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Legend and fascination, geopolitics and deterrence: Intellectual myths and neoteric French policy towards Russia

Legenda i fascynacja, geopolityka i odstraszanie. Intelektualne mity i nowoczesna francuska polityka wobec Rosji

ABSTRACT:
The article examines the evolution of France's foreign policy toward Russia, tracing the shift from historical fascination to active deterrence. It analyses the historical and ideological roots of France's diplomatic stance in light of changing geopolitical dynamics. Drawing on historical accounts of Franco-Russian relations and recent policies under President Emmanuel Macron, the study employs qualitative analysis of French foreign policy discourse and strategic positioning in Europe. The findings indicate that Russia's aggression in Ukraine has prompted a major shift: historical ambivalence, once shaped by ideological sympathy and rivalry with the US, has given way to a unified European stance aligning France with Central European states. This reflects a broader ideological turn toward European unity and NATO-EU cooperation. France's new approach is not merely reactive but part of a strategic vision of a geopolitically autonomous Europe, with Paris assuming a leading role in shaping a cohesive Western response to Russia.

KEYWORDS:
Franco-Russian relations, foreign policy, geopolitics

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STRESZCZENIE:
Artykuł analizuje ewolucję francuskiej polityki zagranicznej wobec Rosji, ukazując przejście od historycznej fascynacji do aktywnej polityki odstraszania. Badanie koncentruje się na historycznych i ideologicznych podstawach francuskiego podejścia dyplomatycznego w kontekście zmieniającej się sytuacji geopolitycznej. Wykorzystano źródła opisujące relacje francusko-rosyjskie oraz najnowsze decyzje podejmowane za prezydentury Emmanuela Macrona. Zastosowano jakościową analizę dyskursu polityki zagranicznej Francji i jej strategicznego pozycjonowania w Europie. Wyniki wskazują, że rosyjska agresja wobec Ukrainy doprowadziła do zasadniczej zmiany: historyczna ambiwalencja, kształtowana niegdyś przez ideologiczną sympatię i rywalizację z USA, ustąpiła miejsca jednolitemu stanowisku europejskiemu, zbliżającemu Francję do państw Europy Środkowej. Zmiana ta odzwierciedla szerszy zwrot ideologiczny w stronę jedności europejskiej i współpracy NATO–UE. Nowe podejście Francji nie jest jedynie reakcją, lecz częścią strategicznej wizji geopolitycznie autonomicznej Europy, w której Paryż odgrywa wiodącą rolę.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:
stosunki francusko-rosyjskie, polityka zagraniczna, geopolityka

1. Introduction

From the Enlightenment, when intellectual "romances" with Russian culture and power first emerged, France's relationship with Russia has been characterized by both fascination and pragmatism. In that era, Western Europe began to define its own identity partly through the invention of an "Eastern Europe" – a space imagined as lying between civilization and barbarism, between Europe and Asia. Russia, placed within this conceptual framework, became both an object of curiosity and a subject of condescension, admired for its grandeur yet regarded as perpetually "other"[1].

France's later relations with Russia continued to reflect this duality. During the Cold War, strong communist currents and geopolitical rivalries positioned the Soviet Union as both a partner and a counterweight to American influence. After the fall of the Kremlin regime, France saw an opportunity to foster closer cooperation with descendants of the fallen empire, aiming both to gain broader influence in the region and to secure its own economic interests. During this time, Paris saw Moscow as a strategic balancer in the

[1] L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford 1994, p. 15.

world order, and NATO was often perceived as an informal rival to French interests. But this historical liaison has ended abruptly with President Emmanuel Macron's recent reversal. Attempts to engage the Kremlin have been replaced by a determined focus on deterring Russia in the face of its aggression in Ukraine.

This change is not just a reaction; rather, it is a component of a larger plan to create a geopolitically independent Europe, with France at the forefront of a cohesive NATO-EU alliance. A new era of practical, group action is beginning to reshape Europe's place in a turbulent world as Paris aligns with Central Europe. This is possible both due to the geopolitical situation as well as a tradition in French political and historical thought, which is currently being used to reshape French international politics as a whole.

2. The origins of the French attitude towards Russia and the Soviet Union

Franco-Russian relations trace their roots primarily to the 18th century, when Russia opened itself up to the outside world. At the time, France was regarded as the cultural, civilizational, political, and social centre of Europe – the hegemon in all these fields. It is no surprise, then, that Russia, in its pursuit of partial modernization, looked models along the banks of the Seine for inspiration[2]. Due to geographical distance and the emerging concept of the concert of powers – in which states balance one another and engage in geopolitical manoeuvring[3] – Russia appeared to be a safe ally for many European countries, including not only France but also Britain and Austria.

The European areas where Russia sought territorial dominance at the time included the Baltic region and the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. First came the conflict with Sweden (1700 to 1721), where the objective was access to the Baltic Sea coast. Later came the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), in which Russia, allied with France and Austria, aimed

[2] The discussion about whether Peter the Great's intentions to "westernise" Russia were genuine continues to this day. One common opinion is that Russia's modernization was largely superficial, carried out sincerely only in the areas of militarization and army reforms.

[3] More on the topic of classical concept of balance of powers in Europe, see P. Wandycz, *Pax Europea*, Cracow 2003; E.V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, Ithaca 1955.

to destroy the growing power of Prussia. The reversal of alliances came in 1764, under the new tsar, following the *Miracle of the House of Brandenburg*, when Russia aligned with Prussia against Austria to maximize its influence over the crumbling Commonwealth[4]. The three powers reached an agreement and carried out partitions of Poland, through which much of its territory came under Russian control.

A critical moment for France's position in the region was its failure in the Seven Years' War. France's defeat – primarily at the hands of Britain, and to a lesser extent through the collapse of its alliance with Austria – marked a significant decline in its influence. In contrast, Russia, despite failing to secure a decisive victory, managed to turn the postwar situation to its advantage, emerging as the most influential political actor in Central and Eastern Europe. At that point, both Russia and Prussia were rising powers, while French influence was visibly waning.

