

Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia: Think Tanks and Grand Narratives

Report by Anton Barbashin & Alexander Graef



Russian President Vladimir Putin (2nd L) meets with Egyptian politician Amr Moussa (2nd R) and other participants of the annual Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia October 18, 2018. Sputnik/Alexei Druzhinin/Kremlin via REUTERS

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade Russian foreign policy has taken critical turns, surprising not only the entire international community but also Russia's own foreign policy experts. Arguably, the most notable turn came in March 2014 when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula, setting in motion developments that are continuously shaping Russia, its neighbors, and, to a certain degree, global affairs. Clearly, Russia's post-Crimean foreign policy does not exist in a vacuum. Its ramifications are colliding with regional and global trends that are effectively destabilizing the post-Cold War international order, creating uncertainties that are defining the contemporary international moment.

In this report, we deal with those whose job it is to explain the logic of Russia's foreign policy turns and to analyze global trends and their meaning for Russia and the rest of the world. Although these experts, as a rule, do not directly influence political decision-making, their debates, as Graeme Herd argues, "set the parameters for foreign policy choices" and "shape elite and public perceptions of the international environment" in Russia.¹ Especially in times of crisis and rapid change ideas produced at some earlier stage by experts and think tanks external to the state bureaucracy can suddenly obtain instrumental value and direct policy options.

In Part 1, we briefly discuss the role of think tanks in Russian foreign policymaking and present the landscape of Russian think tanks working on foreign policy issues. We distinguish among three basic institutional forms: academic and university-based think tanks, private think tanks, and state-sponsored think tanks. Highlighting the diversity of organizations, we then focus on four state-sponsored think tanks whose size, political contacts, and financial means allow them to dominate the think tank scene in Russia and that represent different ideological angles of a broad, yet also comparatively volatile mainstream: the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), the Valdai Discussion Club, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI).

Part 2 follows this selection by looking at Russian foreign policy debates since 2014. We consider how experts writing for these four organizations have approached three major themes: the evolution of the concept of Greater Europe and European Union (EU)-Russia relations, the establishment of the Greater Eurasia narrative in the context of Russia's declared pivot to the East, and the concepts of multipolarity and the liberal world order.

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Part One

Chapter 1: Think tanks and foreign policy making in Russia

Any discussion of the role of think tanks in Russia needs to start with the fact that Russian foreign policymaking is highly centralized. According to the 1993 Constitution, the Russian president directs the state's foreign policy.² Yet in the 1990s, the lower house of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, which had been dominated by the Communist Party in opposition to President Boris Yeltsin, at times exerted considerable influence on the course of events, for example by refusing to ratify international treaties or by developing independent policy proposals. In turn, Russia's foreign policy goals had not yet been fixed and strategies remained subject to frequent changes and compromise.

Since the first election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in March 2000, the policy process has been increasingly concentrated within the presidential administration, where Putin himself acts as the sole strategic decision maker. Starting in 2003, liberal oppositional parties were increasingly pushed out of the State Duma, and the new party of power, United Russia, received a constitutional majority. The remaining opposition parties, including the once highly critical Communists, were increasingly co-opted in support of presidential policies.

In consequence, today, direct personal access to members of the administration and/or the president is the only way to have any real influence on the course of political action. This dominance of the state bureaucracy and its insulation from societal forces shapes the environment for the development and activities of (foreign policy) think tanks, in a considerable departure from Western liberal democracies, where the think tank concept was first developed.

In the United States, think tanks have been traditionally understood as “nonprofit organizations” with “substantial organizational independence” and the aim to influence public policy making.³ In a path-breaking article thirty years ago, R. Kent Weaver suggested that such organizations come in three ideal-typical forms: “universities without students,” “contract research organizations,” and “advocacy think tanks.” His classification rests on the differences in staff, operational principles, and product lines. While “universities without students” and “contract research organizations” both value academic credentials and norms of objectivity, they produce different types of work: monographs and articles versus problem-focused analyses commissioned by state agencies. “Advocacy think tanks,” by contrast, recruit staff with various backgrounds, including from business, journalism, and the military, and often “put a distinctive spin on existing research” with the deliberate aim to influence policy making and public debate.⁴

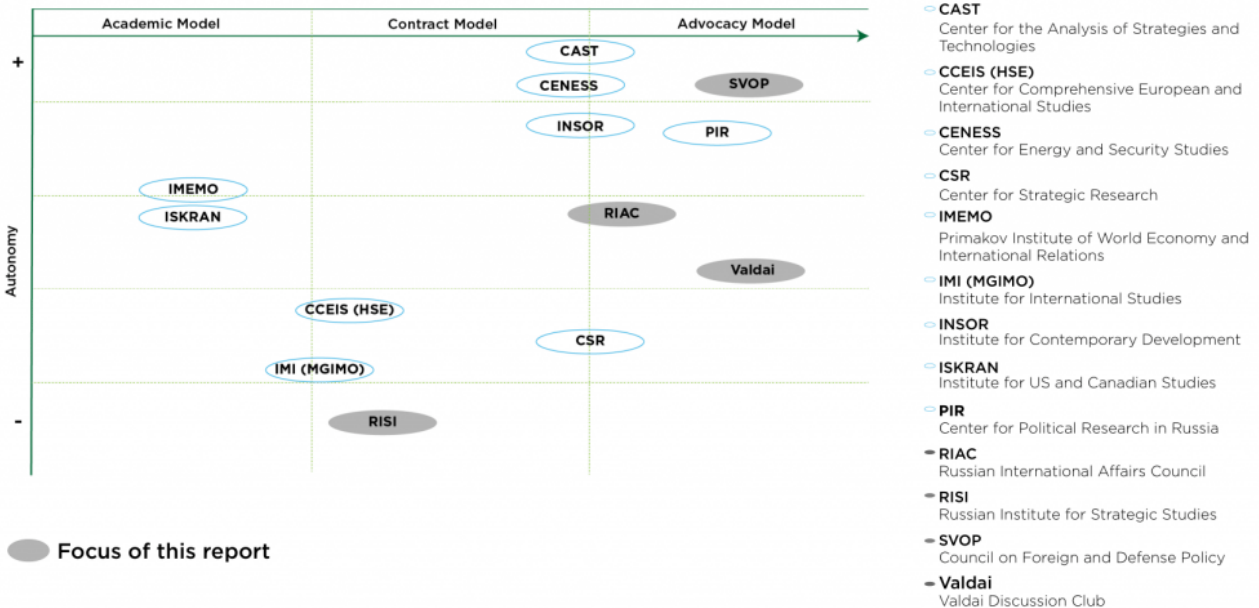
This tripartite concept helps us make sense of different strategies within the marketplace of ideas, but the assumption of organizational independence from the state does not travel well beyond the Anglo-American tradition.⁵ In continental Europe, think tanks, particularly those

working on foreign policy issues, are often linked to state institutions and/or political parties. At the same time, they are actively engaged in policy development and enjoy considerable intellectual autonomy. By the same token, the notion of think tanks as exclusively nonprofits unnecessarily excludes organizations that exist as businesses but engage in public policy debates. This is problematic because, in some countries, including Russia, choosing enterprises instead of non-profit organizations as the legal form of choice for think tanks is simply a way to avoid increasing state control of politically active civil society and noncommercial activities.

Hence, rather than starting from a narrow definition of think tanks as a specific type of organization, we follow recent arguments that think tanks should be seen as “platforms, composed of many individuals who have multiple affiliations and multiple ideas.”⁶

They often function as meeting places for key stakeholders to produce specific end-products, such as publications or events. As will become clear, such a flexible approach is especially helpful in Russia, where organizational boundaries can be fuzzy and where experts frequently collaborate and can belong to multiple think tanks. More important than establishing clear-cut boundaries is to investigate their historical trajectory, which includes different sets of practices and various forms of policy work.

Selected Russian Foreign Policy Think Tanks: Types and Positions



Infographic 1. Source: Graphic compiled from the author’s qualitative analysis

Different think tanks then can be usefully placed within a typological table along two dimensions: on the one hand, the kind and mixture of policy-related work following Weaver's classification, differentiating among academic research, contract-based policy analyses, and advocacy; on the other hand, the degree of organizational autonomy, which includes institutional independence from both state agencies and private sponsors. The combination of both dimensions provides us with an admittedly rough, but helpful overview of the relative social position of thirteen selected Russian think tanks within the marketplace of producing policy ideas (Table 1).

Our selection combines size, capacity, and institutional variety to illustrate the existence of different think tanks forms in Russia.⁷ At the same time, the experts and think tanks discussed here do represent the dominant mainstream of the Russian foreign policy expert community with relevance for both policy and public debate. Think tanks beyond this selection usually (still) lack political relevance and critical mass,⁸ study foreign policy only in passing,⁹ or focus on concrete world regions with a dominant domestic policy perspective.¹⁰ Finally, some think tanks that have been active in the past have either been shut down or reduced their activities to a minimum.¹¹ In this context it is important to emphasize that most Russian (foreign policy) think tanks are very small and depend on the leadership and engagement of just one or two persons. Hence, think tanks are usually heavily interrelated on an interpersonal level with individual analysts working simultaneously for several institutions. Because foreign policy is not a professionally clear-cut field of knowledge production, there are also overlaps with institutions dealing dominantly with economic and military policy issues.¹²

The following two parts describe the emergence and main attributes of these thirteen think tanks, which are denoted by their official acronyms. First, we provide an overview of the general landscape of Russian foreign policy think tanks, which we divide into three groups: academic and university-based think tanks, private think tanks, and state-sponsored think tanks. Second, within the last group we zoom in on four organizations (in gray) that have played a significant role in Russian foreign policy debates in the last decade yet simultaneously represent different ideological angles. The more detailed information about their institutional design and historical trajectory will help us understand the social context of the policy debates that will be at the center of Part 2.

Chapter 2: The landscape of Russian foreign policy think tanks

Russian think tanks working on foreign policy issues can be divided into three basic groups depending on type of ownership and how they evolved historically. First, there are academic state-funded institutions, which include research institutes within the system of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and state universities with faculties focused on studying foreign policy and international relations. Second, the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled not only former scholars but also journalists and military officers to establish their own private think tanks, particularly in the 1990s. Although many folded over time, some are still operating in distinct niches despite increasing political pressure. Finally, since the late 2000s the Russian state, with its growing political ambitions and economic potential, has actively invested in the creation of (foreign policy) think tanks and intellectual platforms. Nevertheless, as we will

argue, the source of this support has been neither monolithic nor unambiguous. Rather, state-sponsored think tanks represent, to some extent, different positions and power struggles within the political elite.

