

**From Engagement to Pragmatic  
Confrontation:  
The Political Elites' Approach towards the  
West under Putin**

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## **Engagement and confrontation in Russian approach to the West**

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the main lines of the changes introduced by Putin in Russian political approach toward the West and the orientations of the political elite linked to these changes, on the basis of some elite interviews.

By and large, Eltsin and Putin are linked to two different pictures of the relations between Russia and the West. One is characterized by policies and initiatives of reciprocal engagement aiming to provide Russia with a Western model of political and economic order (based on market and democracy) and to integrate Russia into the Western international institutions (G8 EU NATO). The other one is characterized by a more complicated mix of convergences and divergences, where a meaning part of that engagement seeking approach has been replaced by a peculiar kind of political confrontation, based on a reevaluation of Russian national interests and its role in the world.

In this context, Russian *integration* into the Western world is not considered a primary need anymore. Consequently, in the last years, many tensions have come about between Russia and the West, regarding Russian compliance with the Western values and expectations in both home and foreign policies. For his hard public replies to Western critics, Putin has frequently been described as an anti-Western leader, seeking a new cold war.

However, when Putin became president the Russia-West relations had already entered a difficult phase with the interruption of NATO-Russia cooperation after the war on Kosovo, the US unilateral retirement from the ABM treaty, and a hard criticism on the war on Chechnya. Nevertheless, over the following years the Russia-West dialog reasonably expanded. To quote some examples, Russia-NATO relations resumed with the creation of the Russia-NATO Council in 2002, Russia-EU summits became regular and promoted some new forms of cooperation on security. In addition, Russia strengthened the bilateral relations with Western countries and its position as a permanent and full-fledged member of the G8.

So, despite the allegations of anti-westernism, nowadays Russia appears better linked with the West than in Putin's early days in charge. However, the basis of the Russia-West dialog changed terribly. Compared to Eltsin's one, Putin's approach to the West lies on a deeply different ground: not the full engagement into the Western model and organisations but rather an equal cooperation allowing the country to preserve its ideas

and identity and defend its national interests without being frightened of peaks of political confrontation. Generally, the West criticises Russia on democracy backsliding, energy blackmailing, the Chechen war, and the military and political support to the “rough states”. On its side Russia replies claiming its full sovereignty, complaining for the Western use of double standards and criticising the US hegemonic attitudes, as in Putin’s recent speeches at Lathi (2006) and Munich (2007).

None of these peaks opened a permanent conflict between Russia and the West. However, they stand for a significant change in Russian elite’s approach to Russia-West relations. And it is on these changes that I will focus, on the basis of the two main different options of political approaches, recorded so far, and more properly: the “full engagement” and the “political confrontation”.

## The political confrontation in the elite interviews

On the basis of a selection of elite interviews collected under a research project coordinated at Glasgow University, I would like to show what arguments and concerns have been feeding the move from engagement to confrontation under Putin.

### The interviewees

The interviewees belong to the key levels of foreign and security policy making - from the parliament to the presidential organs and to the business community. Generally they occupy a position near to head officers (as sub-directors, *referent*, *sotrudnik*, *sovietnik*) or a leading position as businessman. According to their positions they have been grouped as follows:

**A- Presidency:** people involved in the activities of the presidential administration, the Security Council and other structures related to foreign and security policy

**B- Executive:** people working for the premier, the government or other branches of executive power

**C-Legislative:** people from parties, parliamentary groups and key commissions as those of security or foreign affairs

**D- Economy:** leaders and members of industrial groups having relations with the Western partners and competitors

## **Evaluating the elite approach**

The interviews focus mainly on five aspects: the opinion on Eltsin and Putin, the views on EU and NATO, the identification of Friends and Foes and the general view of the West. For each aspect we use a five-grade scale to evaluate the orientation of the interviewees from the engagement to the confrontation, as follows:

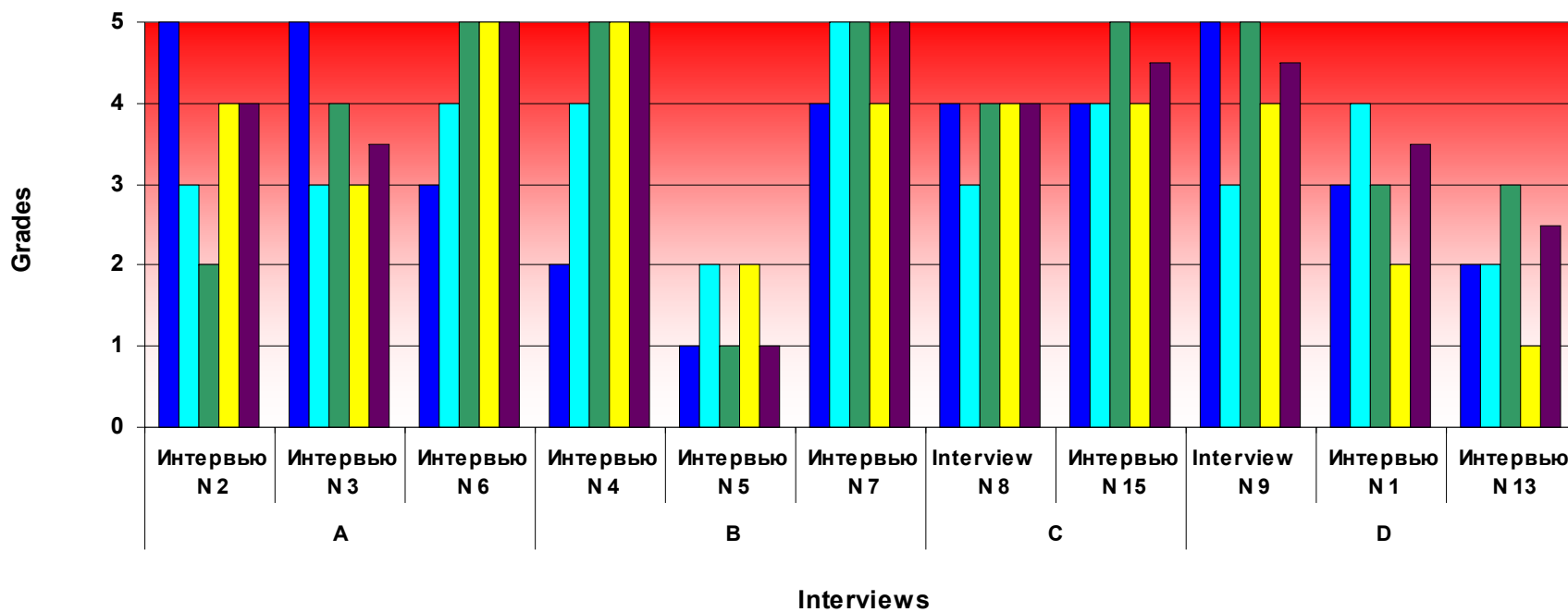
**Eltsin/Putin.** 1-5 scale where 1 means high preference or remark for Eltsin and 5 means high preference for Putin and commitment to most of his points. 3 is a moderate remark of changes introduced by Putin while 2 and 4 are mid options between moderate remark and strong preferences: 2 means no or low preference for Eltsin but criticism on Putin and its politics; 4 means general approval for Putin.

**EU/NATO.** 1-5 scale where 1 represents deep engagement intensions and 5 means complete adversity and/or remark of divergences. 3 means pragmatic neutrality and 2/4 are mid options between neutrality and strong preferences (2=selective engagement and 4 selective confrontation).

**Friends and foes.** 1-5 scale where 1 means remark of internal or international foes which cannot be defeated without the assistance of the West. 2 Is a general identification of common (Russia and West) foes to defeat which some cooperation with the West is needed. 3 Identifies common (Russia-West) foes but different views and approaches in dealing with them. 4 means involvement of the West in the number of foes. 5 indicates USA and/or Europe as the main foes.

**Approach to the West.** 1-5 scale where 1 means full engagement, 5 strong/full confronting approach, 4 softer and selective confrontation, 3 pragmatic approach, 2 pragmatic engagement.