The French elites of the second half of the 18th century closely observed the process of the diminishing of their country on the international stage. Their attention began to shift not only away from French domestic concerns but also from the Western European sphere (British, French, Italian) toward the East: initially, toward Germany, and later toward Russia, especially when the Russian side extended a hand to French elites in the form of Catherine the Great's philosophical initiatives. The effect was, as Marek Mosakowski noted, that "overwhelming majority of French philosophers adopted an uncritical stance towards Russia's modernization and wholeheartedly endorsed its ambiguous sociopolitical dynamics"[5].

French Enlightenment thinkers constructed a new image of Russia using binary oppositions, portraying it as both backward and progressive – a space suspended between Europe and Asia, civilization and barbarism, whose

[4] We must remember, of course, that prior to the events of the Seven Years' War, Russia had military defence treaties with both Austria and Prussia. Diplomats from across Europe were actively seeking Russian support, so Russia's diplomatic importance did not begin in 1763; rather, it was already considered a valuable ally and strategic partner even before it began to dominate Central Europe.

[5] M. Mosakowski, *La nouvelle Russie de Pierre le Grand: Un fantasme russe des premières Lumières françaises*, "Cahiers ERTA" 2024, vol. 39, pp. 11–26; idem, *Fontenelle and Russia: Creation of the Petrine Myth in Eighteenth-Century France*, "Cywilizacja i Polityka" 2017, vol. 15, no. 15, pp. 220–229.

perceived potential for moral and cultural improvement made its "otherness" intellectually captivating[6].

This reimagining replaced earlier traveller accounts and positioned Peter the Great as the symbol of Russia's transformation into a modern state. French early-Enlightenment authors, such as Bernard de Fontenelle or Louis de Rouvroy, helped establish the Petrine myth in Europe. The perception of Peter the Great's almost divine stature assumed a unique form within both his own time and in the historical imagination of subsequent generations. He was seen as an extraordinary figure whose personal agency reshaped the Russian state. His actions were interpreted not merely as political reforms but as a radical re-creation of the nation itself – an act of founding that elevated Russia from a loosely organised entity into a centralized imperial power. Enlightenment thinkers often framed his reign as the definitive moment in which Russia emerged as a structured and coherent state within the European order[7].

It would be unfitting not to mention the most famous of pro-Russia thinkers – that is, Voltaire – who was promoter of a positive Russian myth in France[8]. He generally admired transformative leaders who advanced civilization, making Peter the Great an ideal subject of both his study and admiration. Voltaire saw Russia as a real-world example of Enlightenment ideals in action, particularly rational governance[9].

The myth of Peter the Great was not the sole contributor to the positive legend of Russia in European Enlightenment thought. The second, perhaps more important one, is the myth of Catherine the Great. The woman responsible for elevating Russia to the avantgarde of imperialism, shocking as it may seem, was perceived by "progressive" thinkers as a model ruler[10]. This

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6 Compare L. Wolff, op. cit., pp. 11, 357.

7 M. Heller, *Historia Imperium Rosyjskiego*, transl. E. Melech, T. Kaczmarek, Warsaw 2002, pp. 300–301.

8 More on this topic see the Chapter 5 (*Voltaire's Russia*) of L. Wolff, op. cit., pp. 195–234.

9 Ю. Смирнов, *«Вольтер как классик французской россики: 260 лет спустя», рец. на: Вольтер. История Российской империи при Петре Великом, пер. с фр. С. А. Мезина, А. Е. Кулакова; вступ. ст. и коммент. С. А. Мезина, М. В. Ковальёва, Санкт-Петербург 2022* [Ju. Smirnov, *"Vol'ter kak klassik francuzskoj rossiki: 260 let spustja", rets. na: Vol'ter. Istorija Rossijskoj imperii pri Petre Velikom, per. s fr. S. A. Mezina, A. E. Kulakova; vstup. st. i komment. S. A. Mezina, M. V. Kovaljova, Sankt-Peterburg 2022*], "Quaestio Rossica" 2025, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 819–831.

10 More on this topic see J. Kordel, *Catherine the Great, Voltaire, and the Russian intervention in Poland, 1767–1771*, [in:] *Recht zur Intervention – Pflicht zur Intervention?*, Baden-Baden 2021, pp. 503–548.

myth arose from every side of political spectrum of 19th century France – from Voltaire to Joseph de Maistre[11].

Of course, there were those, both in the Enlightenment and later, who questioned this admiration for Russia/Soviet Union. The famous *La Russie en 1839* by Astolphe de Custine is one of the best examples of this, though similar works were published both before and after Custine. Others include works by Jean Chappe d'Auteroche (*Voyage en Sibérie fait en 1761*, 1768) or André Gide (*Retour de l'U.R.S.S*, 1936). The first publication is a careful observation of Russia from a mostly neutral point of view, heavily critical towards Russia's society and governance, while the second was written by a dedicated supporter of the Soviet Union, who, after travelling to Russia, had his image of a "socialist heaven" crushed under brutal reality[12].

What is clearly represented in these cases is an example of one of the most crucial points in the history of ideas: the theory of "travelling concepts", as developed by Mieke Bal in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. The transmission of historical imaginaries into contemporary discourse uses a set of vectors of transmission: rhetorical language, intellectual theories and, in the case of foreign policy, diplomatic practices that continue to readapt the "old" ideas into "new" times.

Building on this, the civilizational binaries that emerged during the Enlightenment (Europe versus Asia, civilization versus barbarism), were rephrased and became part of the French intellectual tradition. The Enlightenment vocabulary of progress and backwardness continued to structure perceptions of Russia as a space of duality: familiar and alien; promising and threatening. The fascination, ambivalence or hostility/fear were being translated into the language of policy advice, strategic planning, and analysis over subsequent centuries, reinforcing the persistence of these travelling concepts.

Within this evolving intellectual frame, the Enlightenment notion of Russia as a "project" defined French foreign policy from the 19th century onward. Russia was seen as a potential partner or ally, who could ultimately become a threat. This pattern is visible in the 20th century, where the conflict between deterrence and dialogue was fuelled through the discourse in

[11] E. Adamovsky, *Russia as Space of Hope: Nineteenth-century French Challenges to the Liberal Image of Russia*, "European History Quarterly" 2003, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 411, 416–417.