Given this institutional diversity, Russian think tanks exist in numerous legal forms. Apart from those organizations which are part of state universities or exist as “state budget scientific institutions,” most (foreign policy) think tanks come in the form of either (autonomous) non-commercial organizations (NCO) or enterprises. Whereas the latter provides more liberty of action, the former is more common, even among state-sponsored think tanks, despite increasing regulation. In contrast to the United States, where think tanks as non-profit organizations and their donors enjoy significant tax advantages, the Russian tax law knows such privileges only for socially oriented NCOs, but on a lower scale.¹³ A heavy blow for think tanks existing as NCOs has been the revision of the Russian NCO law from July 2012, introducing the status of “foreign agents” for those NCOs that in some form touch upon political issues in their work and receive foreign funding.¹⁴ Currently there are seventy-five such organizations, which are subject to intensified bureaucratic control and often public harassment. Moreover, since May 2015, the law on undesirable organizations has terminated the activities of several foreign donor organizations of Russian politically active NCOs, including the Open Society Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, and the MacArthur Foundation.¹⁵

Academic and University-Based Think Tanks

Most institutions doing academic research on foreign affairs and international relations in Russia are part of the Academy of Sciences and represent area studies institutes, which were predominantly founded in the late 1950s and 1960s to support Soviet international engagement. Given the lack of professional experience with many world regions inside the state bureaucracy at the time, these institutes became centers of nonmilitary knowledge production on the culture, politics, and economies of various countries, including the United States.¹⁶ In Soviet times, the two best-known were the Institute for US and Canadian Studies (ISKAN, today known as ISKRAN) founded in 1967 and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) that had been re-established in 1956.¹⁷ Both profited from the Western focus of Soviet foreign policy, large research staffs, and their directors’ political connections.¹⁸



This photo was taken at the first session of the International Scientific and Expert Forum “Primakov Readings” titled “Is Russia and the US a limited confrontation or a potential partnership?” on June 29, 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons/IMEMO RAS

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the institutionalized system of policy advisory based on the Communist Party structure dissolved. The fully state-financed institutes lost much of their funding and given the economic crisis, state interest in foreign and security policy issues diminished. In addition, many scholars, particularly young ones, got better-paid jobs in business or left the country altogether.¹⁹ In consequence, the average age of Russian scholars steadily increased, whereas Western approaches—particularly International Relations (IR) theory—which had not officially existed as a subject in the Soviet Union—had to be learned anew. Only in the mid-2000s did some of the institutes and Russian academia in general partially recover from financial and institutional decay.²⁰ The different institutes, however, have had vastly different levels of success, depending on their leadership. For example, while IMEMO under the directorship of Alexander Dynkin (2006-2016), who now acts as the institute’s President and head of academic research, has secured new private funds, attracted young scholars, and once again become an international household name, not least through events such as the annual Primakov Readings, the once-prominent ISKAN (ISKAN) has faced financial difficulties and overall decline. In July 2015, IMEMO was named after its former director and late Russian prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, who had passed the month before.²¹

Traditionally, the Soviet model envisaged a split between research done at the RAS institutes and teaching as the exclusive responsibility of universities. After 1991, this division of tasks started to break down, and Russian universities increasingly moved into applied research on foreign policy and international affairs. Today, the dominant university remains the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which is directly subordinate to the Russian Foreign Ministry. Together with the Diplomatic Academy, it is responsible for the education of most Russian diplomats.

However, as the think tank of the Foreign Ministry, MGIMO is also deeply involved in applied policy work and produces research notes and reports for government agencies. In 1976, the Institute established the Problem Research Laboratory for System Analysis, which eventually became one of just two Soviet centers studying IR theory.²² After several reforms, in 2009 the lab became the Institute for International Studies (IMI), which consists of ten research centers that loosely cooperate. Together, they are responsible for executing the annual Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) policy research agenda and answering ad-hoc inquiries of the Ministry. Since October 2018, IMI has been headed by the young US specialist Andrey Sushentsov, who is also program director at Valdai and in 2014 founded his own small analytical agency (“Foreign Policy”).²³

Think Tank	Abbrev.	Year Established	Permanent Research Staff	Annual Budget (USD 2019)	Current Leadership
Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations	IMEMO	1956	300-330	2.9 million ^A	Fyodor Voitlovsky Alexander Dynkin
Institute for US and Canadian Studies	ISKRAN	1967	80-90	1.1 - 1.4 million ^B	Valery Garbuzov Sergey Rogov
Institute for International Studies	IMI (MGIMO)	1976/2009	50-60	N/A ^C	Andrey Sushentsov
Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies	CCEIS (HSE)	2006	15-20	N/A	Anastasia Likhacheva Sergey Karaganov Timofey Bordachev

^A According to the RAS state budget plan for 2013, IMEMO received 179.793 million rubles, see Положение 1 к постановлению Президиума РАН, Dec. 11, 2012, №266: <http://www.ras.ru/FStorage/Download.aspx?id=7106c9f9-c518-4266-95ff-3d3274d15df6>. However, IMEMO receives considerable additional funding from its commercial and commissioned work that according to some estimations amounts to at least one third of the state-funded budget. Hence, the overall annual budget of IMEMO is arguably closer to 250 million rubles (\$4.1 million).

^B Data based on ISKRAN financial planning reports 2013-2017 is available on “План финансово-хозяйственной деятельности на 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 и 2017 гг.,” <http://www.iskran.ru/ur-doks.php>.

^C As an official part of MGIMO IMI represents a collaboration of different university research centers. Hence, it is difficult to identify a separate line of financing. The 2018 budget of MGIMO has been about 4.4 billion rubles (\$68 million in 2019), see MGIMO, “Отчет о самообследовании университета за 2018 год,” <https://mgimo.ru/upload/2019/04/mgimo-samoobsledovanie-2018.pdf>.

Table 1: Selected Academic and University-Based Think Tanks

Moreover, in the post-Soviet era, the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow has become a hub for modern social science research. In 2006, it established a faculty on the global economy and international affairs under the leadership of then-SVOP Chairman Sergey Karaganov. While the faculty and the entire university could be legitimately seen as think tanks in their own right, Karaganov established the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies (CCEIS) in October 2006 as a specialized center with seven initial employees, including his associates Timofey Bordachev and Dmitry Suslov, who at first became managing director and deputy managing director, respectively.²⁴

From the start, CCEIS had been envisaged as the leading policy research center of the faculty, providing commissioned reports to Russian enterprises and different economic-related state institutions with a focus on EU-Russian relations and the institutional development of the EU. Over time, it widened its research activities and increasingly started to promote the study of Eurasia, the Far East, and international cooperation within the framework of the association of five major emerging national economies known as the “BRICS.” Although applied research on the EU continued, the focus after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 shifted to a more critical and confrontational attitude toward EU-Russia cooperation. This shift eventually resulted in the development of the “Greater Eurasia” paradigm as an alternative to both “Wider Europe” promoted by the EU and “Greater Europe,” the preferred concept of the Russian leadership in the early 2000s.

Private Think Tanks

The collapse of the Soviet Union enabled private think tank initiatives for the first time. Several former academics from the RAS institutes and state universities established their own small policy research centers and networks. Given the lack of domestic funding, almost all had to rely on Western sponsorship. Many remained one-person operations and were soon dissolved. On the other hand, the economic crisis in Russia during the 1990s did not particularly encourage research on foreign and security policy beyond nuclear nonproliferation and arms control. State demand existed, if at all, for economic and financial policy issues. Nevertheless, during this time several successful private initiatives evolved as enterprises or noncommercial organizations. Since 2012, the noncommercial groups have faced considerable challenges due to changing legislation—particularly the foreign agents law from June 2012 and the law on undesirable organizations from May 2015—that made it more difficult to attract sponsorship from abroad.

Two successful private think tanks are the Center for Political Research in Russia (PIR) and the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST). The first was established by journalist Vladimir Orlov and some friends in spring 1994 at the newspaper *Moskovskie Novosti* (Moscow News), which had been the mouthpiece of Soviet *perestroika*. They set up the journal *Yaderny Kontrol* (Nuclear Control)²⁵ in both English and Russian and soon received funding from the MacArthur Foundation and political-institutional support from MGIMO Rector Anatoly Torkunov and Yeltsin’s National Security Aide Yuri Baturin. Subsequent increases in funding enabled PIR to expand its work to new areas. Moving away from the

narrow focus on nuclear nonproliferation, it launched projects on chemical weapons, missile technology, nonproliferation, military and technical cooperation, and civilian control of military activities. PIR, thus, transformed into what Orlov terms a “boutique think tank”²⁶ and became a hub for ambitious young students and researchers.

CAST was founded in 1997 by two former PIR employees, Ruslan Pukhov and Konstantin Makienko, who took with them the bulletin on conventional arms they had produced for PIR. In contrast to PIR, which remains a noncommercial organization, CAST largely survives by selling subscriptions to its *Eksport Vooruzhenii* (Arms Export) journal to a national and international audience and by producing analyses for Russian businesses active in the military-industrial complex. In addition, since 2008, CAST has published several monographs and edited volumes on topics including the 2008 Georgia-Russia conflict, Russian army reform, the Chinese defense industry, military aspects of the Ukrainian crisis, and Russia’s military engagement in Syria.

Finally, another think tank at the intersection of foreign policy and technology is the Center for Energy and Security Studies (CENESS), established in 2009 to focus on nuclear energy issues. Although it is the smallest of the organizations discussed here, with fewer than five permanent staff members, its founder, Anton Khlopkov—another PIR alumnus—has developed close ties with stakeholders in the Russian nuclear industry and relevant ministries, where his expertise as a physicist and knowledge about Iran’s nuclear program is highly valued. Since 2010, CENESS has organized the Moscow Non-Nonproliferation Conference, which takes place every other year and usually attracts more than 200 high-ranking Russian and international participants as well as sponsorship from various western embassies.

Think Tank	Abbrev.	Year Established	Permanent Research Staff	Annual Budget (USD 2019)	Current Leadership
Center for Political Research in Russia	PIR	1994	5-10	N/A ^D	Vladimir Orlov Yevgeny Buzhinsky
Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies	CAST	1997	5-10	0.5 - 0.7 million ^E	Ruslan Pukhov Konstantin Makienko
Center for Energy and Security Studies	CENESS	2009	<5	N/A ^F	Anton Khlopkov

^DFrom 1994 to 2014, PIR received the largest parts of its funding from foreign organizations, including the MacArthur Foundation (\$3.4 million between 1995 and 2012, <https://www.macfound.org/grantees/132/>). After its initial inclusion and later removal from the registry of foreign agents, PIR had to renounce its foreign sponsorship. This loss has been only partially compensated by domestic sources coming among others from the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund and the Presidential Grants Foundation.

^EBased on the annual accounting reports delivered by CAST to the Russian Federal State Statistic Service from 2014 to 2017. The annual budget fluctuates between 34 and 45 million rubles.

^FCENESS exists as an autonomous non-profit (non-commercial) organization. Although it is registered with the Ministry of Justice, there is no public information available about its budget. In 2012 it received \$400,000 from the MacArthur Foundation, <https://www.macfound.org/grantees/151/>.

Table 2. Selected Private Think Tanks

State-Sponsored Think Tanks

Since the late 2000s, as the Kremlin’s coffers have grown and officials have sought to promote Russian soft power globally, the Russian government has systematically sponsored

official foreign policy think tanks and the consolidation of the Russian expert community. Organizations sponsored by the political elite are, as a rule, significantly larger than private think tanks and cover a broad spectrum of policy issues. Sponsorship as we use the term here, however, does not necessarily equal direct financing as in the case of the academic institutes of the RAS. Due to the importance of informal political practices in Russia, material and symbolic support can be secured by unofficial relations with major enterprises and political stakeholders. Moreover, fruitful interaction with state officials presupposes a certain level of moderation, which excludes extreme policy positions that reject the political regime as such. At the same time, the lack of strong political institutions beyond the Russian presidency makes the course of political action more volatile, with some think tanks, such as the Center for Strategic Research (CSR) and the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), enduring steep up-and-down cycles.

