



Russia-Canada Relations in a Period of Crisis, 2014-2020

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Abstract

This article explores the state of Russian-Canadian relations from 2014 to 2020, identifying areas where cooperation is still possible. Russian-Canadian bilateral relations are deeply affected by the crisis in Russia-West relations and are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Despite the sanctions and accusatory rhetoric from politicians on both sides, ‘niche cooperation’ between the two countries is still possible in areas of common interest. Cooperation on non-political issues and the use of instruments of alternative diplomacy – Track II diplomacy, para-diplomacy, business diplomacy, and parliamentary diplomacy – are all workable approaches, with the potential for positive interactions during the crisis. One very promising area of cooperation is interaction in the Arctic region through bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

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Introduction

Political relations between Russia and Canada from 2014 to 2020 show that bilateral relations have been affected by the crisis in Russia-West relations and limited by a war of sanctions and accusatory rhetoric from both sides. In Canada, mainstream political discourse does not support dialogue with Russia, while in Russia, Canada itself and Russian-Canadian relations are not among central topics of political discourse and research. This makes the search for a common dialogue complicated. Yet dialogue is important to avoid a new Cold War (Westdal 2016), and effective diplomacy means first of all “detoxifying” the crisis (Kinsman 2018) and engaging with those countries one may disagree with on a number of issues. This article contributes to a better understanding of complex bilateral relations between Russia and Canada, and assesses whether there are areas where niche cooperation may be feasible, even in light of the continuing tensions between the two countries over fundamental issues.

This article first discusses the current Russia-West crisis, where relations began deteriorating before the Ukraine crisis of 2014. Disagreements ran much deeper than different approaches to resolving the situations in Ukraine and Syria, however, the Ukraine crisis remains a significant turning point in relations between Russia and Western nations (Ivanov 2019), including Canada, and still poses an additional obstacle to interactions on a wide range of issues.

Secondly, the article focuses on the state of Russian-Canadian relations. Here, Canadian policy toward Russia is highlighted, as Russia has been mainly reactive in bilateral relations. In turn, Canadian policy is a result of global Russian actions, which are not aligned with the Canadian vision of the ‘rule-based international order.’

The article then examines the positions of Russia and Canada on international events occurring between 2014 and 2020, such as the Skripal case and the Kerch incident, and the resulting deterioration of Russian-Canadian relations. Differences in the estimation, perception, and interpretation of these events by the two sides are identified, and effort is made to take Russian and Canadian perspectives into account. This article does not seek to investigate the controversial cases or incidents themselves, nor to assign blame for the current impasse, but rather to consider how those situations have affected the further development of bilateral relations. This article also examines attempts at rapprochement through discussion about inviting Russia back to the G8 and PACE, as well as Russia’s and Canada’s position and perspective on these matters.

This article focuses on areas where the potential for bilateral Russian-Canadian relations exists and provides a forward-looking vision for the relationship that might guide efforts to better serve both Canadian and Russian national interests. Given the current conditions, niche cooperation is possible in areas where both sides can find common interests. Cooperation on non-political issues, using instruments of alternative diplomacy, is a viable approach. A promising area of Russian-Canadian cooperation is interaction in the Arctic region, which remains the area least affected by the crisis.

The Decline of Russia-West Relations as a Precondition for the Deterioration in Russian-Canadian Relations

The root of the problem in Russia-West relations lies in the fundamental difference in how Russia and the West approach key issues of world order. As Russian political scientist Kortunov (2019b) argues, Russia and the West have a different understanding of “what is fair and what is unfair in modern world politics? What is legitimate and what is not?” They also have different perceptions of the foundations of European and Euro-Atlantic security. NATO enlargement, which Russia has opposed since the early 1990s, was one of the main stumbling blocks in relations even before the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin has consistently claimed that NATO’s eastward movement threatens Russian security and that the alliance’s central role in European security has marginalized Russia as a non-member (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019). On the other hand, Canada perceives NATO as a major contributor to international peace and security and as the cornerstone of Canadian security and defence policy (Government of Canada 2020c). As one of the founding states of NATO, Canada has been an important and committed member of the Alliance. It has constantly supported the major post-Cold War transformations in the organization: membership enlargement and functional expansion (Bratt 2007, 246). Canada also officially approved the plan for the accession of new members at the NATO summit in Madrid in 1997.