[12] W. Marshall, *Andre Gide and the U.S.S.R.: A Re-Appraisal*, "Australian Journal of French Studies" 1983, vol. 20, pp. 37–49.

academia and research centres, and ultimately lead to the transmission of ideas that once belonged to the sphere of philosophy and moral reflection into the construction of modern realpolitik and geopolitical calculation.

It is important to note that both pro-Russian and anti-Russian stances in French political and societal elites were always present; however, neither ever became dominant. France, since at least the 18th century, sought to keep an active influence in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The concert of the empires that took place in the 19th century, beginning with the defeat of the Napoleonic armies, proved to the world that Russia is not a "barbaric country" but a partner to be reasoned and cooperated with. France at that time did not see Russia as a primary threat, as the country's goal was primarily to outstand its British and Prussian neighbours. What is important, especially from the perspective of the presented paper, is the evolution of French influence in Russia and the Central European region from the end of 19th century through the first half of the 20th century – a development that further illustrates how these travelling concepts shaped long-term strategic perceptions.

When discussing the 20th century and France-Russia/Soviet Union relations during that time, we have to remember that from World War I onward, Europe – and in fact the whole world – was going through a process of intense ideologization from various points of the ideological spectrum[13]. Communism, waning democracy, and fascism dominated the first half of the century, while communism and liberalism stood as opposite sides during second half. During this period, the French intelligentsia was aligning itself to some degree with each side: it had both liberal, pro-communist and pro-fascist periods in differing forms of engagement and length. For France, becoming allies with Russia in the beginning of the 20th century was a natural outcome of geopolitical and diplomatic manoeuvring between colonizing powers and powers that were contained within the borders of Central Europe.

The French intervention in Russia during the aftermath of World War I and subsequent civil war, was part of the failed effort to reintroduce the *status quo* in Europe, which was ravaged by the German attempt at destabilizing order, established by the concert of powers decades earlier. The engagement

[13] On topic of ideological transformation from political, cultural, intellectual and artistic perspective see M. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Boston 2000.

of French troops in Russia should not be perceived as a form of special treatment toward the former tsarist regime, but rather as an attempt to ensure that Europe was not drawn into another brewing conflict, one that seemed even more dangerous than the previous war. The French intervention, as part of wider Allied efforts, was only a small portion of the significant contribution of attention and resources France has given to Central Europe as a whole during the interwar period. Military missions, aiding newly created states, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, as well as the project of a "Little Entente", were all part of an effort to spread influence over Central Europe to counterbalance a rising threat – though not a Soviet one, but German.

However, these efforts were ultimately futile. Tony Judt refers to the period from 1918 to 1958 as an era of France's "political irresponsibility", marked by internal political chaos and the illusion of international power[14]. He also proposes a second term – "moral irresponsibility", which, in the case of French intellectuals, would refer to their ignorance of radical movements, passivity in the face of danger, and the inability to recognize risky political developments[15]. In this spirit, Judt approached the attitude of France's political and intellectual elites towards the postwar Soviet Union, particularly their more or less silent acceptance of Stalinism[16]. According to Judt, the stance of French elites after the war towards the USSR did not stem directly from the fact that they themselves were communists, but rather from a puzzling plunge into the "whirlwind" of communism. This whirlwind – seen in figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Pierre Hervé, or Roger Garaudy – may resemble the irrational fascination of Enlightenment intellectuals with Russia, even though the Tsarist regime was the antithesis of their political and social ideals. The Stalinist Soviet Union was just as much an antithesis to the humanists of the 1950s. Yet the myth, the fascination, and the hope persisted.

How can this be explained? One cannot simply shift the responsibility onto Miłosz's notion of "the captive mind" or Orwell's "Big Brother". It seems more fitting to propose that France's turn toward the East, toward the Orient, was rooted in a search for an antithesis to the existing situation in the

[14] T. Judt, *Brzemię odpowiedzialności. Blum, Camus, Aron i francuski wiek dwudziesty*, transl. M. Filipczuk, Warsaw 2013, p. 25.

[15] Ibid., pp. 25–26.

[16] M. Shore, *Wstęp*, [in:] T. Judt, *Historia niedokończona. Francuscy intelektualiści 1944-1956*, transl. P. Marczewski, Warsaw 2012, pp. 6–7.

West. During the Seven Years' War, Russia emerged as a power capable of dominating Central Europe and playing alongside Prussia and Austria in the concert of great powers. It ceased to be perceived as a barbaric land. In the case of the Soviet Union – a state that for 30 years had been widely predicted to fail in all areas: economically, socially, militarily, and politically – it emerged from World War II as a victorious power, dethroning the remaining European states from their positions of influence. Stalin became the only player, aside from the United States, with real global leverage.

Perhaps this explains the source of the French fascination: in both instances of fascination with Russia, France found itself in a moment of crisis. In both the 18th and 20th centuries, its international standing was significantly weakened. And in these moments of French decline, it was Russia (or the Soviet Union) that began to demonstrate power. French intellectuals saw in the easternmost European state a model for pulling France back into the ranks of the great powers. Tony Judt highlights the perceived need for a revolution among French elites in the early years after World War II, a revolution across every domain of life[17]. What other country, besides the Soviet Union, the victorious European hegemon, could serve as a symbol of the total reconstruction of the nation?

Perhaps this is one of the possible explanations for the pro-Soviet sentiment in France after 1945, which was present even after the deconstruction of the Stalin myth in Western Europe and, to some extent, persists to this day in various forms. The question remains open as to whether modern pro-Russia parties in France are more rooted in an anti-NATO stance, or whether they are just looking for a model of a populist, "conservative" government and its "great leader" to emulate?

The French intellectual scene after the war was particularly critical of the ideas and arguments put forward by anti-communists arriving in France from Central and Eastern Europe. In the first two postwar decades, France was hardly the most welcoming democratic country for anti-communist thought. To illustrate the difficult climate of the 1950s, one can point to the case of the Polish émigré and arguably the most well-known Pole in France after World War II, Józef Czapski. In 1944, Czapski published, in Polish, his *Memories of Starobielsk* in Italy, followed by the famous *Inhuman Land* in 1949, which

[17] T. Judt, *Historia…*, pp. 47–50.

also appeared in French[18]. Both books described the "prison" reality of the Soviet Union. Polish director Andrzej Wajda recalled that Czapski had tried to publish the book earlier, but French publishers sympathetic to Stalin refused, saying: "You criticize Stalin – and that is simply unacceptable"[19].