CSR was established during Putin's first presidential campaign in winter 1999 with the aim to develop a long-term program on social-economic issues (Strategy-2010). Since then, it has given an institutional platform to the Russian government's leading economics personnel, most of whom came with Putin from St. Petersburg. To some extent, it is the think tank of the Ministry of Economic Development. The pace of CSR's activities has fluctuated considerably depending on the Kremlin's political interest. In 2011-2012, economic experts associated with CSR took part in elaborating the follow-up Strategy-2020 and warned against social unrest, before the think tank's importance in federal politics diminished with the nationalist turn in Russian politics after Putin's reelection in March 2012.

However, with the return of former Russian Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin, who in April 2016 agreed to prepare a new strategy for Russia's socioeconomic development until 2024, CSR once again flourished. With Kudrin as director, the think tank for more than a year became the central Russian expert platform, with various working groups and more than 1,000 contributing researchers from different institutions.²⁷ Although its focus remained on economic and financial issues, CSR also, for the first time, took on "external challenges and security," for which then-IMEMO Director Alexander Dynkin had lobbied. Kudrin and Dynkin were convinced that without a normalization in relations with the West, the 3 percent growth target, set by CSR as the overall goal, was impossible. A working group led by IMEMO researcher Sergey Utkin prepared several reports, including theses on Russia's foreign policy and the country's global positioning for 2017 to 2024. Yet after submitting the main report to Putin in May 2017 and Kudrin's appointment to lead the Russian Accounts Chamber, CSR once again pared back its activities and Utkin's working group was dissolved.

INSOR has also seen its fortunes wax and wane. Established as a noncommercial foundation out of the Center for the Development of an Information Society (RIO) in March 2008, INSOR also touches upon foreign policy issues, mainly through the prism of economic development and modernization. Politically sponsored by then-Minister of Communications and Information Technologies²⁸ Leonid Reyman, Director Igor Yurgens in 2006 started to advance proposals for Russia's long-term socioeconomic modernization as possible successor strategies for the original CSR program from 2000.

In the contest between Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov and first Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to follow Putin as president, INSOR sided with Medvedev, who tasked the institute with developing national projects. Medvedev's eventual victory in the internal power play allowed Yurgens to proceed with his projects and RIO transformed into INSOR as the new presidential think tank. At INSOR's opening ceremony in March 2008, the president argued

that “the authorities do not need compliments or flattery from the expert community, they need public and comprehensive discussion.”²⁹ Although Medvedev joined INSOR as the head of the board of trustees, the Institute received no financial support from the state budget.

Over the course of Medvedev’s presidency, INSOR became an intellectual platform for the collaboration of experts from universities and research centers, supporting the declared socioeconomic modernization agenda. The ability of INSOR to promote these ideas politically depended, however, entirely on Medvedev’s position and personal fate. The failing bet for his reelection in September 2011 and Putin’s return to the presidency put an end to INSOR’s special position and modernization strategy. As Yurgens put it at the time, “We lost to the ‘preservers’ [okhraniteli]. They just beat us.”³⁰

The next section presents the historical development and current position of four state-sponsored think tanks in more detail: Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), Valdai Discussion Club, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI). Although these organizations differ significantly in institutional design and historical origins (Table 3), they all represent the very broad Russian mainstream—they are either personally and/or intellectually close to state institutions. This similarity allows us to compare their output, arguing that even in Russia, state owner- and sponsorship does not necessarily squelch critical engagement. In fact, as we show in Part 2 of this report, these four organizations take quite different political positions.

Think Tank	Abbrev.	Year Established	Permanent Research Staff	Annual Budget (USD 2019)	Current Leadership
Council on Foreign and Defense Policy	SVOP	1992	<5	0.9 million ⁶	Fyodor Lukyanov Sergey Karaganov
Russian Institute for Strategic Studies	RISI	1992	120	N/A	Mikhail Fradkov
Center for Strategic Research	CSR	1999	20-40	5.4 million ⁴	Alexander Sinitsyn Maksim Oreshkin
Valdai Discussion Club	Valdai	2004	10-20	N/A	Andrey Bystritskiy Fyodor Lukyanov
Institute for Contemporary Development	INSOR	2008	10-15	N/A	Igor Yurgens Sergey Kulik
Russian International Affairs Council	RIAC	2010	35	1.6 - 2.1 million ¹	Igor Ivanov Andrey Kortunov

⁶ This budget of 5.5 million rubles has been reported for 2010; see “<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2005655>,” Kommersant, August 21, 2012. In 2018 the network received a Presidential grant for a project on facilitating exchange between European and Russian young leaders in the amount of 1.6 million rubels (\$25,000). See <https://президентскиегранты.рф/public/application/item?id=4FCFD63D-CF29-4DE0-90F5-2A5F78C0EFOD>.

⁴ This budget of 343 million rubles has been published for 2016. The level of funding arguably decreased significantly after the departure of Kudrin and the related reduction of CSR’s activities in 2018. See Ivan Tkachev and Anton Feynberg, “Центр Кудрина раскрыл источники своего финансирования,” RBK, October 11, 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/11/10/2017/59dc97f9a7947da7e8ca48f>.

¹ From 2012 to 2017 the annual expenses fluctuated between 100 and 130 million rubles, according to author’s own compilation based on the annual accounts delivered by RIAC to the Ministry of Justice, http://unro.minjust.ru/NKOReports.aspx?request_type=nko. The Russian newspaper RBK cites an RIAC representative who argues that the total budget in 2016 has been 154.75 million rubles; see Ivan Tkachev, Pavel Koshkin, Oleg Makarov, Anton Feynberg, “Экономия на ‘мягкой силе,’” RBK, July 24, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2017/07/24/59723c879a794741088d42d8>.

Table 3. Selected State-Sponsored Think Tanks

Chapter 3: The big four: State-sponsored think tanks in Russia

The Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP)

Among state-sponsored think tanks, SVOP is the exception to the rule. As one of the oldest Russian nongovernmental organizations, it does not receive financial support from the state but survives on private and commercial donations. Yet SVOP receives symbolic and intellectual state sponsorship, insofar as several members enjoy close relations with political power. In addition, SVOP is not a compact institute, but a network of private citizens with varying professions and political views. SVOP's roughly 200 members include many leading figures of other think tanks and academics, but also journalists; entrepreneurs; scholars; politicians; and diplomats, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and several of his deputies; Dmitry Rogozin, the director general of the Russian state space agency, Roscosmos; and former deputy prime minister.



Sergei Karaganov (center-left), Sergei Lavrov (center-right), and Fyodor Lukyanov (right) at an SVOP panel in Moscow on April 8, 2017. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The initiative to establish SVOP emerged in the wake of the failed coup d'état in the Soviet Union in August 1991. Karaganov, at the time deputy director of the Institute of Europe in the Soviet Academy of Sciences, proposed to Vladimir Rubanov, Vitaly Shlykov, and Alexander Zalko that they assemble a group of people in order to save the collapsing country and to provide a platform for integrating various elite members, particularly those in the security services. Unlike the scholar Karaganov, the other three had had long careers in the Soviet military and intelligence and turned to politics under Gorbachev.

In January 1992, this initial group was joined by a dozen men for the constitutive conference at the Institute of Europe. Coming predominantly from the academy or military, most of them had begun to build political careers, including, for example, Vladimir Lukin, a former ISKAN scholar who would become Russia's ambassador to the United States, a member of parliament, and human rights ombudsman under Putin. From that time on, the group would meet once a year at a resort on the outskirts of Moscow.

Soon, SVOP established several working groups on pressing issues and organized bilateral and international conferences with partners in the United States, Ukraine, and Germany, among others. In the 1990s, the network created a stir by publishing broad strategies for the development of Russian foreign and security policy that were critical of the Yeltsin Administration's policies. SVOP members initiated and promoted important debates on, for example, widespread drug abuse in Russia and its health consequences, the urgent need for reform of the Russian military, and the political union with Belarus. While driving important debates, however, it remains unclear whether SVOP persuaded the government to adopt specific policies.

Nevertheless, a growing number of SVOP members did move into important political positions, particularly after Yeltsin's reelection in 1996. With the appointment of SVOP member Yevgeny Primakov, first as foreign minister in January 1996 and then as prime minister from September 1998 to August 1999, SVOP enjoyed its political heyday. Despite some differences, most members supported Primakov's agenda, consisting of demanding respect for Russian national interests, a multi-vector foreign policy, and support for multipolarity as the desired principle of international order.

Yet Primakov's bid for the presidency failed after losing elections to the State Duma in winter 1999 (a campaign that had been openly opposed by Russian oligarchs) and that put an end to the political advancement of SVOP members. Instead, Putin's election brought in new elites from St. Petersburg, and the old guard from the late-Soviet and Yeltsin eras slowly but steadily lost influence and position.



President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the final session of the seventh meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia on October 22, 2015. Source: Kremlin.ru

Hence, since the 2000s, SVOP has seemed less like a political club influencing decision making and more like a platform for public advocacy and education, particularly starting with the publication of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs* in 2003. Fyodor Lukyanov, who in 2012 took over the chairmanship from Sergey Karaganov, says SVOP performs “enlightenment functions.”³¹ Since 2013, it has conducted public lectures and in 2016 it established a policy analysis and writing seminar series over several months for aspiring young experts. Although SVOP members continue to meet regularly and publish political strategies, the organization has lost its former institutional connection to real power, aside from the continuing membership of Lavrov and his deputies.

Valdai Discussion Club

Thanks to its annual meetings with Vladimir Putin, the Valdai Discussion Club is arguably Russia’s best-known intellectual brand in international think-tankery. Valdai is formally independent and does not receive direct financial support from the government. Yet the commingling of politics and business in Russia ensures that funding comes from state-owned and large private companies, directly coordinated by the presidential administration. Although the amount of that financial support is kept under wraps, Valdai’s current business partners include the Metalloinvest mining company, owned by Alisher Usmanov; Alfa Bank Group—Russia’s largest private bank—headed by Petr Aven and Mikhail Friedman; and the VTB Group.

The Valdai Discussion Club originally emerged from the international conference “Russia at the Turn of the Century: Hopes and Realities,” organized in September 2004 by SVOP and the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti in Veliky Novgorod, near Lake Valdai.³² The event was the brainchild of Svetlana Mironyuk, then editor in chief at RIA Novosti, but Karaganov, at the time SVOP chairman (and now honorary chairman), and his team actively engaged in its intellectual conceptualization. The conference culminated in a meeting of thirty-nine participants from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom with Putin at his state residence in Novo-Ogaryovo. In the following years, Valdai increasingly institutionalized, and annual meetings were held in several Russian regional cities, while the core concept and the number of participants remained stable.