In 2008, the NATO Secretary-General promised membership to Ukraine and Georgia (Brunnstrom and Cornwell 2008), which Russia perceived as crossing a line by bringing the alliance too close to Russian borders. At the 2008 Bucharest summit, Prime Minister Harper voiced his support for their membership (Government of Canada 2008). However, other NATO members, such as France and Germany, have been more cautious about supporting Ukraine’s bid to join the Alliance (CTV 2008). Canada’s position in favour of supporting Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO opposed Russia’s stance, as well as its position on supporting Georgia in the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 (Westdal 2012) over the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Major disagreements between Russia and the West also have included Western support for the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019). Russian officials saw support for the colour revolutions as reflecting the intention of the US, Canada, and other Western allies to retain their predominant position in the international system, thus ensuring their “global leadership” (Lavrov 2016). The Western countries perceived their own actions as part of the process of democracy promotion in post-Soviet countries. Canadian scholars Paquin and Bearegard, in their analysis of the foreign crises that occurred between 2004 and 2011 in the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, argue that with regard to these crises Canada’s foreign policy alignment primarily tends toward a transatlantic orientation (2013, 618). In most cases, Canada has aligned its position with that of the US or its main European partners (2013, 637). Paquin and Bearegard also conclude that the defense and promotion of democracy were important values for Ottawa between 2004 and 2011 (2013, 632-33).

Therefore, differing perceptions and assessments of NATO enlargement and the promotion of democracy have contributed to the impasse in Russia-West relations in recent decades (MacFarlane 2016, 354). Another development that has led to the downturn in relations has been the change in Russia’s strategic culture. Russia wanted to re-establish its position as a key global actor and pre-eminent regional power in Eurasia. This change was partly a response to the West’s expansion into the post-Soviet space (Kanet 2019, 1, 4).

Russian and Western approaches to resolving the crisis in the Middle East after the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 and the conflict in Syria also differed (Tasker 2015). Moscow viewed the Arab Spring and the subsequent instability in Egypt, Libya, and Syria as a continuation of the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Moscow also thought that attempts by the US and NATO to change regimes across the world were a threat to Russia (Tsygankov 2018). These developments have challenged Russian views of its status in the international system (MacFarlane 2016, 354). Western countries perceived the processes in the Middle East as promotion of democracy. Paquin argues that Canada aligned its strategy with that of the US throughout the Arab Spring (2012, 1019). However, there were some significant differences in official statements from Ottawa and Washington. The Harper government did not always emphasize the same themes, values, and principles as the US when responding to these foreign crises. For instance, Ottawa was consistently more concerned than Washington with the issue of stability in the Middle East (Paquin 2012, 1003).

With this context in mind, a major deterioration in the Russian-Canadian relationship was spurred by the Ukraine crisis of 2014. Russia and the West, including Canada, do not agree on the causes of the Ukraine crisis, nor on how to resolve it. From the perspective of Canada and the West, the crisis is a result of “Russian ‘aggression,’ which started in 2014 with the ‘illegal invasion and occupation’ of Crimea, and has drawn Ukraine into a bloody conflict in the east of the country” (Government of Canada 2020b). This Canadian position views Russia’s actions as a violation of international law and of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

Russian officials see the causes of the Ukraine crisis as more complex and rooted in the Ukrainian state, thus assessing it as an internal conflict (Ivanov 2014). In a nutshell, Moscow depicts the Ukraine crisis as a result of corruption and weak institutions in Ukraine and biased Western policy. As European and Russian scholars, Fischer and Timofeev (2018) argue, Russia views the February 2014 revolutionary changes of power in Kiev as an unconstitutional coup supported by the West. Moscow also suspected that the new political leaders in Ukraine were proponents of NATO membership and wanted closer security ties with the West, all at the expense of Russia’s security. Russia and the West apply different categories to characterize the change of status of Crimea. In Russia it is called “reunification,” while in the West the term “annexation” is used (Fischer and Timofeev 2018).²

The above-mentioned conflicts, perceptions, misperceptions, and narratives have negatively influenced bilateral relations. Several Canadian international programs that had been successfully implemented in Russia have been curtailed. In particular, technical cooperation programs and the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction have been discontinued. After the US, Canada was among the first Western countries to impose sanctions on Russia in 2014. According to the Government of Canada, this was done “in order to respond to the gravity of Russia’s violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine,” and sanctions extended to the financial, defence, and oil and gas sectors (Government of Canada 2020a).