The situation began to change over time – particularly with the death of Stalin, Khrushchev's Secret Speech, and the publication and growing popularity of books written by anti-communists. A symbolic victory for the émigré community came with the French-language edition of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart*, whose preface was written in 1985 by Jorge Semprún – a former member of the Spanish Communist Party (until 1964)[20]. That being said, during the Cold War, France was consistently one of the four main hubs in Europe (alongside the United States, Canada or Australia) for *émigrés* from the Soviet bloc – alongside West Germany, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland – serving as a centre for political, social, and cultural activity. While pro-communist tendencies in France remained a constant source of concern for many *émigrés*, the French government never took action against political opponents of the Eastern bloc regimes.

A separate issue concerns the academic approaches to studying the Soviet Union. In most Western countries during the Cold War, such studies were dominated by the totalitarian methodology, which strongly emphasized the responsibility of Soviet authorities for state terror and the repression of their own population. In France, however, the conciliatory tone dominated in intelligentsia approaches to the USSR. Up until 1956, this took the form of the outright denial of any negative depictions of Soviet power. Later, the dominant view held that Stalinism was a distinct ideological deviation from communism and that, following Stalin's death, the Soviet Union had become a "normal" state. Scholars known as *fellow travellers*, sympathetic to the USSR, at times dominated the French narrative in the field of Soviet studies. We must remember as well that official Franco-Soviet relations under general de Gaulle were shaped by the policy of détente, striving for normalization[21].

[18] It was published in 1949 by French publishing house Iles d'or, with preface by French historian Daniel Halévy.

[19] A. Wajda, *Kino i reszta świata. Autobiografia*, Cracow 2013, p. 46.

[20] G. Herling-Grudziński, *Un monde à part*, transl. W. Desmond, Paris 1985.

[21] More on this topic, see G.-H. Soutou, *De Gaulle's France and the Soviet Union from Conflict to Détente*, [in:] W. Loth (ed.), *Europe, Cold War and Coexistence, 1955–1965*, London

The issue of *fellow travellers* was insightfully discussed by Michael David-Fox[22]. Obvious points of reference for understanding the fascination of these circles with communism and with Stalin himself include the studies of François Furet, Martin Malia, Robert Conquest, Marci Shore, and the previously mentioned Tony Judt. It is sufficient, in my view, to draw attention to the fact that since at least the 1930s, there existed in Western Europe a kind of "sect" of scholars gripped by a fascination with their object of study (just as the "revisionist school" in the US; both cases included young scholars that were unhappy with the strict anti-Soviet narrative stemming from the "totalitarian" school of Sovietology). One could argue that the modern iteration of the *fellow travellers* are the pro-Russian parties in Western countries[23].

3. French criticism of the Soviet Union

Unlike the fascination of Enlightenment philosophers, however, the pro-communist current was a fascination that abandoned the standards of scholarly objectivity, which historians in particular ought to uphold. One of the most notorious critics of pro-Soviet thinkers was Raymond Aron, who argued that those intellectuals were "irreducibly hostile to the West, in sympathy, in spite of all, with the Communist undertaking". He fiercely criticized this "philosophical double-think", noting that they were "merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of the proper doctrines", claiming that the Soviet "monster all spattered with blood is none the less Socialism", thus sacrificing intellectual honesty to preserve the historical myth of inevitable revolution[24].

Exceptions to this narrative are of particular importance today. Among scholars permanently based in France, several names stand out: Mikhail Heller, Alain Besançon, and Annie Kriegel. Alain Besançon described the

2004; A. Stent, *Franco-Soviet Relations from de Gaulle to Mitterand*, "French Politics and Society" 1989, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 14–27.

22 M. David-Fox, *Illusions of Influence and the Mystique of Power: The Fellow-Travelers and Stalin as Philosopher King*, [in:] V. Tismaneanu, B.C. Iacob (eds.), *Ideological Storms. Intellectuals, Dictators, and the Totalitarian Temptation*, Budapest–New York 2019, pp. 25–41.

23 Compare for example: F. Thom, *Comprendre le poutinisme*, Paris 2018, p. 70.

24 R. Aron, *Foreword*, [in:] idem, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, transl. T. Kilmartin, New York 1962, pp. IX–XIV.

French Sovietology field as comprising three "schools" of thought. The first, he stated, was the "scientific" one, which masked itself as objective, but was rooted in pro-Soviet sentiment. The second school of Sovietology that Besançon mentioned was the "communist one that was created after 1968 in the US" ("revisionist" school). The third and most important to Besançon was a "critical" school of Sovietology – one that had the fewest supporters and the least influence, both in academia and in political life.

Despite having the fewest supporters and the smallest influence, scholars from the "critical" school nevertheless gained recognition, positions in academia, and opportunities as publishers. The debate was shaped not only by historical workshop but political and ideological standpoints as well. After all the debates, it turned out that none of the schools could be considered "victorious"; however, they all influenced another generation of scholars and politicians. The distinguishing factor of the "critical" school of Sovietology is that it was composed of people sceptical toward any action taken by the Soviet regime, such as Gorbachev reforms, and later, toward the post-Soviet states in their processes of democratization[25]. They were the minority, albeit a vocal one, who came to be viewed in a better light after the fall of the post-Soviet reforms.

The "critical" school not only made significant contributions to Soviet studies but also, through their work and critical analysis of the Soviet Union, led to the birth of a new school of Sovietology in France – post-Soviet critical Sovietology, which led to one of the most important publications in the history of Soviet studies: *The Black Book of Communism,* published in Paris in 1997 by Éditions Robert Laffont.