That changed after 2009, when the club began to supplement its annual autumn meetings with international events on Russian politics and international relations in cooperation with foreign partners. For example, in 2009 Valdai hosted conferences in London and Amman, and in 2010 events were organized in Berlin, Shanghai, Beijing, and Valletta. Working groups on the future of US-Russia relations were held at Harvard University and in Moscow and Boston, and were co-sponsored by various US foundations, including the Carnegie Corporation, the Open Society Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation. Despite the presidential administration’s informal support of Valdai, the change in political winds after Putin’s reelection in March 2012 buffeted the organization. In December 2013, Valdai’s co-founder, Mironyuk, was abruptly fired from RIA Novosti, which itself was abolished by presidential decree to make way for the Rossiya Segodnya state news agency Segodnya under the leadership of Dmitry Kiselyov.³³ Two years earlier, the presidential administration had objected when Mironyuk began her Master of Business Administration (MBA) studies at the University of Chicago. She said she was advised that a Russian state media administrator of her seniority should not travel to the United States to receive an education.³⁴ After that, she clashed repeatedly with Mikhail Lesin, a Putin aide,³⁵ and Alexey Gromov, first deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, about the role and purpose of state media.³⁶ The transformation of RIA Novosti to Rossiya Segodnya and the replacement of Mironyuk with Kiselyov, whose views on media and state propaganda differed considerably from the progressive bureaucrat’s, led to Valdai’s reorganization. The club decided to split from RIA Novosti. Instead, RIAC, the Higher School of Economics (HSE), and MGIMO were brought in as new partners. The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, which had been established in March 2011, subsequently took over management of the club’s projects. In parallel, Valdai’s organizational procedures and agenda were reformed. What had, according to one Valdai expert, been a “tourist office with an intellectual-propagandist odor”³⁷ turned increasingly into an analytical center.³⁸

The club’s focus shifted from informing foreigners about Russian politics to promoting distinct Russian views on international affairs. Accordingly, Valdai established five annually rotating policy programs, each led by a representative of a participating organization. Sushentsov, director of the Institute of International Studies at MGIMO since October 2018, became responsible for the study of war and armed conflict. Dmitry Suslov, a former journalist from St. Petersburg and Karaganov’s associate at HSE, focuses on regionalization and US-Russia relations. Timofey Bordachev, who heads the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at HSE, has been curating the program on Eurasia since 2015. Ivan Timofeev, program director at RIAC, and MGIMO professor Oleg Barabanov are responsible for topics including social stability and the transformation of global institutions. Finally, SVOP Chairman Lukyanov functions as Valdai’s research director.

The 2014 relaunch also widened Valdai's publication activities and multiplied its outreach platforms. Bimonthly reports that had been published since winter 2009 became more frequent and comprehensive. Since October 2014, the organization has also been publishing short analytical articles, the so-called "Valdai Papers," by Russian and international experts.³⁹ Short video interviews with conference participants also were introduced as a new multimedia format. In addition, the number of participants at the annual meetings of the Valdai Discussion Club and the scale of the event itself have steadily increased. At its 10th anniversary in September 2013, almost 200 Russian and international experts participated,⁴⁰ and after changing venues for several years, the annual Valdai conference has been organized in Sochi since 2014.

Russian International Affairs Council

In February 2010, President Medvedev issued an order establishing RIAC as a noncommercial partnership under the patronage of the Foreign and Education ministries. It took the Foreign Ministry, however, more than a year to complete the necessary procedures and establish the legal basis for providing state funding for daily operations. RIAC is part of a larger effort to improve Russia's image abroad and promote Russian perspectives internationally.



RIAC President Igor Ivanov (left) and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (right) at the annual general meeting of the Russian Council for International Affairs (INF) on November 20, 2018. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

At the second annual meeting in 2011, RIAC President and former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said, “The council has been created as an instrument to unite the Russian foreign policy community, and not as a bureaucratic structure or an alternative to one or another existing organization.”⁴¹ Ivanov said Foreign Ministry expertise, although considerable, could not by itself forecast complex developments in international relations, such as the Arab Spring. That kind of prescience would require scientific know-how, permanent monitoring, consultations with international experts, and regular contact with a wide range of societal groups. Hence, RIAC was established as a platform rather than an analytical center, and, in the words of Council’s Director of Programs Ivan Timofeev, compares with the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States or the German Council on Foreign Relations.⁴² As such, it has a small in-house staff of around thirty-five, who in 2011/2012 were predominantly recruited directly from university, first as interns and later as project managers.

The expert work, by contrast, builds upon various forms of cooperation with established research institutions, including the institutes of the RAS and individual researchers. Major events are organized by reaching out to RIAC’s extensive membership base of individuals and corporations, which include, for example, the Alfa Bank Group, the state technology corporation Rostec, and energy companies such as Lukoil and Transneft. Together, they unite representatives of Russian academy, business, diplomacy, and politics. RIAC’s individual memberships have doubled from about eighty in 2011 to more than 160 today.

Despite its diversity, RIAC’s membership base is ideologically centrist. Representatives of the extreme right or left who, at some point, were prominent political commentators, such as extreme right-wing neo-Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin and left-wing nationalist Sergey Kurginyan, neither belong to nor collaborate with the organization. Consequently, although RIAC represents a broad spectrum of social and intellectual positions, it constitutes the mainstream of the Russian foreign policy expert community, as it is dominated by Foreign Ministry officials and RAS academics. The integrating figure of both professional spheres remains the well-respected Ivanov.⁴³

With this prominent support and its wide social network, RIAC has become the main communication platform for Russian foreign policy experts. To some extent, it plays the role SVOP did in the 1990s, at least in strategic coordination, debate, and international outreach, though on a different scale. Unlike SVOP, RIAC is primarily financed by the state budget via the Foreign Ministry. In the first three years of operation from 2012 to 2014, almost all its spending—more than 95 percent—came from the state budget, including the federal, regional, and municipal levels. Since 2015, the share of donations from Russian businesses and private citizens, as well as RIAC’s own commercial activities, in its annual expenses has been increasing, and in 2017 accounted for almost one third.⁴⁴ However, officially declared expenses suggest that, in absolute terms, annual state funding has been rather stable over time.⁴⁵

In April 2016, RIAC leadership teamed up with CSR's foreign policy working group. The result, in June 2017, was a joint presentation on Russia's foreign policy and global positioning, with perspectives from 2017 to 2024.⁴⁶ As part of the project, RIAC conducted thirty interviews with diplomats, experts, media specialists, and entrepreneurs, and developed several case studies. Among other things, the report suggested that "Russia is an integral part of European civilization" and argued that the "underdevelopment of the Russian economy and governance institutions poses a much more significant threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity than any realistic military threats."⁴⁷ Moreover, Council experts participated in another policy report presented by CSR in April 2018 defining seven strategic priorities for Russia's development until 2024, particularly regarding the country's integration into the global economy and the use of its foreign policy as a tool for economic development.⁴⁸

Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI)

RISI emerged by presidential decree in February 1992 from the basis of the Scientific Research Institute for Intelligence Problems, which had been part of the counterintelligence arm of the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) under Yuri Stsepinskiy. Despite these origins, RISI was established as a new state-sponsored institute, formally independent from the intelligence services. In April 1994, Stsepinskiy was replaced by the academic historian Yevgeny Kozhokin, who had been elected to the first Soviet Russian parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies, in partially free elections. Directly before his appointment to RISI, he served as deputy chairman of the State Committee for Federal and National Affairs.

When Kozhokin took the helm, RISI consisted of no more than fifty analysts with varying backgrounds, including former intelligence officers and civilians. In addition, a considerable information department collected and analyzed open-source materials. During his fifteen years as director, Kozhokin brought many new researchers to the Institute, particularly from his *alma mater*, Moscow State University. He established the study of the post-Soviet space as one of the Institute's signature areas and turned RISI into a respected institution. In 2007, the Institute employed arguably around seventy researchers, working on international security, the near abroad, military-strategic questions, international economic security, and market economic issues.⁴⁹

For most of Kozhokin's directorship, however, the Institute remained almost invisible to the public. That started to change in April 2009, when Medvedev turned RISI into a federal scientific institution financed by the presidential administration, with the president as its founder. Its research activities were tied to the strategy and priorities outlined in the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly. In consequence, the Institute added new departments, received more resources, and increased its public activities substantially. At the same time, Medvedev dismissed Kozhokin and appointed Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, who had just retired from the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), as director.

Given the opportunity and financial means, Reshetnikov and his new team made several important changes. First, the Institute established several regional information-analytical centers in Russia and appointed contact people abroad. Whereas the Institute had only one such center in Kaliningrad (since 1996) under Kozhokin, new offices were opened in Rostov, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg from August to November 2009. Moreover, in April 2011, Reshetnikov established another center for regional and ethno-religious studies in Kazan. After the annexation of Crimea, similar centers were opened in Simferopol and Sevastopol in

April and September 2015, respectively. In addition, since March 2014, RISI opened an information center in Tiraspol. Finally, over the course of 2013, RISI appointed individual representatives in Helsinki, Belgrade, and Warsaw, some of whom have since been expelled from the respective countries.

Second, the corps of analysts at RISI increased to more than 120, with more than 200 total employees. An analysis of available biographical data suggests that most of the researchers employed in 2016 had joined RISI after 2009, sometimes directly after graduating from university.⁵⁰ Reshetnikov himself added the Humanitarian Research Center as a new department, with the aim to study “the contentious issues of foreign relations history and the role of the religious factor.”⁵¹ He also brought several new personal advisers to RISI, including former diplomat Vladimir Kozin, who became a frequent commentator on questions of arms control and US missile defense, and historians Petr Multatuli and Mikhail Smolin, both of whom support the restoration of the Russian monarchy.

Third, RISI’s publications became more frequent and diverse, as researchers were encouraged to publish for wider audiences and to be visible on state TV and in the news. In late 2009, RISI launched the quarterly *Problems of National Strategy* journal (published every two months since 2012) and in 2012 founded its own book series on religious-historical themes in cooperation with the FIV publishing house, owned by Smolin. Under Reshetnikov, the institute also established RISI TV and since 2014 has shot several films, particularly on Ukraine, making the case for the Crimean annexation based on the peninsula’s cultural affinity with Russia.

From 2009 to 2016, Reshetnikov’s political views were integral to the institute’s work and reputation. Reshetnikov sees Russia as a distinct Christian civilization in an eternal political and cultural struggle against the West, particularly the United States. The nationalist shift in Russian foreign policy since 2012 has provided this worldview with ample scope for action. Under Reshetnikov, RISI actively promoted attempts to intensify the military conflict in eastern Ukraine, aiming at the creation of Novorossiia (New Russia) as a confederation to extend control over southeastern Ukraine.

In this context, at least two former employees have publicly argued that RISI’s work, particularly on Ukraine, was shoddy and highly ideological. Instead of profound analyses, the institute had fed political leaders propaganda and distorted information about the events in Ukraine and their prospective development, the former staffers argued.⁵² As a result, they said, the potential for a local insurgency against the central government in Kyiv had been overstated,⁵³ contributing, at least from Moscow’s perspective, to a major foreign policy failure.