While areas of tension existed before 2014, as discussed above, former Foreign Service officer Breton and a Canadian scholar Dutkiewicz (2020) note that there were positive developments in

² Since Russia and the West apply different categories to characterize the change of status of Crimea (“reunification” vs. “annexation”), the author of this article puts both terms in quotation marks when speaking about the Russian and the Canadian views.

the pre-2014 period within areas of mutually beneficial cooperation. Thus, it would be reasonable to keep the relations at least at a ‘low level’ of cooperation in niche areas where both sides can find common interests. As long as such fundamental differences persist, the only possibility is to minimize confrontations (Kortunov 2019b). Ivanov (2019), former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, argues that discussion of the Ukraine agenda and wider world issues should be a parallel rather than sequential process. The question of how to rebuild a cooperative Russia-West relationship, therefore, remains open. A minimum goal is managing the confrontation. While the space for manoeuvring remains limited, niche cooperation seems possible.

Russian-Canadian Relations at the Political Level 2015-2020

In light of the above-mentioned and other issues, Russian-Canadian bilateral relations are taking place against a difficult backdrop and are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The regime of sanctions between the two countries remains at the forefront, as well as the harsh rhetoric from both sides. From a Canadian perspective, Russia is not a like-minded country. From a Russian perspective, Canada is currently seen as one of the Western leaders of the “anti-Russian crusade” (Breton and Dutkiewicz 2020).

Liberal Government of Canada, 1st Term, 2015-2019

Following the federal election of 2015, steps taken by the Liberal Party and the Government of Canada, as well as by former Canadian politicians, led Russian politicians to hope for a ‘warming’ in bilateral relations (RIA 2016).³ Several Canadian former politicians, diplomats, and business representatives supported the idea of dialogue with Russia, among them Jean Chrétien, former Prime Minister of Canada, and Christopher Westdal and Jeremy Kinsman, both former Canadian ambassadors to Russia (Chase 2015; Westdal 2016; Kinsman 2018). In 2016, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, said of Justin Trudeau and his colleagues, “we can expect that there will be opportunities to set our bilateral relations straight. [...] the election rhetoric and the rhetoric of the new government indicate that they are ready to resume a dialogue on international issues and restore bilateral cooperation” (Mid.ru 2016). Lavrov’s statement probably referred to a meeting of Chrétien and Putin in 2015, and to the views of Canadian Foreign Minister, Stéphane Dion, who was appointed after the 2015 federal elections. Dion called for constructive engagement with Russia, recalling that Canada was speaking to the Russians even during the difficult Cold War era. However, due to the policies of the former (Conservative) government from 2006 to 2015, Russian-Canadian interactions had been interrupted. According to Dion, while Canada would always stand with Ukraine, it was time to start working with Russia “when we have common interests” (Zimonjic 2016). Westdal (2016), in an opinion article for the *Globe and Mail*, stated that “we seek re-engagement with Russia [...] to serve major, compelling Canadian national security interests in Eurasia, the Middle East and far beyond. We do so to try to turn the rising tide of a new Cold War, [...] to stop the ruinous tug of war for Ukraine, [...] to cooperate in the Arctic [...] to do business.”

³ All translations from Russian are made by the author of the article.

However, this was a short period of good intentions and no positive shift followed. The idea of dialogue was a marginal position of individuals in Canada, as well as wishful thinking on the part of Russian officials. Much-anticipated concrete measures and practical steps leading to rapprochement were not taken by either side, although there remained analysts in Russia who expected 'warmer' relations (Issraelyan 2017, 358). A benchmark for them was the non-adoption by the Canadians of the *Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act*, also known as the Canadian 'Sergei Magnitsky Law' because of its similarity to the Magnitsky Law adopted earlier in the US. Dion argued that this law, which the Liberals pledged to enact, would complicate efforts to re-engage with Russia and harm Canadians seeking to do business in Russia (Lum 2016). However, after Dion's resignation, the Liberals brought the Magnitsky Law into force in October, 2017.