The book featured contributions from scholars across France and Central Europe. French contributors include: Nicolas Werth, Stéphane Courtois, Jean-Louis Panné, Rémi Kauffer, Jean-Louis Margolin, Pierre Rigoulot, Pascal Fontaine, Yves Santamaria, and Sylvain Boulouque. From Central Europe: Andrzej Paczkowski and Karel Bartošek. The work aimed to study all aspects of communism across the globe – from Europe to Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Dominant in the tome is what we could call a "post-totalitarian",

[25] See for example an article by Besançon on Gorbachev: A. Besançon, *Gorbachev Without Illusions*, "Commentary", April 1988. And book by Mikhail Heller, published in 1991 in Russian, not translated into neither English, nor French: М. Геллер, Седьмой Секретарь. Блеск и нищета Михаила Горбачева, London 1991 [M. Heller, *Sed'moy Sekretar'. Blesk i nishcheta Mikhaila Gorbacheva*, London 1991].

or in fact a "Central European", way of thinking about Soviet and post-Soviet affairs, mixed with anti-communist interpretations of the history of China and the "Third World" in general.

The publication received both positive and negative feedback[26]. Negative reception was mostly due to a "totalitarian" approach by Courtois, who was accused of taking an ideological perspective. The overall tone of the publication was, particularly in France, seen as criticizing and synonymizing communism with "sovietism" or "Marxism" in general. The authors were accused of pushing ideological beliefs; for example, by equating Stalin with Lenin. The discussion was expansive and entered into another dimension – not only historical but a political one in the field of European politics.

In January 2006, the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 1481, which many interpreted as part of the broader anti-communist discourse that gained momentum following the publication of *The Black Book*. The resolution "strongly condemns the massive human rights violations committed by totalitarian communist regimes"[27]. It was evident in 1997, again in 2006, and most recently in 2019 – when the European Parliament passed the Resolution on the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe[28] – that Western European politicians and intellectuals (at least some of them) have begun to engage more seriously with history through the lens of Central European cultural, historical, and political experience. The first seeds of this shift were planted by émigrés from the Soviet bloc, not only those previously mentioned, but also American scholars of European descent, such as Richard Pipes or Zbigniew Brzeziński, who were naturalized after the war.

That was the only way French academia could cooperate with independent scholars from Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War: through emigration. Only by leaving Central Europe, then under the grip of communist ideology, could meaningful intellectual exchange take place (at least in the fields such as political science, philosophy and contemporary history). It is worth noting that France was consistently welcoming toward intellectuals from abroad. A notable example is Mikhail Heller, who worked at the

[26] More about reception and discussion about the book, see U. Kurcewicz, *Le débat français sur Le Livre noir du communisme*, "Studia Politologiczne" 2015, vol. 35, pp. 27–46.

[27] Council of Europe, Resolution 1481, 25 January 2006, https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/xref/xref-xml2html-en.asp?fileid=17403&lang=en [16.07.2025].

[28] Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, Official Journal of the European Union, C 171/25 (Thursday 19 September 2019).

Sorbonne, became a French citizen and professor, and emerged as one of the most renowned and influential academics of his time at the country's foremost university. One of his students, incidentally, was Frédéric Billet – later appointed French ambassador to Poland during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, France entered a period marked by the belief that "history had ended", that liberal democracy had triumphed over its two great rivals: Nazism and communism. There seemed no further reason not to pursue cooperation with countries like Russia, which were, to varying degrees of sincerity, attempting to westernise, modernise, and democratise. But this optimism merely echoed earlier periods, such as the Enlightenment or the rise of communism. Consider the unexpected and rapid rise of Vladimir Putin and his inner circle, the reassertion of Russia as a global power following the chaotic Yeltsin years, and the crafting of new national myths – of the strong leader, the formidable military, the efficient and disciplined state apparatus. Marine Le Pen – then president of the far-right Front National – repeatedly praised Putin's leadership in interviews. In a 2011 interview with "Kommersant", she confessed: "I do not hide that, to a certain extent, I admire Vladimir Putin. He makes mistakes, but who doesn't? The situation in Russia is not easy, and you can't quickly solve all the problems dating from the USSR's collapse twenty years ago"[29].

Le Pen framed Putin as a "patriot" and stressed shared European values, arguing France should break with what she saw as American domination and "turn towards Russia". It was not only Le Pen who held this stance: ten French MP's from The Republicans party visited annexed Crimea in 2015[30]. Nicolas Sarkozy was openly pro-Russian, as was François Hollande, who initially promised a tougher stance against Putin, and soon thereafter refrained from altering most of the pro-Russian policies and politics of Sarkozy[31]. This historical pattern can be seen as repeating itself, being reminiscent of times when France and its partners in the EU and NATO sought reconciliation with

[29] *Marine Le Pen dit "admirer" Vladimir Poutine*, "Le Point", 13 October 2011.

[30] *Jacques Myard, député Les Républicains, sur France 24: La Crimée est russe, et alors?*, "France24", 25 July 2015.

[31] See more on this topic: E. Kaca, Z. Nowak, *More Sense than Sensibility: French Policy towards Russia under Hollande*, "The Polish Institute of International Affairs. Bulletin" 2013, vol. 123, no. 576.

Russia after 1991 – despite the wars in the Caucasus, the conflict in Georgia, and even the first aggression against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, crises of various kinds began to hit Western Europe: immigration, instability, and economic uncertainty. In contrast, Russia appeared to stand immune to such upheaval – re-emerging as a global force and offering an alternative vision to countries in the so-called Global South, many of which had grown disillusioned with the West. The enduring myth of the great Eastern ruler again led European leaders to take the Kremlin ruler, responsible for transforming a dying state into a pretender for hegemony, seriously.

4. Neoteric French politics

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was the first time that it had been possible to establish peaceful cooperation between the two countries on all fronts since the establishment of French-Russian relations. All of Europe took part in this project, under the leadership of Germany and France, and later US. This approach, however, resulted in Europe being blinded and largely manipulated into thinking that Russia values peaceful relations with the EU and NATO as much as those organizations valued relations with Russia.