In the intra-Russian foreign policy debate, RISI also has been used as a way to police the activity of other Russian think tanks. In February 2014, RISI, together with the Center for Actual Politics, assessed the activity of eight Russian research institutions, networks, and think tanks, including PIR; the New Eurasia Foundation, led by RIAC Director General Andrey Kortunov; the RAS Institute of Sociology; and even the Russian International Studies Association, led by MGIMO Rector Anatoly Torkunov. The resulting report suggested that the organizations be made to register as foreign agents. “Positions contradicting Russian state interests have become a persistent part of mass consciousness and thinking among a considerable part of the Russian expert community,” the report said.⁵⁴

Although it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship, some of the organizations in the report were made to register as foreign agents, forced to reduce their activities, or even dissolved. Main financial sponsors, such as the MacArthur and Open Society foundations, were declared “undesirable organizations” and banned. The report poisoned the relationship between the Russian academic expert community based at MGIMO and the RAS institutes on the one hand and the RISI leadership on the other. Institutional links were cut, although cooperation with individual researchers continued. Reshetnikov’s academic reputation was in tatters.



Mikhail Fradkov (left) and Leonid Reshetnikov (right) at a meeting with Vladimir Putin (center) on January 31, 2017, at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia. Source: Kremlin.ru

In November 2016, Putin replaced Reshetnikov with SVR Director and former Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, who still leads RISI. Speculation about the reasons for the shakeup ranges from political leaders’ dissatisfaction with RISI’s analytical work and its dominant monarchist-religious orientation to its alleged hand in failed Russian attempts to undermine Montenegro’s accession to NATO.⁵⁵ Some attribute Reshetnikov’s dismissal to successful lobbying by politically well-placed think tankers and researchers who were mentioned in the 2014 report.

Whatever the reason, institutional reforms launched in May 2017 by the new director discarded the religious agenda and led to a repositioned RISI. Fradkov dissolved the Center for Humanitarian Studies, and its director, Mikhail Smolin, along with several advisers close to Reshetnikov, left RISI. The entire leadership of RISI and almost all deputy directors were replaced. Moreover, Fradkov established a new Center for Research Coordination and rearranged some of the research centers. Several department heads were replaced. Arguing for the reorganization, Fradkov said, “We need to be more professional” and “produce work of high quality,” in a swipe at the quality of analysis produced by RISI under Reshetnikov.⁵⁶

Overall, the status of the “big four” foreign policy think tanks in Russia depends on existing interpersonal relations with political power that ensure both direct state funding and/or intellectual sponsorship. In this context, it is striking that apart from RISI, all other think tanks represent social networks and meeting points rather than institutes with permanent research staff. This fact highlights both their role as tools of Russian soft power directed at foreign audiences and platforms to consolidate the Russian expert community. Whereas SVOP has been able to selectively influence policy making in the 1990s, this role has been partially overtaken by RIAC. Here, the direct linkages that exist between the RIAC leadership and the Russian MFA are crucial to introduce ideas into the policy process. The Valdai Club, on the other hand, serves as the international mouthpiece of Russia’s foreign policy elite, enabling its members to participate in global debates. The exception to the rule is RISI as the research institute directly subordinated to the presidential administration. After seven years of maximum publicity following a monarchist-orthodox agenda, RISI’s work has once again become less accessible, stressing the in-house character of its analyses.

Part Two

Chapter 4: Foreign policy narratives since 2014

In the second part of this report, we look at Russia’s grand foreign policy narratives and their evolution after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, as defined by the Russian foreign policy expert community. To that end, we focus specifically on reports, working papers, foreign policy concepts, and policy briefs published with RIAC, the Valdai Discussion Club, SVOP, and RISI.

Most of the materials that define Russian foreign policy discourse in its public form are published by the RIAC and Valdai Club. Both organizations seek to engage an international audience and therefore publish most of their work in Russian and English. Both have also built research partnerships with renowned foreign policy institutions around the world. For instance, of the thirty-one reports that RIAC has published⁵⁷ since 2014, seventeen were co-sponsored by international partners, including the Royal United Services Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the European Leadership Network, the German Council on Foreign Relations, and the Atlantic Council of the United States.

As neither the Valdai Club nor RIAC has a large permanent staff, most of the work they publish is written or co-authored by foreign affairs experts from MGIMO, the RAS institutes, and the Higher School of Economics (HSE), among other organizations, thus representing a broader view of international relations and Russian foreign policy.

In this part of the report, we consider how Russian foreign policy experts have approached three major themes: First, the evolution of the concept of Greater Europe and how it defines Russia-EU relations today, specifically in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in The Donbas; second, the establishment of Greater Eurasia narrative and its relation to Russia's pivot to the East, with a specific focus on Russia-China relations; and third, the evolution of the Russian foreign policy community's attitudes to the concept of multipolarity and current world order.

Chapter 5: The end of Greater Europe

Russian understanding of what exactly Greater Europe is and could be has always been flexible. The term 'Greater Europe' refers to the entire geographic space between Iceland and Norway in the North and Turkey in the South and the space from Portugal in the West to Russia in the East. In the context of Russia foreign policy thinking since the 1980s, it was presumed that this macro-region could be tied together one way or another, not only due to economic, political, and security considerations but also largely to a common cultural and historic closeness. The details of this cooperation varied depending on political circumstances of the moment, but the idea that Russia and the rest of Europe would move closer to each other has been one of the most enduring narratives guiding Russia's foreign policy community since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much of Russia's institutional cooperation with the West in the 1990s, including the Russia-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994, Russia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1996, and the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in 1997, were motivated by a vision of Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

The first half of the 2000s saw intensified institutional cooperation with the EU and aspirations to implement the four Common Spaces framework, which provided considerable incentives for the foreign policy community to further develop the concept of Greater Europe, envisioning deeper economic, institutional, and social ties. But political elites viewed this process differently than did the larger foreign policy community, as suggested⁵⁸ by former Foreign Minister and current RIAC President Igor Ivanov in 2015. The proposals on Euro-Atlantic cooperation "were ahead of their time: the political elites in our countries were not prepared for such groundbreaking ideas," Ivanov explained. "We should learn this lesson. We need to be more realistic and develop proposals that reflect the political situation. That means not falling behind, but also not racing ahead of ourselves."⁵⁹

By the early 2010s, much of the Greater Europe agenda had been reduced to talks about possible visa liberalization, economic ties, and cultural, academic, and civil society cooperation. The evolution of Russia's political system, especially after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, constrained considerably the Greater Europe agenda that had been a pet project of the expert community. Still, the idea has not been discarded altogether, despite the clear divergence of political goals in Russia and the EU. The annexation of Crimea and the war in the east of Ukraine created enormous differences in Russian and Western assessments of

the Ukrainian conflict and its causes, prompting a raft of eulogies for the Greater Europe vision.

Ukraine: Cause or consequence?

While nearly all American and European experts see Russia's annexation of Crimea as a violation of international law that openly breached Ukrainian sovereignty and created multiple risks for European and global security,⁶⁰ the Russian expert community publicly presents quite different views on the events of 2014. The most exotic take on the roots of the Ukrainian crisis came from RISI under Reshetnikov's leadership. In an October 2014 report⁶¹, RISI combined the most dominant conspiratorial views of Western policy toward Ukraine, asserting that the Ukrainian revolution of 2013-2014 was a Western plot aimed at "waging an informational, economic, political, and possibly military assault on Russia."⁶² According to the report, Russia is thwarting the creation of a new world order that US "business and political elites" have been trying to create for the last couple of decades. Moreover, the authors claimed that the United States planned to evict the Russian military from the Crimean Peninsula to construct US military bases on the Black Sea coast. Russia's pushback in Ukraine, according to RISI experts, prevented the creation of a global society of "chipped and nanorobotized transhuman bio-objects, semihuman-semicomputers." In later interviews, Reshetnikov doubled down, telling *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in October 2015, for instance, that "regardless of its leaders, Ukraine can exist only as a state hostile to [Russia], or as no state."⁶³

It must be noted that RISI's take on this issue is an outlier, even for the most conservative parts of Russia's foreign policy community. But even though RIAC and Valdai Club experts do not cite wild conspiracy theories about Ukraine, they do tend to both overlook the fact of Ukraine's political agency and see the conflict through the prism of post-Cold-War relations between Russia and the West. RIAC experts attribute the Ukrainian crisis to flaws in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, which since the collapse of the Soviet Union has become "less transparent, less predictable, and less stable than in the twentieth century."⁶⁴ This deterioration, these experts say, is due to the failure of Russia's Western partners to understand Russia's security concerns and their rejection of Russia's proposals to create a joint European security architecture that would treat all parties involved as equal. A September 2014 report⁶⁵ by the Valdai Club claimed that Russia annexed Crimea because the Kremlin realized it was being cheated by the West. EU and US backing for the Ukrainian revolution, it argued, was not motivated by a desire to support democracy and human rights, but to kick out the Russian fleet from Crimea and to admit Ukraine to the EU and NATO. The report asserted that Russia's annexation of Crimea was not a goal in and of itself, but a response to two and a half decades of the West dismissing Russia's national interests. The report also claimed that even a hypothetical resolution of the Ukrainian crisis today would not lead to "business as usual," as the very basis of Russian-Western relations needs to be reconsidered.

Ultimately, Russian foreign policy experts considering the causes of the Ukrainian conflict ended up in a similar place as they had on the concept of Greater Europe. The West and Russia have failed to understand each other's position, RIAC President Igor Ivanov argued.⁶⁶ The West had expected Russia to recognize Western institutions as superior and adapt to Western rules of the game without considering Russia's specifics and ambitions, while Russia had expected that building a Greater Europe would lead to some sort of compromise between the two, he said. Since Russian leadership values being treated as an equal partner much more highly than being part of the West, this conflict seemed unavoidable. Although the vast

majority of experts agree that the crisis in Ukraine has scuttled old expectations and models of relations with the West, they disagree on how Russia should proceed with damage control. SVOP's 2016 strategy on foreign policy—co-authored by Karaganov, Bordachev, and a couple of experts from the Higher School of Economics,⁶⁷—argued that the conflict in The Donbas will not be solved anytime soon, so Russia should keep it in a “frozen” state.

RIAC's 2017 report on foreign policy, on the other hand, cited the damage the fighting inflicts on Russia and called for “consistent efforts toward liquidation of Donbas conflict.”⁶⁸ In assessing the state of the EU, the Valdai Club's Bordachev⁶⁹ argued that its current weakness creates opportunities and challenges for Russian foreign policy. He recommended that Russia cultivate relations with various state and private actors in the region on the national- and EU-level if it suits Russia's national interest. RIAC's advice on the same issue is quite different—that Russia should distance itself from EU domestic affairs and support neither far-right nor far-left parties in its member states.



