War and Peace in the 21st Century 2018

What is Russia up to?
CONFERENCE REPORT

The 16th War & Peace in the 21st Century seminar (W&P), held at the Palau Pedralbes on January 20th 2018, organized by CIDOB and the Barcelona City Council, in collaboration with ESADEgeo Center for Global Economy and Politics and supported by “la Caixa” Foundation, assessed the current domestic context in Russia in the run-up to the presidential election and the international implications of the likely new mandate of President Vladimir Putin.

Antoni Segura, Chairman of the Board of CIDOB, welcomed all participants and crowded audience. Mr. Segura opened the seminar by highlighting the relevance of Russia and its role in the international arena in 2018, when the country will face serious challenges both in the domestic and foreign front. Mr. Segura reminded that the W&P seminar of 2009 had already focused on the relationship between Russia and the European Union.

Laura Pérez Castaño, Councillor for International Relations at the Barcelona City Council, started her presentation indicating that Europe’s history and European culture cannot be understood without Russia. Russian writers such as Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy or the Belarussian-born Svetlana Alexievich are universal and are part of our own heritage and collective soul. She emphasized the strong affinity between Europe and Russia. Mrs. Pérez expressed then her concern about some dimensions of the current foreign policy of Russia, in particular the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan and other neighboring countries. She indicated that Russia as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council has a moral responsibility to play the role of a mediator and peace-maker in this crisis. Mrs. Pérez stated her regret about Russia not taking advantage
of its international position to respond to this crisis differently. From the point of view of the Barcelona City Council, Russia has missed an opportunity to lead the efforts to stabilize Syria. Mrs. Pérez pointed out that the Barcelona City Council, with the support of its citizens and civil society organizations, has a clear commitment in terms of hosting, protecting and integrating refugees and displaced people. To conclude, she also referred to the issue of human rights situation in Russia. She mentioned that, as the person in charge of LGBT affairs at the City Council, she very often receives reports, testimonies and evidences reflecting an alarming regression in the field of human rights in Russia.

Javier Solana, Honorary Chairman of the Board, CIDOB and Former EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, started his intervention praising the remarkable achievement of holding the War and Peace seminar continuously since 2002 in the city of Barcelona. Mr. Solana indicated Russia’s importance as a player in global politics and a key one for the European Union. He stated that the EU, therefore, needs to better understand today’s Russia and the context of the upcoming presidential election as well as its prospects.

The first panel of the seminar, titled “Understanding today’s Russia”, was chaired by Marc Marginedas, Moscow correspondent of El Periódico. Mr. Marginedas said that Russia is entering an era of uncertainty in terms of domestic politics. He referred to the constitutional limitation of the consecutive mandates which, in theory, implies that president Putin will leave power in 2024. However, Mr. Marginedas questioned whether Mr. Putin would respect the legal provision and, if so, how the transition would be. As he pointed out, all transitions of power entailed periods of instability in Russia, including the last two years of Yeltsin’s presidency with five prime minister changes, sex scandals, terrorist attacks and a war launched by the Government in Chechnya. Mr. Marginedas asked the speakers whether we will witness a similar situation or whether the regime will attempt to reinvent itself to cling to power. He also referred to the economic uncertainties surrounding Russia, generally considered as a result of low oil prices and Western sanctions, but in fact deeply rooted in the structure of the Russian economy. The winner of the presidential election to be held on March 18th is already known, said Mr. Marginedas, but this election will be a thermometer for Russian public opinion.