Between 1991 and 2022, France viewed Central and Eastern Europe's concerns about Russia with scepticism and avoided the direct involvement of both France and EU/NATO organs into direct geopolitical confrontation with Russia. French government aimed to preserve a balanced relationship with Moscow, putting significantly greater effort into dialogue. This position led to the alienation of Central European countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, which have alarmed the West about the Russian threat and argued for stronger transatlantic ties and more direct security guarantees. At first, after Chechnya and Georgia, anti-Russian voices were limited and often branded as exaggerated in their criticism of Vladimir Putin.

Emmanuel Macron, who felt that Europe should not be a passive observer in the competition between superpowers, pursued a strategic policy between 2017 and 2022 to incorporate Russia into a new European security framework. In an effort to stabilize relations after the 2014 Ukraine crisis,

he started a conversation on trust and security[32]. To refocus France's attention on issues like terrorism, Africa, and the Middle East, Macron's strategy placed a higher priority on reaching a compromise with Russia – even at the expense of relations with European partners. Volodymyr Zelensky's election in 2019 was viewed as an opportunity to use the Normandy Format to end the hostilities, but it failed. Simultaneously, Russian activities in former French colonies raised alarm in France. US-European relations improved under President Biden but Macron maintained direct communication with Putin until the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine[33].

Given the internal problems within the Western alliance and the increasing assertiveness of non-Western powers, Macron felt that settling tensions with Russia was crucial to both France and the EU. In order to give this policy a more European dimension, he tried to convince other EU states to support it. He also engaged on strategic and economic issues, especially regional conflicts and advanced technologies, and he deepened French-Russian dialogue[34].

A lack of visible progress in restoring damaged relations from Moscow did not deter France or its closest allies from seeking a peaceful resolution to conflicts started by Russia, as was evident in the case of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas. Up to the very last hours before the 2022 invasion, France made efforts to stop the conflict from escalating. After failing to do so, Emmanuel Macron had to reevaluate his, and his country's, stance on Russian affairs, which was rather a continuation of a conciliatory approach, with France's geopolitical orientation consistently reflecting a sense of competition with the United States (particularly during Donald Trump's administration[35]), along with the perception of Russia as a more of a potential partner rather than a rival.

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[32] On this topic consult a brief overview of Macron's policies towards Russia up to 2022 by David Cadier: D. Cadier, *France: What Was Behind the Macron Russia Initiative?*, [in:] M. Kaeding, J. Pollak, P. Schmidt (eds.), *Russia and the Future of Europe*, Springer 2022, pp. 39–42.

[33] Ł. Maślanka, *Twilight of Jupiter: The Legacy of Macron's Foreign and Security Policy*, "OSW Commentary" 2024, no. 613.

[34] M. Menkiszak, *Russia on Macron's Détente Initiatives*, "Point of View" 2021, vol. 85, no. 3.

[35] In 2019, Emmanuel Macron stated that, due to Donald Trump and the United States' attitude towards NATO and transatlantic relations, he could no longer be certain of America's willingness to honour Article Five. He described the situation in NATO as the "brain

Emmanuel Macron's approach to Russia changed gradually but significantly between 2022 and 2023. After 2022, France has moved away from its previous stance, and efforts like the 2019 Brégançon initiative[36] have given way to a strategy focused squarely on deterring Moscow[37]. The new strategy is based on recognizing the brutal nature of Russia's war in Ukraine, growing scepticism about the prospects for a swift peace, and a strategic calculation that integrating Ukraine into NATO offers the best long-term security guarantee. For President Macron, this is all embedded within a broader ambition to shape a geopolitically sovereign Europe, not dependent on outside powers like Russia, China, or the US.

The French stance on Central European affairs also had to be reassessed, as France could not maintain its previous attitude of marginalizing countries from this region. The new French approach views Central Europe as a key region when it comes to implementing and designing policy changes towards Russia. Newly created French initiatives, gestures, and broader engagement with the region acknowledge the strategic relevance of Central European perspectives[38].

Macron's gestures aim to signal a new alignment. I have chosen to describe this shift in French diplomatic policy as "neoteric", rather than merely "new" or "modern". It is neoteric because it advocates a fundamentally new idea. This is not just a formal or structural adjustment; it implies a transformation in France's thinking and identity on the global stage.

Today, both France and most of the Central European countries endorse the idea of a "European pillar" within NATO, having moved beyond the notion that EU and NATO interests are at odds. Both sides have a common goal: reinforcing Europe's geopolitical role in a shifting international order.

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death of NATO". *France's Macron Questions U.S. Commitment to NATO in Economist Interview*, "Reuters", 7 November 2019.

36 More on this topic: M. Leonard, *Inside Macron's Russia Initiative*, "The Strategist", 4 October 2019. Leonard argues that the French pro-Russia stance was actually intended to emulate the so-called "Kissinger strategy", which was aimed at crippling Sino-Soviet alliance by allying with China. However, in 2019, it aimed to prevent a Chinese-Russian alliance by warming up relations with Russia.

37 For further analysis of the French political attitude towards Russia see Kunz's discussion of the internal debate on Russia policy in France and Germany. B. Kunz, *Beyond "Pro" and "Anti" Putin: Debating Russia Policies in France and Germany*, "Visions Franco-Allemandes" 2018, vol. 28.

38 D. Cadier, *France and Central Europe Are Converging on Security*, "Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", 27 February 2024.

In May 2023, President Macron, participated in GLOBSEC, a security conference held in Bratislava, Slovakia[39]. The speech he gave there held symbolic significance, as it directly marked a departure from France's longstanding geopolitical strategy, represented both by Macron in previous years and by former leaders of the French Republic. In his address, Macron referred to the famous words of Jacques Chirac, then President of France, in 2003: "Some told you then that you were missing opportunities to keep quiet – but I believe we sometimes missed opportunities to listen. That time is over, and today, these voices must be all our voices".

In doing so, Macron referenced Chirac's earlier, rather undiplomatic statement regarding support for US policy in Iraq[40]. Macron's speech in Bratislava became particularly renowned for this act, his acknowledgment of Central Europe's position, and simultaneously for recognizing that the policy France had pursued for many years was riddled with error and an inability to comprehend the nature of Russian policy toward the region and the world.