(Left to right) Girard Michael Ambrosi, Timofei Bordachev, Marc Franco, and Mario Hirsch at the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies' conference titled “Russia and the EU: the question of trust,” in Luxembourg on November 28, 2014. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The key difference between the two approaches lies in their assessments of how ongoing conflict with the West affects Russia's strategic interests. RIAC's report sees Russia losing from its conflict with the West, being further marginalized from international institutions and projects, and suffering economic losses as a result. In this view, Russia is overspending on security when those resources would be better spent on modernization and economic development. Most of RIAC's recommendations are based on deconfliction and normalization of relations with the West. SVOP, by contrast, praises Russian foreign policy of the past decade, arguing that its successes make up for economic weakness. SVOP stresses the importance of military modernization and the type of societal mobilization that Crimea's annexation sparked. It praises the return of "great powerness as a value"⁷⁰ whose rejection in the late 1980s and 1990s had led only to losses and widespread dissatisfaction with the government.

None of the existing approaches foresees a quick rapprochement with the EU, or even a chance that Russia and the EU could return to a partnership based on common values, even if only in rhetoric. Thus, Russia-EU relations can from now on be based solely on pragmatic interest and needs, at times divergent, featuring both situational confrontation and partnership. Does that mean that Greater Europe is dead as an idea, or is it a question of time and the will of key political leaders in the Kremlin to reanimate it?

Is the return of Greater Europe possible?

In a 2018 article⁷¹ titled "Will Russia Return to Europe?" RIAC's Kortunov took on Russia's liberal-minded foreign policy thinkers and Western counterparts who are convinced that Russia will inevitably reconsider its foreign policy stance when the Kremlin leadership changes. The persistent argument that once "Putin's regime collapses" Russia will embrace European values and would be willing to correct the mistakes of Putin's era proposes the comforting vision of a medium-term solution to the "Russia problem." But this narrative exists mostly outside of Russia's mainstream foreign policy think tanks, among Russia's liberals.

Kortunov wrote that this idea rests on three principal positions: first, that Russia is a European nation and shares more societal values and norms with contemporary Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe, than with any Asian society; second, that Europe is the only hope for Russia's modernization, as Asian nations have little interest in modernizing the Russian economy, instead preferring it as a major source of natural resources and a destination for their exports; and third, that Russia could not compete with Asia's biggest nations, such as China and India, and eventually would end up as a second-rate power, whereas it could be on par with the EU's most influential nations. Only together with the EU could Russia maintain its great-power status, strengthening the EU at the same time, the argument goes.



This photo was taken at the Russian Council for International Affairs' (INF) round table titled “Results and prospects of the development of Russian-Chinese relations in light of the 40th anniversary of China’s reform and openness policy,” on December 12, 2018. Source: Russian Council

By this logic, Kortunov wrote, it only makes sense for Europe to wait for Russia to “come around,” whether in 2024 or the early 2030s, combining carrot and stick—encouraging societal and cultural exchange while penalizing the Kremlin’s most outrageous behaviors.

Kortunov noted, however, that this approach views the EU as static and ignores crises the EU is enduring, from migration to the rise of the far-right, from illiberal democracies within the EU to lingering enlargement fatigue from recent waves of new members. Nor does it account for the considerable difficulties that resolving the Ukrainian crisis would pose for Russia’s next generation of leaders. Kortunov suggested that even if a peaceful transfer of power does occur in the Russia of the 2030s, the country could not return to the agenda of the 1990s and 2000s, leaving the shape of Russia’s European path undefined.

Kortunov doubted that Greater Europe could be reinvented on the basis of the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) rapprochement, as Brussels has no interest in such cooperation and Russia has no tools to make the EU treat the EEU as an equal. Kortunov

argued that Russia’s best chance to “come back to Europe”⁷² is via Asia, as part of an emerging Greater Eurasia.

Although Russia’s foreign policy experts differ on how to regulate the Ukrainian crisis, they do not question the Kremlin’s decisions that led to the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. These facts are taken as given.⁷³ While RIAC’s experts tend to stress conflict prevention and the importance of keeping options open in Russia-EU relations, SVOP and the Valdai Club’s policy proposals focus less on damage control than on opportunities that this break with Europe offers.

Chapter 6: Greater Eurasia or China’s junior partner?

One of the last conceptually original ideas that prioritized Russia-EU relations was SVOP’s Sergey Karaganov’s 2010 proposal for the “Union of Europe.”⁷⁴ It envisioned an agreement between Russia and the European Union on the establishment of common strategic space between both entities with the possibility of including Turkey and Kazakhstan to form a macro-European entity. Karaganov proposed close cooperation in foreign policy decision-making, a common energy market, a unified regulatory space, and a visa-free regime that prioritized cultural, educational, and societal exchange.

Karaganov literally called his proposal the “last chance” for Russia and Europe to build a joint strategic vision that he said could counter Chinese and US global influence. Almost prophetically, he predicted that if Russia could not strengthen itself through an alliance with Europe it would regress into little more than a provider of natural resources for China and eventually a political appendage of Beijing. Ironically, only a few years later Karaganov, SVOP, and the Valdai Club would become the main intellectual conceptualizers of Russia’s pivot to the East—by far the most radical shift of foreign policy thinking in the history of the Russian Federation. Since 2012, the Valdai Club has published six reports that effectively chart the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy thinking toward the East.

Pivot to the East: Development of Siberia or a counterweight to the West?

Upon returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin named the development of Siberia and the Far East as a priority for his new term in office, citing the need to use the opportunities arising from the booming economies of the Pacific to develop Russia’s vast, underpopulated, and fairly poor territories. His call to conceptualize Russia’s development of the Far East was met in the Valdai Club’s 2012 report *Toward the Great Ocean, or the New Globalization of Russia*,⁷⁵ supervised by Karaganov and Bordachev. The authors made a strong case for the need to develop Russia’s Far East, citing the economic weakness of Russia’s Pacific territories that sit north of a booming world of Asian markets. The report rightly said that Russia had missed out on the region’s economic growth because of outdated infrastructure, an underdeveloped economy, and a dire demographic situation, although it puts most of the blame on Russia’s outdated euro-centricity of economic and foreign economic thinking.

Karaganov and Bordachev argued that the shift in Russia’s foreign policy thinking from overdependence on the West toward Asia is long overdue, calling it the “globalization” of Russian policy rather than a “pivot to the East,” which made it sound more inclusive and

depoliticized. Most of the report considered the opportunities Pacific economies bring to the table and how Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern regions could benefit from a more coordinated policy of liberalizing the region for foreign investment and economic cooperation. The authors barely touched upon possible cooperation of Russia and China in Central Asia and the potential role of Russia's Eurasian integration.

In another report two years later, the authors emphasized the economic motivation of Russia's pivot to the East, arguing for the need to continually engage a variety of Asian nations in order to integrate Siberia and the Far East into the Pacific economic space.⁷⁶ Much of the report deals with the transport potential of Russia with rail corridors from Asia to Europe and the Northern Sea Route. It also proposes an entirely new philosophy for administration of the region, denouncing the former colonial approach and state top-to-bottom regulations in favor of federalism, openness, and engagement. Neither of these reports addressed the "geopolitical" aspect of the pivot, nor did they touch upon its cultural or civilization aspects.

Inevitably, the confrontation between Russia and the West after the annexation of Crimea raised the stakes and importance of the pivot, and especially the role China plays in this equation. It also created the need for a foreign policy vision that would not only justify Russia's position vis-à-vis the West but also offer the prospect of a future matching the great-power ambitions the Kremlin was promoting at home and abroad.

In a third report published in 2015,⁷⁷ the authors practically abandoned the multilateral approach toward potential partners in the region, concentrating on China and its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative instead. Karaganov and Bordachev called for intensive cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and the SREB, outlining the possibilities of common development of Central Eurasia based on transportation and transit capabilities. Crucially, their vision sees Russia and China as equal partners capable of jointly developing Central Asia. Yet the premise of this collaboration is based on China's proposed vision of trade routes that at that time had only declarative value and very little substance. In a following report published in 2016,⁷⁸ the authors expanded on this idea, with references to the historical importance of Central Eurasia's development and the civilizational features of the pivot. "Russia's standoff with the West in 2013-2014 has accelerated its economic turn to the East. This move is no longer viewed as pragmatic economics, but has taken on geopolitical and civilizational traits,"⁷⁹ Karaganov wrote. The authors stressed the importance of working with China on developing those territories, going beyond simply facilitating trade routes from the East to the West to investing in co-development of the region based on the capabilities of the EEU-China partnership.

In SVOP's foreign policy strategy published the same year,⁸⁰ Karaganov and his co-authors further developed their vision, arguing that the world is moving away from unipolarity through multipolarity toward a soft bipolarity, where the United States and China would be the two main players. The authors predicted that Russia, along with India and Iran, would counterbalance Chinese economic dominance, eventually leading to the creation of Greater Eurasia.



The photo was taken of Sergei Karaganov, Dean of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the National Research University – Higher School of Economics and honorary chairman of the Russian Council on Foreign Defense and Policy, at the London Conference on June 1, 2015. Source: Wikimedia Commons/Chatham House

RIAC's 2015 analysis⁸¹ of the prospects of Russia's Eurasian policy was slightly less enthusiastic than those of SVOP and Valdai. Its author, Ivan Timofeev, noted that neither Eurasian integration nor cooperation with China could substitute for the EU. Moreover, he argued that only the West, not Eurasian integration, could give Russia the necessary instruments for modernization. He acknowledged that deeper ties with China could help Russia diversify its energy export markets, but said reorientation toward Asia could not make up for the impact of Western sanctions on Russia. The pivot to the East, by RIAC's analysis, is inevitable,⁸² but must be approached soberly and pragmatically. Timofeev questioned Russia's capabilities to foster competitive transit routes or provide for necessary economic growth from Eurasian integration. In a nutshell, he acknowledged that the pivot is necessary, as it is taking place anyway, but highlighted its most problematic aspects and tempered the optimism of the Valdai Club's analysis.

From pivot to the East to the project of Greater Eurasia

As the early optimism about Russia's engagement with China faded and it became clear that the East could not take the place of the West in Russia's foreign relations, the foreign policy community had to propose an updated version of Russia's grand foreign policy narrative post-Ukraine. Because the promise of economic development was no longer a convincing argument for the pivot, geopolitical, civilizational, and historical considerations started to take precedence.

In a 2017 report of the Valdai Club,⁸³ Karaganov and Bordachev proclaimed that the pivot to the East had been accomplished. Russia, they argued, had broken its ideological fixation on the West and embraced a new Central Eurasian or Northern Eurasian identity that "implies moral and political independence from the West, and the strengthening of positions in relations with the West." Its strategic partnership with China is based on shared responsibilities: Russia takes care of security and China provides economic prosperity. In his personal address in the report, Karaganov boasted that "the dangerous expansion of the Western alliances was stopped in Ukraine, even if it happened late and the cost was high. In Syria, Russia halted the mad policy of regime change. From a Weimar-like struggling country, Russia returned to its familiar role as a strong state and recovered its confidence. Today, Russia is one of the main masterminds of Greater Eurasia."⁸⁴

What exactly is Greater Eurasia? According to the Valdai Club, it is a common frame of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geoideological thinking that unites the nations of Eurasia. The report's authors argued that Russia's vision of Greater Eurasia is consistent with China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. They claimed that Russia and China play a central role in formulating rules of engagement for this entity, based on such principles and goals as rejection of universalism, respect for sovereignty and noninterference in the domestic affairs of one another, economic openness, the creation of new security architecture, and a dialogue of Eurasian civilizations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is proposed as the institution to help coordinate this grand cooperation.