The Canadian Magnitsky Law includes targeted measures against foreign nationals who were responsible for or complicit in gross violations of human rights, or were public officials or associates of such officials who were responsible for or complicit in acts of significant corruption (Government of Canada 2019b). Moreover, the law permits the freezing of assets and the suspension of visas when officials from Russia and other nations are found to be guilty of human rights violations. Canadian firms are prohibited from dealing with foreign nationals who have grossly violated human rights.

The shift from bad to worse in Russian-Canadian relations coincided with Donald Trump's election in the US in November, 2016. Trump's victory contributed essentially, though not decisively, to the end of a warming period in Russian-Canadian relations. Trudeau was rightly concerned about deteriorating relations with the US and carried out a rotation of the Cabinet in January, 2017. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dion, was replaced by a new minister, Chrystia Freeland, apparently selected by Trudeau because of her strong connections in the US (Macdonald 2019). Relations with the US, Canada's closest ally and most important economic and security partner, became the top priority and required most of the resources of the Canadian administration. Other international and foreign policy issues were sidelined. The new Cabinet turned out to be unfavourable for Russian-Canadian relations.

Freeland is often called Trudeau's trusted ally (Scherer and Ljunggren 2020; Vigliotti 2019). Her views may have partly contributed to the Prime Minister's shift away from trying to mend relations with Russia. Colin Robertson (2020), a former Canadian diplomat, suggests that Freeland's Ukrainian origin and heritage might be a reason for her anti-Russian beliefs. Freeland is not popular in Russia and is perceived as being committed to anti-Russian sentiments (Sidorova 2019, 281). She was previously included in the Russian sanctions list and has the status of *persona non grata*, which may also influence her attitude to Russia. Dion's sensible suggestions on relations with Russia were not picked up by Freeland (Robertson 2020), who supported the passage of the Sergei Magnitsky Law. In her statement, Freeland described the law as "a clear demonstration that Canada takes any and all necessary measures to respond to gross violations of human rights and acts of significant foreign corruption" (MacDolald 2017). Canadian lawyers and scholars Cotler and Silver (2020) argue that the Magnitsky Law represents the very best of Canadian human rights foreign policy, but according to Canadian scholars Carment and Belo (2017), the law caused Russia's trust in Canada to deteriorate sharply. Even though sanctions had proven to be an ineffective instrument in forcing Russia to abandon its doctrines, particularly regarding Syria and Ukraine, Canada expanded its sanctions regime (Carment and Belo 2017). This led to Russia

imposing countersanctions. According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Canadian authorities preferred to isolate themselves from Russia instead of developing mutually beneficial cooperation, and thus Canada lost more than it gained from the sanction measures (TASS 2017).

Following these developments, it became clear that a ‘reset’ in Russian-Canadian relations would not happen soon, and the action-reaction dealings continued on both sides. The cases indicated below demonstrate further divergence between Russia and Canada.

The poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the UK adversely affected Russian-Canadian relations.⁴ Russia was accused by several Western countries, including the UK, the US, Canada, and Germany of highly likely being responsible for the incident, using chemical weapons, and breaching its Chemical Weapons Convention obligations (Government of Canada 2018). The UK reacted to the incident with a series of measures, including the expulsion of Russian diplomats. Most EU countries, as well as the US, Canada, and Ukraine, also expelled Russian diplomats to show solidarity with the UK. Moscow denied the accusations and announced the expulsion of diplomats from its territory in retaliation. Russia and its Western counterparts differ in their interpretation of the Skripal case, and it is hard to judge the merits of the claims on either side due to lack of evidence (Kinsman 2018). But it is clear that the case provided the impetus for a new spike in the Russia-West crisis. Some of the direct results of this situation are impediments in embassy and consular services and visa processes from both sides, which affect people-to-people ties, tourism, cooperation, and exchanges in science, culture, and education between Russia and many Western countries, including Canada. According to Dutkiewicz (Harris 2018), there was a risk of a “significant blowback in the Canada-Russia relationship, especially in matters touching on the Arctic.” Luckily, the dialogue on the Arctic did not cease.