Konstantin von Eggert, journalist and political commentator, started by saying that there will not be a presidential election in Russia on March 18th, but rather something that can be called a reappointment, reconfirmation, re-coronation, plebiscite, etc. It cannot be called an election as there is no choice between different options, and it is a Kremlin-sponsored theater. According to Mr. von Eggert Russia is entering a stage of growing political crisis as this is going to be Mr. Putin’s last presidential term. Mr. von Eggert does not expect big changes anytime soon as the regime, in his view, is afraid of undertaking real changes. The question of this regime’s legitimacy is the only relevant question in the political agenda of Russia. One key factor that frequently goes unnoticed is the massive de-privatization process undertook in the last decade; as he said, up to 70% of Russia’s GDP consists of state or state-related companies. According to Mr. von Eggert, the biggest challenge of the Russian regime in the coming years will be societal boredom.
Arkady Ostrovsky, Russia and Eastern Europe Editor at The Economist, indicated that Russia’s economic problems cannot be solved through economic means, but political ones. Mr. Ostrovsky agreed with the previous speakers regarding the winner of the upcoming election, though saying that it is a different question whether this election will be successful or not. In his view, when it comes to current Russian politics, elections matter, but they resemble a tsar’s quest for increasing legitimacy rather than a president elected. The consensus built around Putin and his regime, both with the elite and the citizens in general, does no longer work. Putin has failed to protect the elite and their property, as one of the biggest problems for the elite today is transferring their wealth to inheritors. The elites do not feel safe anymore, when investing their wealth in Western countries is becoming dangerous and puts stress on the Russian political system in return. Mr. Ostrovsky indicated that income is also shrinking for the wider population. Therefore, as no class within the Russian society feel safe or satisfied, Putin is relying more and more on symbolic and unorthodox ways of reaffirming his legitimacy, e.g. the annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine or meddling in U.S. politics. In Mr. Ostrovsky’s opinion, the need for such measures would only increase. He emphasized that Mr. Putin’s regime cannot afford to lose a war, but it can afford to go against the so-called internal enemy, which calls for tensions, uncertainties and difficult times ahead for Russia, as the regime and Mr. Putin do not know how to transfer power effectively and smoothly.

Marie Mendras, Professor at Sciences Po University’s School of International Affairs and Research Fellow at CNRS in Paris, started by highlighting the relevance of the international isolation and sanctions for understanding Russia, indicating that the regime should be seen through the lens of a “survival mode”, but keeping in mind that survival at home feeds conflicts abroad. This is not necessary through war —and as Mrs. Mendras pointed out, Mr. Putin has won no war yet—, but rather constant confrontation. If Russia had a booming economy or had been on good terms with major powers, Mrs. Mendras questioned whether it would need to recruit an army of hackers and journalists. She said she saw no single victory for Russia in the last three or four years, including in Syria. She stated that this survival mode made the Kremlin use much energy and all the little legitimacy it had left to maintain its power and wealth. From a European perspective, Mrs. Mendras stated that the decision-making crisis in Moscow should worry the EU the most. Top echelons of power live trapped in an opaque world of delusion and they are misinformed. Contrary to Mr. von Eggert, Mrs. Mendras argued that the elites are not bored, but very worried. Professional elites, she said, are losing fast in terms of money and prospects.

The second panel of the conference, titled “What is the “rightful place” of Russia in the World Order?”, was chaired by Cristina Gallach, Former Under Secretary General for the Department of Public Information at the United Nations. Mrs. Gallach summed up some of the questions to be addressed during this panel as follows: What is the role of Russian foreign policy in the neighbourhood? Is it going to change with Mr. Putin’s new mandate? What can the West as a whole do, us in order to solve the huge problems of the world which cannot be solved by individual actors? Is Russia a reliable partner? And if so, in which areas is it a reliable partner?
Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), started his presentation asking whether Russia is part of the problem or part of the solution. These questions, he insisted, are an important issue for Europe, for the West and for Russians. Nobody wants to be part of the problem. The issue of what is rightful is particularly difficult for former imperial countries, which undergo a certain international downturn. Spain, Turkey and the UK exemplify this. Britain has lost its empire status, but not yet found a role in the world. Mr. Kortunov then asked what the reality for Russia is. One of the key notions for post-imperial states is respect, as they tend to feel that “they no longer matter”, and this is not a comfortable psychology as everyone wants respect and recognition. Russia, Mr. Kortunov pointed out, tends to consider that it is entitled to a different future from the post-Soviet states. Therefore the relationship Russia could form with other international actors like the EU or NATO has always been a struggle. He considered that Russia can hardly be part of an Eastern Partnership or similar schemes of regional cooperation.