This change resulted from the French presidency's increasing recognition of three fundamental facts: the extreme and unyielding character of Russian foreign policy, the failure of Macron's previous personal encounter with Vladimir Putin, and the damage done to France's reputation among EU allies and its aspirations to lead Europe as a result of its previous position. Macron gradually gave up on the appearance of a balanced approach. His words and actions began to reflect his understanding that deterrence and power relations were better ways to deal with Moscow than mere diplomacy.

France's support for Ukraine's EU and NATO ambitions, as well as a shift toward military and political support for Kyiv, were symbols of this

[39] Présidence de la République, *Closing Speech by the President of the French Republic*, https://cz.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/elysee_-_closing_speech_by_the_president_of_the_french_republic.pdf [16.07.2025].

[40] Full statement by Chirac: "I believe they missed a good opportunity to keep quiet. If, on the first difficult issue, one starts giving their opinion independently of any consultation with the group they otherwise wish to join, then that is not very responsible behaviour. It is not very well-mannered". *Jacques Chirac Critique la Position Pro-Américaine des Futurs Membres de l'UE*, "Le Monde", 18 February 2003.

reevaluation. Macron's UN, Munich[41], and Bratislava[42] speeches emphasized a larger theme: the delegitimization of Russian policy by highlighting its imperial mentality, strategic errors, and increasing isolation. Ultimately, the French president articulated a strategic goal of supporting Ukraine until a just and sustainable peace can be achieved – through strength rather than compromise. This policy is supported not only by Macron's advisors (more on them below) but also by large parts of French academia and research centres – to name one example among many, we can point to the works of Robert Belot[43] or Françoise Thom[44].

In summary, France, which had previously resisted involvement of NATO/EU policies in the East, now actively supports them. It endorses NATO's expansion – including Ukraine and Moldova – and has signed direct security partnerships and arms deals with countries including Ukraine and Armenia. Macron often presents himself as a leader of an anti-Putin vanguard. As of 2025, Macron had not only distanced himself rhetorically from the existing legacy of political thought among France's ruling elites, but also initiated substantial environmental and administrative changes.

One of those changes is building the geopolitical foundations of his administration based in part on the counsel of experts who are well studied in Central Europe history and current affairs. The most prominent example of this is historian Justin Vaïsse – author of a biography on Zbigniew Brzeziński[45], and Director General of the Paris Peace Forum, an independent non-governmental organization established at Macron's initiative. Another, less known and more symbolic figure in the direct foreign affairs advisory

[41] In Munich, Macron said: "I want to say here and tonight, on your behalf, to our Ukrainian friends: we respect you and we admire you. Your fight to defend your nation is heroic and it inspires us. […] We will help you until victory and we will be together in building a just and lasting peace. Count on France and count on Europe. *Emmanuel Macron – Vœux 2023 aux Français*, "Vie Publique", 31 December 2022.

[42] In Bratislava, Macron said: "The war of aggression against Ukraine is ultimately an extreme manifestation of a challenge to our European unity that has played out in the last fifteen years, and a show of fragility. Fifteen years of Russian attempts to overturn the whole European security architecture, to reshape it in its own terms". Présidence de la République, op. cit.

[43] R. Belon, *Vladimir Poutine ou la falsification de l'histoire comme arme de guerre*, "Collection Débats et Documents" 2024, vol. 34.

[44] F. Thom, op. cit.

[45] J. Vaïsse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*, transl. C. Porter, Cambridge 2018.

circle to Macron was Frédéric Billet, French ambassador to Poland. Billet was appointed to his office in 2019 and served until 2023. What makes him an interesting figure is that he graduated the Sorbonne in Slavic Studies, while his scientific advisor was no other than Mikhail Heller. Billet was definitely a front runner in the non-appeasement stance on Russia and was one of the most vocal supporters of Ukraine both before and after the war erupted in 2022, acknowledging the role of Poland and the Central Europe region in 2022: "The history of Europe has shown more than once that it was Poland that set an example for us – of how to resist and how to endure the yoke of oppression. […] today we stand in solidarity with Ukraine. Here, the historical paths of our countries intertwine and demonstrate that victory is possible through unyielding will and firm determination in the pursuit of freedom"[46].

However, it is Justin Vaïsse who has played one of the most important roles in shaping the new core French foreign policy. He headed the Policy Planning Department at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2013 to 2019, and was a member of the external expert team advising Macron during his 2016–2017 presidential campaign. It was he who proposed the creation of the Paris Peace Forum – an event aimed at improving global governance through the cooperation of states, international organizations, and civil society on concrete projects – which Macron supported and officially inaugurated in 2018. Since 2019, Vaïsse has led the Forum as its Director General, attesting to his continued influence on the president's foreign policy.

Justin Vaïsse's leans towards a critical view of Russia, seeing it as a waning but still dangerous power driven by internal weaknesses and insecurity. In his studies, we find a view of the modern political world that is increasingly shaped by fragmentation, power diffusion, and strategic uncertainty. The once-dominant unipolar order, centred on US leadership after the Cold War, has given way to a more contested multipolar system. Emerging powers like China, Russia, and India no longer passively accept decisions made in Western capitals. This shift has not only complicated global governance but also weakened shared norms and the capacity for coordinated international responses. In the absence of clear global leadership, regional powers have stepped into the vacuum – often pursuing their own agendas in ways

[46] F. Billet, *Wolność, równość, braterstwo w obliczu wojny w Ukrainie*, 14 July 2022, https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/frederic-billet-wolnosc-rownosc-braterstwo-w-obliczu-wojny-w-ukrainie/ [16.07.2025].

that intensify instability. The Middle East, in particular, has become a theatre of overlapping ambitions and rivalries, marked by both state and non-state actors exploiting the strategic retreat of traditional powers.

This diffusion of influence, according to Vaïsse, has made conflict more unpredictable and consensus harder to achieve. The war in Ukraine underscores the stakes of this evolving order. It challenges not just Ukraine's sovereignty, but also the credibility of European security guarantees and the broader liberal international system. The conflict has resulted in an unusually cohesive European response, bringing military and economic tools to bear in defence of core principles. It has also elevated the role of Central and Eastern European countries, whose proximity and historical experience provide a sharper strategic perspective[47].