The Kerch Strait incident in 2018 involving Ukrainian naval ships also led to divergent interpretations between Russia and its Western partners.⁵ Russia perceived the incident as a provocation from the Ukrainian side, whereas Ukraine and its Western supporters saw Russia’s actions as aggression against Ukraine. Along with the EU and the US, Canada announced new sanctions on 114 individuals and 15 entities (Government of Canada 2019a). In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that “the Canadian authorities are playing their Russophobic card” (Mid.ru 2019). The lack of political dialogue and transparency from both sides heightened misunderstandings.

In 2019, Trump expressed his support for reinstating Russia into the G7, and French President, Emmanuel Macron agreed that Russia should be invited to the G7 summit in 2020 (Atwood and Klein 2019). Other members, such as the UK and Canada, reject this possibility (Thompson 2020).

⁴ On March 4, 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military officer and double agent for the UK’s intelligence services, and his daughter, Yulia Skripal, were poisoned in Salisbury, England, with a nerve agent of Novichok family.

⁵ On November 25, 2018, Russian border guards detained two small armored artillery vessels “Berdyansk” and “Nikopol” in the Kerch Strait and the raid tugboat “Yana Kapu” of the Ukrainian Navy. On board the ships were 24 servicemen of the Ukrainian Navy and two officers of the Security Service of Ukraine. It was alleged that they had illegally crossed the Russian border. Ukrainian sailors were arrested and detained until the exchange of detainees between Moscow and Kiev in September, 2019. In November, 2019, the Russian Federation handed over to Ukraine the ships detained a year earlier. However, Kiev intends to seek a guilty plea from Moscow, as well as compensation from Russia.

There is no unity within the G7 regarding conditions for Russia's return. In the West, Moscow's potential return is seen as a "reward for Russia's good behaviour," however in Moscow it is assumed that the G7 needs Russia, more than Russia needs the G7, in order for the group to solve serious problems in the international community (Kortunov 2019d, 31-32; Baunov 2019). As Kortunov argues, Russia would be interested in returning to the G7 only if there were significant changes in the foreign policy of at least some members (2019d, 32). However, Russian scholars highlight that there might be a joint interest in returning to the "G7+1" formula (Kortunov 2019a). Joining the G7 for discussion on problems of common interests, such as the digital economy, international tax reform, trade protectionism, and global inequality could be productive.

In the summer of 2019, Russia was reinstated in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) with French and German support (Mounier 2019). Kortunov (2019c) suggests those who argue about Russia's membership in PACE can be divided into two groups: "pragmatists" and "skeptics." From a pragmatic perspective, Russia's membership in PACE opens a platform for dialogue, which should not be neglected when there are not enough communication lines between Moscow and Western capitals. However, skeptics do not believe Russia's participation will be constructive. In their opinion, the Russian delegation to PACE will use the Assembly mainly to promote "Kremlin propaganda" (Kortunov 2019c). Canada took the position of the skeptics on this issue, supporting Ukraine's dissatisfaction with the decision. If the goal is conflict resolution and stability in Europe and the Euro-Atlantic space, this refusal to open the channels of communication may be counter-productive.

The Russian Question in the 2019 Federal Election Campaign and Post-election Period

The "Russian question" was raised in Canadian political discourse shortly before the 2019 federal election in Canada, as Russia, as well as China and North Korea, were suspected of possible election interference (Reuters 2019; TASS 2019). A University of Calgary study identified Russia's interest in competing against Canada in the Arctic as a reason for such interference, although no evidence was identified (Blanchfield 2019). Unlike in some Western countries, the Russian issue was not central to Canada's federal election campaign in 2019. The party leaders touched upon the theme of Russia in the framework of Arctic security and development, and the crisis in Ukraine. The election campaign of 2019 showed the positions of the main Canadian party leaders on Russia: in their comments in election debates, all of them maintained a mostly negative attitude toward the idea of dialogue with Russia (Dzsurdzsa 2019; Glavin 2019; NDP 2018). As a result, even in a minority Liberal government, a positive shift in the Russia-Canada agenda is very unlikely to take place. Shortly after re-election, Trudeau reaffirmed Canada's strategy toward Russia in a speech at a 'NATO Engages' event in December, 2019, stating that NATO must engage with Putin from a position of strength rather than one of compromise, and he characterized Russia as "a significant challenge" (Brennan 2019).