### Engagement and confrontation in Russian elite



## Results and main concerns of the interviewees

The graphic shows the general results of the interviews analysis. The first point we can make is that most of the lines pass the grade 3. In the 1-5 scales described above 3 generally marks an intermediate approach between engagement and confrontation. That's to say that most of the orientations reach grades between the pragmatic approaches and the confrontational ones. So far, the number of interviews scored is not large enough for a quantitative analysis but the arguments and the concerns emerged in the interviews help explain the changes in Russian approach to the West and deserve some mention.

**Eltsin/Putin.** All the interviewees underline a difference in the 2 leaders' approaches to the West. The approval for Putin's foreign policy is generally high for his coherence and attention to the Russian national interests and international status. Still some criticism is reported both for Eltsin and Putin. If Eltsin is blamed for his contradictory policies and for excessive dependence on Western powers, Putin is blamed for the strong centralisation of power.

**Europe EU/ NATO.** It is interesting to compare these two trends. Both the lines mostly pass the grade 3 with the green one (NATO) generally reaching some higher grades than the blue one (EU). On one hand, the elite members' approach to NATO and EU is characterised by a departure from engagement intentions replaced by pragmatism and in some cases by a strong adversity to these institutions mainly because of their eastward enlargement. On the other hand, some distinctions are made between EU and NATO.

In the first case they recognise a common identity with the European countries that might allow some cooperation with the EU on security, trade, and energy issues, while in the second case, it appears much more difficult to recognise a partnership with NATO since it was created with anti-soviet and possibly anti-russian purposes. For some pragmatic interviewees Europe represents the part of the West with which Russia should mainly engage in dialog and cooperation to build a multilateral world although preserving its identity. However, according to the most radical ones, both the EU and NATO are a mere projection of the US

hegemony. Finally, it's noteworthy that the radical and the pragmatic wings appear to converge on some worrying dynamics: the EU and NATO eastward enlargement, some unilateral NATO initiatives in ex soviet space (as NATO's operations in Crimea, 2006) and the hard criticism on Russian internal affairs.

**Friends and Foes.** Almost all of the interviewees consider the international terrorism a major challenge for Russia and the international community. However, most of them don't hesitate to include the West among the main national foes. This is because there are many divergences on the ways Russia and the West should face terrorism. They are linked to the reciprocal blame on the use of force, in Chechnya, from the Western point of view and in Middle East from the Russian one. Some interviewees consider the West hostile because it is seeking to limit Russian international perspectives on both global and regional level. To them, Washington wants to impose its decisions with the military force (Yugoslavia, Iraq) and wants to affect the political orientation of the former soviet states so depriving Russia of its natural allies in the near abroad. For these reasons the United States is sometimes included in the number of main foes. As for the European countries, some interviewees regard them as potential allies to balance the US superpower while some others consider them still too weak and influenced by the US anti-Russian initiatives. Definitely, the United States is regarded as a foe in political and military terms while Europe in economic and industrial ones.

**Approach to the West.** In most of the interviews seems to prevail a general approach to the West that includes elements of pragmatism and elements of political confrontation. However in no cases the argumentation of these positions has an aggressive nature. The interviewees try to explain the reasons that are behind their positions. Mostly they want Russia to protect itself from the Western ambitions and not react against it. They condemn the 11/9 attacks and hope that Russia and the West will improve their cooperation in counter-terrorism through mutual respect and comprehension. Even those who include the West in the main foes recognise the relevance of a good partnership with the West: a partnership that should not imply Russian *adaptation* to the Western standards but rather a constant negotiation.

## Conclusion

The results of this interviews' analysis seem to suggest that the Russian elite's approach toward the West has left the full engagement seeking nature of the early nineties without embarking on a new cold war but rather elaborating a complex approach to Russia-West relations bringing to what might be defined a *pragmatic confrontation*. The analysis of the elite interviews seems to suggest that the current attitude of Russian leaders to face peaks of political confrontation is related to an approach widely shared by the political elite. This approach marks a departure from the full engagement intentions of early nineties, as a result of the high costs of the failed transition in terms of economic and international decline.

The full engagement has been replaced by a *pragmatic confrontation* that, so far, cannot be labelled *anti-westernism* and has not acquired any aggressive feature. In this perspective, Russia-West relations seem to have a chance to develop further although on a new basis which is very different from that tried early after the end of the cold war.

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