The fact that Vaïsse is a historian and the author of the aforementioned biography of Zbigniew Brzeziński is not without significance. By reading his work, in which he analyses the life and political activities of the Polish emigrant, an outline of the biographer's own beliefs may emerge. Justin Vaïsse presents both Brzeziński's and, as reader can deduct, his own ideas on Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the proper Western reaction to regional instability[48]. Vaïsse presents Brzeziński as a strategically independent thinker who viewed Russia's aggression as a symptom of decline, not strength. He supports NATO expansion to secure Central Europe, rejecting buffer zones as sources of instability. Through this lens, Vaïsse advocates for a firmer European stance and a more assertive French role in the transatlantic alliance[49].

Another prominent historian within Emmanuel Macron's intellectual circle – and the broader community of French thinkers focused on international relations – is Thomas Gomart. A historian and current director of IFRI (*l'Institut français des relations internationales*), Gomart has, since his early academic career, concentrated on Franco-Soviet relations as well as contemporary dynamics between the Russian regime and society. In his 2008 book *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, Gomart established himself

[47] More on Vaïsse's geopolitical stance can be found in interviews he gave in 2022, such as: J. Vaïsse, *Conférence de Paris sur l'Ukraine: "Il faut saisir ce moment pour dire que la pente vers la défaite n'est pas inéluctable", plaide l'historien Justin Vaïsse*, "Franceinfo", 13 December 2022; idem, *Le système international est devenu plus chaotique*, "Paris Peace Forum", 11 November 2022.

[48] Example can be found here: J. Vaïsse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski…*, p. 49.

[49] Ibid., pp. 74–75; 388; 406–409.

as an analyst of the power structures linking the Russian government and society. He argued that Russia's national identity is fundamentally tied to its status as a great power on the international stage. This conviction, rooted in the belief that Russia must assert itself as a great power or else be nothing, continues to shape the country's foreign policy long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Gomart, this mindset also foreshadows potential future tensions in dealing with Putin's Russia[50].

In 2020, during an era of worsening relations between France and Central Europe, Gomart was among the intellectuals attempting to restore positive relations. His stance was a manifestation of Macron's policy to centralize European diplomatic efforts in order to act as a global power. While acknowledging the Central European region's geopolitical sensitivities, Gomart argued in 2020 that France's foreign policy priorities were increasingly shaped by global challenges, the growing influence of China, and strategic tensions in the Indo-Pacific. He expressed scepticism about further EU enlargement, particularly toward the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, suggesting such moves risk undermining EU cohesion and provoking geopolitical instability, notably with Russia. Gomart advocated for a more integrated and strategically focused European Union, where internal consolidation and the development of shared strategic capabilities should precede expansion[51]. What seems to be important is the dedication of Gomart and, by extension, Macron to include Central European countries into the wider project of a unified Europe, capable of acting on a global stage as an independent player.

Having examined the examples of France's neoteric policy toward Russia and the architects behind it, we can conclude, first and foremost, that since 2022 Emmanuel Macron has clearly chosen a path of non-appeasement toward Russia and has consistently upheld it. French elites are no longer looking at Russia and its leaders with admiration. This marks a significant

[50] T. Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, Washington 2008, p. 3. One important point to note is that Gomart's book was published by the Carnegie Moscow Center, a think tank that was shut down in 2022. Led by Dmitri Trenin, the Center was intended as a platform for fostering dialogue between Western intellectuals and Russian elites. It's important to remember that in 2008, when Gomart's book was published, Carnegie was widely regarded as pro-Western – a perception that changed after the 2012 presidential election.

[51] Q. Cloet, *Distant Liaisons: What Went Wrong Between France and Central Europe?*, 29 January 2020.

shift in French foreign policy, especially when compared to France's stance in past decades or even just a few years ago. Second, many French intellectuals currently holding key positions in government are more aligned with the European integration project, one that increasingly includes Central European countries. This represents a clear departure from the outlook of Jacques Chirac.

Third, French academia has become more open – partly due to years of interaction with émigrés and the influence of contemporary historiographical trends such as decolonization studies – to scholars from Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, in light of sanctions and growing political tensions, it has largely closed its doors to scholars from Russia. This represents both a culmination and a new beginning: the integration of the Central European perspective into the broader French and European understanding of continental affairs.

Conclusions

This article has traced the evolution of French policy toward Russia, highlighting a recurring historical tension between intellectual myth-making ("Legend and Fascination") and pragmatic calculation ("Geopolitics and Deterrence"). This dynamic can be understood through a multi-phase typology, which began during the Enlightenment, when French thinkers like Voltaire, operating from a position of relative French weakness, constructed uncritical "myths" of a civilized Russia. This phenomenon reappeared after World War II, as intellectuals in crisis viewed the USSR as a model for total reconstruction, in opposition to de Gaulle's pragmatic détente.

This conciliatory stance defined the post-Soviet era, driven by a belief in Russia's westernisation and scepticism toward Central European warnings, as seen in President Macron's initial outreach. The 2022 invasion, however, triggered a fundamental reversal into "Neoteric Deterrence". This shift is not merely reactive but part of a new strategic vision for a geopolitically sovereign Europe, marked by active deterrence and an unprecedented alignment with Central and Eastern European partners. This turn signifies the definitive end of France's historical ambivalence, as the long-standing tradition of "Legend and Fascination" has been decisively (at least for now, while France

is still in a pre-populist ruling era) superseded by a new, clear-eyed era of "Geopolitics and Deterrence".

While French intellectuals and political elites consistently viewed Russia as a partner, they fundamentally misread the country's self-perception. Russia's historical identity, particularly in its centralized form, is rooted not in mercantile, intellectual, industrial or agrarian progress, but in its self-image as a military state (defined by Peter, Catherine, Alexander II, Lenin and Stalin), whose primary geopolitical currency is the projection of fear and force – as Françoise Thom brilliantly observed[52]. The French turn toward Neoteric Deterrence is thus a historic corrective: it signals the abandonment of the centuries-old, flawed intellectual hope of civilizing or redeeming Moscow, replacing it with a pragmatic, force-on-force posture designed to manage a power that understands and respects only the logic of deterrence.

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