Hence, in the view of Mr. Kortunov, living in Europe without being part of NATO or EU implies being a peripheral country for Russia. According to Mr. Kortunov, the core of the problem is not the enlargement of the EU, but that Russia is marginalized and is uncomfortable. A special status implies a special status in the territory of the former Soviet Union. He
continued by asking whether Russia could be part of the solution, stating that if one wants to be a great power in the 21st century, it should be a contributor of global commons. Greatness cannot only be defined by the possession of nuclear weapons; it is not only about power projection, energy or other resources that puts one in a special category of countries operating in global markets. It is not just about having veto power in the United Nations. The fundamental problem of Russia right now is that its foreign policy tools to make a case are very limited. Russia has military power, nuclear energy and conventional gas and oil; it is part of various institutions including the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but this is not enough, as Russia is not a revisionist power. Mr. Kortunov stated that claiming Russia’s policies as the cause of all of Russia’s problems in the international arena is an oversimplification, because the problem goes deeper than the leadership. For many Russians, the world is perceived predominantly as a hostile place, a source of challenges and threats more than that of opportunities. Going back to Russian history and cultural codes explain why there is this image in the consciousness of a part of the Russian society. Mr. Kortunov stressed on the fact that changes of mentality own terms of approaching the world are necessary. Russia can play an important role in a number of areas. Internet is one example: Russian is the second most commonly used language on the internet after English. However, the Kremlin looks at internet as a threat, not as a tool to promote Russia and the Russian culture, as a source of soft power. Without economic reforms there won’t be stakeholders interested in Russian politics, therefore economic reform is a must, he concluded.

Judy Dempsey, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe and Editor in Chief of Strategic Europe, started her presentation by highlighting how difficult it is to talk about Russia nowadays in the EU, as the discussion is completely polarized. One is either on one side or the other. Mrs. Dempsey recalled how in 2007 former German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Frank Steinmeier, went to Russia in order to revise the Ost-politik and, in a way, to try to re-integrate Russia, stressing the relevance of economic transformation and modernization. However, President Putin rejected this attempt and since then there has been a feeling in Berlin of having lost Russia. According to Mrs. Dempsey, Mrs. Angela Merkel realized that the Ost-politik was not working and needed new additions, but the Ukrainian crisis changed it all. Mrs. Merkel led, as it is known, the EU move to impose sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea, including pushing other member states to support this step. Mrs. Dempsey reminded of Mrs. Merkel’s February 2014 phone call with Mr. Putin, when she asked about his intentions regarding Ukraine, and him replying that there was nothing he would do about it. Mrs. Merkel realized Mr. Putin couldn’t be trusted, and her opinion mattered a lot for the German elite, as Mrs. Dempsey pointed out. She also said that changes in Germany and the EU were the first key elements of the new relationship with Russia. That the EU had a unified position regarding the sanction resolution totally surprised the Kremlin. In the view of Mrs. Dempsey, the strategy of Russia was to play the member states against each other.

Mrs. Dempsey agreed with Mr. Kortunov that Russia’s foreign policy instruments are limited. For instance, the EU has stepped together over the sanctions, which explains the frustration of Russia about Europe. Since it could not play one country against the other, it is now trying to
meddle with the EU's internal affairs. Mrs. Dempsey said that Russia has convinced itself that NATO and the EU are trying to provoke a regime change in Moscow, which is a red line for the Kremlin. The competition of ideas and values and how democracy has to move forward in dealing with issues of, e.g. social media is a reflection of this EU-Russia crisis. In search of a starting point of this rupture, which many date back to the NATO operation in Kosovo in the spring of 1999, Mrs. Dempsey emphasized that from 2004 onwards the concept of the EU in the eyes of the Kremlin changed from a trade organization to one that exported values. She also referred to how Russia felt betrayed by the NATO and the UN Security Council in Libya in March 2011. Russia did not veto the resolution adopted, but NATO broke its mandate. Disappointment with the West and the aim of projecting and protecting values is pervasive in the Kremlin. To conclude, Mrs. Dempsey said that the Kremlin has missed one recent but fundamental point about the EU. In her view, the EU is moving its focus from human rights to stabilization, and the Kremlin should take this on board, as this is a new element of the EU and a drift away from what the EU believes in.

Finally Mr. Jordi Bacaria, Director of CIDOB, thanked all the participants for their contributions and shared his concluding remarks to the seminar. Mr. Bacaria began his speech by highlighting the implications of Russian foreign policy on European security and the global order. He stressed that as much as the problems of Russia nowadays cannot be only solved through economic means, that Russia needs to focus on its economic instead of military development to be ‘in its rightful place in the world order’. He also stressed on the importance of building a closer link between its foreign policy and an economic transformation inside the country. As regards to the next presidential elections, Mr. Bacaria underlined the question of how the regime will be heading domestic affairs in the coming years. To conclude, he elaborated on the need for a strong relationship between Russia and the EU based on a better understanding of each other and for finding and reinforcing areas of mutual cooperation.