Among the Valdai Club's concrete proposals to institutionalize these efforts were the development of a common Greater Eurasia logistics strategy; investments in financial infrastructure, including de-dollarization and an alternative to Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT); and the creation of a Eurasian mega-media vision and projects that would combine features of the BBC and Stratfor. A key objective is Russia's increasing presence in the region as an independent security broker, although the authors recognized that Russia had already become a "de-facto military-political ally of China."

Considering that SVOP's strategy, written primarily by Karaganov, had recognized a global evolution toward "soft bipolarity," dominated by the United States and China, the idea of Greater Eurasia implies Russia's status as China's de facto junior partner. To avoid Russia being treated as less than equal, the Valdai Club proposed a solution that would allow Russia to spearhead this process and secure the most beneficial conditions of "partnership" that this type of relationship might offer. Of course, the larger questions remain: what difference do the small, scattered disagreements between Russia's approach to Greater Eurasia from China's vision of OBOR make? How does Russia's strategic thinking fit into Beijing's plans?

In the last published Valdai Club report on this issue,⁸⁵ the authors took a slightly different approach and concentrated on measures the Russian government should take to temper widespread expectations about Russia's Greater Eurasia plans. "Russian society need not renounce its predominantly European culture. But it should stop fearing or even being ashamed of its Asian origins. In terms of the prevailing mentality and attitude to the central authority in society, Russia, like China and many other Asian states, is heir to the empire of Genghis Khan,"⁸⁶ the report stated. By claiming Russia's Genghis Khan heritage, the authors said, "We are filling our proper civilizational niche as a great Eurasian power, an original and self-sustained fusion of many civilizations. And we are becoming ourselves again as we make our way back home." The Valdai Club's recommendations focused on propagating "Russia's Asian destiny," combating Sinophobia in Russia, and increasing general knowledge and education about Asia.

Thus, Russia's pivot to the East has come a long way since 2014: from a way to develop Siberia and the Far East to the creation of Greater Eurasia and the recognition of Russians' true "Asian destiny." The foreign policy conceptualization of the pivot has followed primarily the Kremlin's rhetoric, flexibly adapting foreign policy developments at each moment of development. Arguably, these reports aim to add proper depth to existing trends and to provide additional advice on how the Kremlin's goals could be achieved most quickly and reasonably.

Not everyone in Russia's foreign policy community agrees with this civilizational approach to building Greater Eurasia. For instance, Kortunov of RIAC warned⁸⁷ that the denunciation of Russia's European identity in favor of an emerging Eurasian identity would lead to a national catastrophe. He has called for an in-depth study of how Australia and New Zealand have remained part of the Asian-Pacific region while being culturally and politically different from the rest of Asia. Moreover, he said the deeper Russia integrates with Asia, the greater the need would be to reinforce and preserve Russia's European nature. As noted previously, Kortunov has argued that Russia would be better-placed to return to Europe "via the creation, jointly with China, India, and other Asia partners, of a Greater Eurasia that would give Russia the stronger negotiating position and potential it would need for its eventual dialogue with Brussels."⁸⁸

Russia's pivot away from Europe toward Asia is recognized by all major Russian foreign policy experts, but its dimensions, goals, and risks are clearly evaluated differently. For the lead authors of the Valdai Club, it is a welcome and long-awaited historical move that has worth in and of itself. For several of RIAC's senior experts, it is inevitable and complex but still potentially beneficial if Russia can demonstrate diplomatic skill, political flexibility, and a readiness to sometimes play second fiddle in its relations with China, India, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Chapter 7: Multipolarity and world order

Since the mid-1990s, Russia's foreign policy experts, government officials, and diplomats have been convinced of the inevitability of multipolarity as the core of any stable world order. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity, they presumed that the unipolar moment of US hegemony would be short. Other centers of power would step up to provide for a more balanced and fair global governance. Putting aside theoretical arguments, the idea of

global governance executed by multiple centers of power across the world had an important psychological dimension: Since all versions of multipolarity discussed in Russia assumed that Russia would be one of those poles and would therefore retain its great-power status, it offered a comforting vision for many in the foreign policy community.

This view was championed by Yevgeny Primakov,⁸⁹ who had insisted that the economic rise of non-Western nations such as China, India, and Japan would eventually lead to political power and to a counterweight to US global leadership. In the 2000s when Russia, China, India, Brazil, and other large countries started to boom economically, many Russian experts assumed that the end of unipolarity was just around the corner. Especially since 2003 and the launch of the US campaign in Iraq, which was characterized as an excess of the unipolar world, Russian political elites have raised their voices for multipolarity, which has led to heated discussions among them about the features of multipolarity.

In one of RISI's analyses,⁹⁰ the coming multipolarity is explained through the prism of military interventions and the end of the "unchecked expansion of Western institutions." Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria are held as proof that the United States can no longer advance its foreign policy goals without taking into account the opinion of other great powers. In a nutshell, this approach represents a Hobbesian view of international relations, in which only the strong (in this context, military) powers can formulate what is acceptable and just. Thus, the multipolar world is the world of strong military powers that have their spheres of influence and regulate global affairs by striking deals with other great powers. Of course, this approach disregards international law or the rights of "smaller nations" since they lack adequate military might and/or what the Kremlin calls "sovereignty."

Russian officials and foreign policy experts often cite sovereignty as the key to being recognized as a great power or a proper pole in the multipolar world. The experts frequently take their cues from the official statements of the president and senior state officials. As Putin noted in 2017,⁹¹ "Russia treasures its sovereignty, but not as a toy. We need sovereignty to protect our interests and to ensure our own development. India has sovereignty and we know it [...] and so has China. I will not enumerate them all: There are other countries, too, but not many." Putin here echoes the view that only a few nations have real sovereignty; therefore Moscow has the right to violate the sovereignty of its smaller neighbors.

This emphasis on state sovereignty naturally poses an interesting question about the nature of Eurasian integration and the way Russia treats its allies, as well as Russia's aspirations to build Greater Eurasia alongside China. What does integration mean to Russia if sovereignty cannot be shared even with the closest allies? Especially considering that, according to Putin,⁹² "Russia is fortunately not a member of any alliance. This is also a guarantee of our sovereignty. Any nation that is part of an alliance gives up part of its sovereignty." The conflicting nature of some of those statements combined with the almost axiomatic belief in the coming age of multipolarity creates a contradictory depiction of multipolarity in much of Russia's foreign policy analysis. Some of this confusion can be attributed to failed attempts to reconcile theoretical approaches, foreign policy developments, and the rhetoric of top state officials, especially after 2014.

As noted by Kortunov, the concept of multipolarity is used situationally to address issues of geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic pluralism.⁹³ But its proper establishment as a desired form of international order is frequently postponed to an increasingly distant future. Moreover, Kortunov notes that multipolarity as a concept has never acquired a proper scientific meaning in the Russian foreign policy and academic community. There are no adequate criteria to evaluate the progress toward or retreat from multipolarity.

Multiple bipolarities

In multiple reports by the Valdai Club, as well as in the two foreign policy strategies proposed by SVOP since 2014, experts deemed likely a soft bipolarity between the United States and China as the main rivals for upcoming decades. According to this narrative, outlined in the 2016 Valdai Club report,⁹⁴ the world would once again be divided into two camps with the US, the EU, and the transatlantic network of alliances on the one side and Russia, China, and other nations within Greater Eurasia on the other. In short, Atlantic versus Pacific economies. According to the Valdai Club, this conflict will not resemble the Cold War because it will not be rooted in ideology and countries are too interconnected to tolerate the same patterns of confrontation. “Both groups will pursue a periodic ‘hybrid,’ more or less intensive struggle with each other”⁹⁵ with informational and technological aspects central, Valdai Club experts predicted. Sanctions and countersanctions, according to this narrative, would become a constant practice.

The authors argued that both poles would lack strict hierarchy or relations within their groups and would develop policies based on shared interests. The Valdai Club experts claimed that the United States and the EU want to contain other centers of power and to retain a “monopoly of opportunities” in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Russia and China, on the other hand, share similar goals with regard to Greater Eurasia, combining China’s economic capabilities and Russia’s military might. The authors predicted that political escalations will soon become the norm and will hardly be considered the beginning of the end anymore. But since both the Atlantic and Pacific groups carry tremendous capabilities, the authors predicted it would soon be clear that neither could dominate, eventually leading to a safer world.

RIAC’s Kortunov argued⁹⁶ that since the Ukrainian crisis Russian politicians and experts have indeed become more preoccupied with one vision of bipolarity or another, which he attributed to a desire to see the world in black and white rather than in shades of gray. Instead of fine-grained analyses, commentators increasingly reconstruct a Soviet approach to international relations with a “defining conflict” between two blocs at the center, a simple explanation that frames and, to a certain degree, simplifies global processes, he wrote. Those hypothetical defining conflicts take various shapes, Kortunov argued, including the neoliberal “democracy versus authoritarianism,”⁹⁷ which to a certain degree fits the bipolarity narrative of US-China confrontation the Valdai Club is exploring. Another one, “chaos versus order,” says the United States’ attempts to promote democracy abroad, especially in the Middle East and in North Africa, have led to chaos and decay. Russian officials often use this argument to frame the United States’ support for “color revolutions” around Russia’s borders. Clearly, supporters of this approach see Russia as representing the forces of order and stability. Yet another possible defining conflict, as noted by Kortunov, is “conservatism versus liberalism,”⁹⁸ in which Western states are presented as promoting post-Christian, “morally corrupt decadent values,”

whereas Russia stands by “conservative Christian family values.” It would not be a stretch to call these approaches flawed and viable only in theory.

RIAC’s Ivan Timofeev⁹⁹ has mounted an interesting critique of both multipolarity and bipolarity, arguing that if economic power is seen as a foreign policy tool, then unipolarity is far from over, given the United States’ economic clout. For example, Washington has reintroduced sanctions against Iran and most multinational companies have ceased their activities in Iran. Similarly, most global business is staying away from sanctioned entities in Russia, regardless of political preferences. Even Russia’s strategic partner, China, is taking extra time to do the proper compliance before engaging with Russian businesses. Timofeev says both cases illustrate the overwhelming economic and financial power of the United States, which also rests on the central role of the US dollar as the major global reserve currency, as well as global reliance on Western financial institutions.

Arguably, if the world were either multipolar or bipolar, US decisions to sanction one entity or another would not carry so much global weight. Hence, in Timofeev’s view, neither multipolarity nor a new bipolarity between China and the United States adequately describes economic power relations today.

Liberal world order versus chaos

In the most recent Valdai Club annual report published in October 2018,¹⁰⁰ the authors rejected their own previous arguments for a coming soft bipolarity that would create stability in the international system. Instead, they wrote “The evolution of the international environment, however, has led to the emergence of a different paradigm, one that remains on the sidelines of the discussion — namely, a world without poles. This is a chaotic and rapidly changing order, a war of everyone against everyone else, accompanied by the collapse of the world’s most fundamental institutions — from the nation-state with its sovereignty to classical capitalism.”¹⁰¹ The authors blamed the United States for consciously destroying the existing world order because it is trying to alter the rules of the game in its favor, because it fears the emergence of other centers of power, or because it has bungled conflict-management abroad.

