Atlantic or wider Western approach will remain as the main challenge in the future as well (p. 18).
- The partnership between Russia and China is still mostly dependent on the close relations between the leaders of these two countries – Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. It should also be noted that parallel to the close partnership, there is a great asymmetry in trade-commercial relations between China and Russia and this is not only true of this one field. This asymmetry is becoming more and more pronounced in the military field as well as in the fields of space, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. If we also take into account that China is boosting its influence in Russia's far east and Central Asia, it becomes probable that Chinese-Russian relations will be facing severe challenges (p. 34).
- While the West remains rather inert with relatively limited capabilities, Russia has managed to turn itself into an actor that cannot be ignored (p. 13).
- Given the background of a prolonged crisis in relations between the West and Russia, the Kremlin has intensified its connections in various parts of the world, including Latin America, the Middle East and Africa (p. 34).
- Moscow has been competing in a higher weight category than its own for a long time and yet it still managed to achieve substantial success in 2019. Despite making no serious corrections in its foreign policy, Russia has restored its powers in the Council of Europe; a NATO member state – Turkey, has received an S-400 air defense system and Moscow's status as a mediator in the Middle East has been strengthened (p. 34).
- Russia continues destabilizing Ukraine, threatening nuclear stability, is discrediting and attempting to harm Western liberal institutions and values while also being suspected of assassinations of various individuals in foreign countries. Given all of this, many consider that Macron's initiatives about resetting relations with Russia are misplaced (p. 34).



- Many Europeans remain skeptical about whether severe confrontation with Russia is in European interests. From time to time politicians still discuss the gradual weakening of the sanctions against Russia (p. 18).
- Some in Europe believe that despite the fact that Russia cannot be a stable political partner, it could still be seen as a reliable economic partner which strengthens arguments in Russia's favor. According to this logic, even at the height of the Cold War, the USSR remained a reliable supplier of energy resources. At the same time, many believe that reducing economic ties with Europe will alienate Russia from it even further (p. 18).

## **Conclusion**

The Munich Security Conference Reports give us quite clear impressions of the dynamics of the growth of Russia's international political activities which have been on the rise since the 2014 military aggression against Ukraine.

Based on these Reports, several important factors on which Russia bases its tactics can be underlined:

- Russia is utilizing the inertness of the Western states which are refraining from being actively involved in the resolution of conflicts taking place in the world today. Russia is trying to take the initiative into its own hands as it did in Syria and, therefore, increase its weight on the international arena.
- Russia is exercising aggressive policies: it is strengthening its positions on various continents, facilitating discord between the Western states and interfering in the domestic political life of the Western states. With all of this, it is trying to strengthen its positions in negotiations with the Western states.
- Russia is attempting to form new alliances. In this regard its partnership with China is especially important as the interests of these two countries on the formation of the so-called post-Western world order are aligned. Given Russia's close cooperation with Iran in Syria, there is a prospect of a further expansion of this alliance.
- Russia realizes that the attitude of the Western states towards it is not uniform. Despite its aggressive policies, talks about restoring relations with Russia continue. Moscow views this as a chance to avoid sanctions imposed against itself without any compromises and with minimal losses which would be a great political victory.