The Valdai Club authors painted a dark picture of the inevitable rise of confrontation and the possibility of wars among great powers. Instead of the physical destruction of armies, however, they envision the destruction of digital infrastructure, calculated to “throw the enemy back to the 20th century.”¹⁰² They attributed much of ongoing disorder to growing tension between elites and the population in most of the West, which they in turn blamed on global migration. Other factors they cited are growing xenophobia, identity crises, and the rise of the far right.

The authors concluded that the world order that existed after 1945 is irreversibly damaged and will only continue to decay. They also argued that “in this diverse and highly interconnected world, it is unlikely that states will manage to construct a viable new world order as long they pursue narrow self-interest at the expense of the common good.”

RIAC’s Kortunov, on the other hand, is less pessimistic. In his essay “Inevitability of a Strange World,”¹⁰³ he argued that most of the criticism of the liberal world order is either unjust or highly biased; multiple crises that allegedly “constitute” its complete demise are overblown. Kortunov urged his colleagues to distinguish among the “crisis of liberalism” as an ideology, the “demise of US hegemony,” and the “crisis of the liberal world order.” He argued that the

liberal world order is considerably more attractive than liberal ideology and much more entrenched in foreign policy thinking of most international actors. “The liberal world order is not the only theoretically possible development option for world politics, but it is the only order in the strict sense of the word,”¹⁰⁴ Kortunov wrote.

Theoretical questions and abstract concepts are highly debated among Russian foreign policy experts. Visions of multipolarity and a new bipolarity are easy targets for criticism and offer a considerably diverse palette of opinions. The Valdai Club and SVOP view the questions of polarity and global order mostly through the prism of Greater Eurasia, in which they are heavily invested. RIAC, on the other hand, tends to be more conservative in assessing the “end of the unipolar world” or a “crisis of the liberal world order,” providing a much more balanced assessment of ongoing trends.

Conclusion

Russian think tanks working on foreign policy issues come in different types and shades. Historically, the dominant institutional form has been the academic research institute within the Academy of Sciences, often with an area-studies focus. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, put an end to their systematic inclusion into the policy process organized by the Communist Party.

At the same time, some researchers, military officers, and journalists built upon new opportunities and founded their own policy research organizations in the 1990s. Many of them, however, no sooner launched than they disappeared. Nevertheless, some private initiatives have been successful and enduring. Since the late-2000s, the Russian government has increased its funding for research and advocacy in foreign policy as state coffers grew and the Kremlin sought to project soft power globally. Hence, the Kremlin has sponsored several institutional innovations. On the other hand, the nationalist and Eurasian policy shift in 2012, which has been reinforced by the crisis in and around Ukraine, reduced the public space for disagreement and serious debate. Some private think tanks that existed as nongovernmental organizations had to relinquish foreign funding, were declared foreign agents, and considerably reduced their activities. Overall, the story of INSOR, the up and downs of RISI, and the changes within the Valdai Discussion Club after 2014 attest to the volatility of Russian politics and the struggle of different camps within the political elite. Even more than in the Soviet period, direct access to the leadership, that is the president and his closest advisers, is the *conditio sine qua non* for influencing policymaking.

The foreign policy community has responded to the events of 2014 by reconsidering Russia’s grand foreign policy narratives, parting with the idea of Greater Europe and conceptualizing the emergence of Greater Eurasia based on Russia’s Eurasian integration and strategic partnership with China. The intracommunity debate has been framed to a certain degree by the facts on the ground: the annexation of Crimea, the confrontation with the West, and Russia’s strengthening ties with China. The major differences in experts’ approaches amount to whether they see those developments as an opportunity or a challenge. Abstract concepts such as the future world order allow a more critical approach for researchers and institutions, and thus introduce a greater diversity of opinions. Ultimately, the analyses of the debates that have taken place in four foreign policy think tanks, RIAC, SVOP, the Valdai Club, and RISI, over

the last five years leads us to conclude that despite state funding and/or close links to state officials, there exists, in fact a considerable degree of controversy between them.



President Xi Jinping (left) and President Vladimir Putin (right) pictured at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia on June 5, 2019. Source: Kremlin.ru

Yet, none of these four think-tanks, even the most critical ones, are (publicly) questioning the fundamentals of the Kremlin's foreign-policy, neither in the case of Ukraine, nor with regards to China. Rather, they try to nudge existing strategies and dominant narratives among the elites into directions considered helpful given their professional viewpoint.

Hence, although Russian foreign policy think tanks by and large lack the opportunity to directly influence political decision-making, their thinking and evaluations do provide the Kremlin with alternative information, which can acquire instrumental value in times of crises. Finally, SVOP, Valdai and RIAC sustain linkages with foreign audiences that allow Western readers to receive (insider) information about the Kremlin's political kitchen which otherwise remains highly non-transparent.

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2. Constitution of the Russian Federation, art. 86.
3. R. Kent Weaver, "The Changing World of Think Tanks." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 22, no. 3 (1989): 563–78.
4. *Ibid*, 567.
5. Diane Stone and Mark Garnett, "Introduction: think tanks, policy advice and governance" in *Think tanks across nations: A comparative approach*, ed. Diane Stone, Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 3.
6. David Cadier and Monika Sus, "Think Tank Involvement in Foreign Policymaking in the Czech Republic and Poland," *International Spectator* 52, no. 1 (2017): 119.
7. A dataset compiled by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC 2015) presents ninety-four "organizations" active in the field of international research. However, the data collection among others includes eighteen institutions of the Russian Academy of Sciences, thirty university faculties, seven publications, three foreign organizations (including the Carnegie Moscow Center), and two polling firms. Moreover, since 2015 several centers listed in the directory have been dissolved or are inactive, while others focus dominantly on socio-economic policy issues. Hence, the actual number of Russian institutions in the field of foreign policy that could be categorized as think tanks broadly understood is considerably smaller and if one includes all area studies institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and certain universities closer to thirty. See <http://ir.russiancouncil.ru/ir/>.
8. For example, the Center for Strategic Assessment and Forecasts established by Sergey Grinyaev in February 2012 and the public diplomacy NGO Creative Diplomacy (PICREADI) founded in 2010 by Natalia Burlinova.
9. For example, the Gorbachev Foundation, the Center for Political Technologies (founded in 1991 by Igor Bunin), the Institute of Political Studies (established in 1996 by Sergey Markov) and the Sulashkin Center (established by former Duma deputy Stepan Sulashkin in 2013).
10. This includes, for example, the Institute of the Middle East established as the Institute of Israel in 1993 by Yevgeny Satanovsky. Moreover, the area studies institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), i.e. the Institute of Europe, the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute for African Studies, cover an entire range of issues from language, to history and politics. A special case are those centers that work among others on the post-Soviet space and specifically Ukraine, enjoying close personal relations with political power such as the Institute of CIS countries founded in 1996 by SVOP member and Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin and the Center for Current Policy, established in 1992 and currently led by former deputy head of internal policy at the Presidential Administration, Alexey Chesnakov who is close to Presidential aide Vladislav Surkov.
11. For example, the Institute for Political and Military Analysis (Alexander Sharavin and Alexander Khranchikhin; reduced activities), the Center for Strategic Assessments (Sergey Oznobishchev and Alexey Konovalov; inactive), the Institute of Strategic Studies and Analysis (Vagif Guseynov; dissolved after 2014) and the monarchist-orthodox 'analytical center' Katekhon, which ceased its public activities in Spring 2017.
12. In the field of military analysis there exists many different networks and clubs led by former officers, including for example the Academy of Military Sciences (Makhmut Gareev), the Academy of Geopolitical Problems (Leonid Ivashov), the Club of Military Leaders (Anatoly Kulikov) and the Association of Military Political Scientists (Vasily Belozyorov). With the exception of the Academy of Military Science most of them, however, do not issue policy analyses or (academic) research products on any significant scale.
13. Some NCOs, such as non-commercial partnerships, are allowed to engage in business activities.

14. Federal law “On non-commercial organizations,” Art. 2 (6), see http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_8824/87a16eb8a9431fff64d0d78eb84f86accc003448/
15. The current list of undesirable organization whose activities are banned includes fifteen institutions, see <https://minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko/unwanted>. The MacArthur Foundation decided to leave Russia after the law had been adopted, see <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/statement-macarthur-president-julia-stasch-foundations-russia-office/>.
16. In addition, there are the Institute for African Studies (1959), the Institute for Latin America (1961), the Institute of the Far East (1966), and the Institute of Europe (1987). Together with the Economic Research Institute (1976) and the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far-East (1971), which both belong to the Far Eastern Branch of the RAS, since 2010 they constitute the department on global problems and international relations.
17. IMEMO became the successor to the Institute for World Economy and World Politics, which had been established in 1925. In 1947, however, it was abolished after the ideas of its long-term director, Eugene Varga, about the postwar posture of the Soviet Union came into conflict with Stalin’s policies.
18. For example, after Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985, he appointed his friend, long-term ambassador to Canada and former IMEMO Director Alexander Yakovlev, to secretary of the Central Committee in charge of ideology. Yakovlev’s successor at IMEMO, Yevgeny Primakov, joined Soviet politics in 1989 as the chairman of the Soviet of the Union, the lower house of the Soviet parliament. The time of perestroika and glasnost was the heyday for these Soviet think tanks’ involvement in politics. Several initiatives by the political leadership were rooted in ideas developed at IMEMO and ISKAN or had been directly suggested by them. For the political role played by these institutes and their experts in the Soviet Union, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) and Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
19. For example, in 1986, IMEMO had more than 700 researchers and almost 1,000 employees. With currently about 350 employees, it is again at the level of the late 1950s but remains by far the largest institute within the RAS department on global problems and international relations. See Pyotr Cherkasov, *ИМЭМО Очерк истории* (Moscow: *Весь Мир*, 2016), 428, 741.
20. In the context of the RAS reform from 2013 to 2018 the maximum age for directors of state research organizations was set at 70. See “Федеральный закон от 22 декабря 2014 г. N 443 ФЗ,” <https://rg.ru/2014/12/26/fz443.dok.html>.
21. “ИМЭМО РАН ходатайствовал о присвоении институту имени Примакова,” Interfax, July 3, 2015, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/451424>.
22. Mark Khrustalyov, “Две ветви ТМО в России,” *Международные процессы* 4, ном. 2 (2006), 119-128, <http://intertrends.ru/system/Doc/ArticlePdf/1058/PERSONA-GRATA-11.pdf>
23. Analysts writing for the agency are predominantly based in Russian universities, particularly MGIMO. The agency is available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.ru/>. Since 2017, Sushentsov has been the president of another MGIMO in-house analytical center called “Eurasian Strategies” with largely the same people involved, see <http://eurasian-strategies.com/about-us/leadership/>.
24. Bordachev is now scientific supervisor (as is Karaganov), whereas Suslov remains deputy academic director. Director Anastasia Likhacheva has led CCEIS since spring 2019.
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