Nonetheless, there are voices in Canada calling for a renewed dialogue with Russia. For example, the international relations analyst Jocelyn Coulon has argued that, "Canada had every reason to impose sanctions on Moscow for its actions in Ukraine, but there was no reason to freeze all relations with Russia" (2019b). He points out that it is often forgotten that Canada has just two neighbours – the United States and Russia – both of whom are great powers. Therefore, in his view, it would be desirable for Canada to have a productive relationship with Moscow (2019b).

In its foreign policy, Canada considers the views of the US and NATO allies. Despite the growing difficulties in Canada-America relations during Trump's tenure in the White House, the US has remained Canada's closest partner (Blank and Gattinger 2017, 83, 95). It can be said that the state of Russia-US and Russia-NATO relations has some effect on the development of relations between Russia and Canada. Canadian scholars Murray and Rioux (2020) argue that Canada should become more independent in the world and define a foreign policy that is less dependent on the US and more reflective of the emerging international order. According to Canadian scholars Sands and Carment, there are two countries which Canada must get along with – Russia and China. Canada's Arctic interests intersect with Russia's, and its economic interests require cooperation with China (2019, 286).

Several factors influence Canada's policy toward Russia, primarily disagreement with Russia's actions worldwide, which in many cases are not in line with the Canadian vision of the rule-based international order. It can be argued, however, that Russia's policy toward Canada on a wide range of issues is primarily reactive, as there is no direct conflict between the two countries. Since 2014, Russia's approach has been reduced to retaliatory measures against the sanctions imposed by Canada. According to some Canadian scholars, such as Murray and Rioux (2020) and Fisher (2020), at the moment, Canada has no clear vision for its foreign policy. An absence of a coherent foreign policy may partly explain the lack of a clear sense of Canada's future relations with Russia. Murray and Rioux (2020) underline the need to review and define Canada's national interests, as well as long-term trade and economic objectives. Fisher (2020) has claimed that Canada is missing "a well-defined vision of what Ottawa hopes to achieve and [in] what direction Canada is headed." Instead, Canada is intending to lead in "revitalizing the rules-based international order" (2020). Murray and Rioux (2020) emphasize that Canada has an important role to play in global affairs, but only with a substantive review of its foreign policy.

Canada's current strategy demonstrates the huge importance of the Ukrainian factor on the country's foreign policy. This can be partially explained by the presence of a large, active Ukrainian diaspora in Canada of 1.2 million people. The country's leaders would not want to lose the support of this part of the population. However, Coulon (2019a), for one, insists that foreign policy "is not intended to promote particularism, although it is tempting for political parties to woo the vote of ethnic communities. But the defence of the national interest demands a cold and dispassionate look at the affairs of the world." At the same time, damage from the low level of development of Russian-Canadian political and economic relations is assessed as insignificant for both the Russian and Canadian economies (Nemova and Issraelyan 2019, 373). The search for ways to establish political relations is, therefore, not among foreign policy priorities on either the Russian or the Canadian side.

However, restoration of relations is important for several reasons. As Paikin (2018), international relations scholar and policy analyst, argues, stronger relations between Ottawa and Moscow are essential, not only if Canada wishes to manage its northern border, but also if Canada is genuinely interested in building a new international order in this century, rather than being a mere bystander operating on terms set by other countries. Without participation and dialogue with Russia, there will be no resolution of several international issues. In turn, Russia has expressed interest in a dialogue with Western countries, including Canada, which would help to increase the level of stability and predictability in international relations. Additionally, business circles in both countries have expressed an interest in cooperation.

Alternative Diplomacies and Cooperation on Arctic Development

As the analysis so far demonstrates, Russian-Canadian relations continue to cool, and the space for cooperation is becoming narrower, as neither Russia nor Canada is making any active attempt to restart a political dialogue. In these conditions, niche areas for cooperation become important, such as cooperation on Arctic development. Similarly, it may be worth exploring increased roles for alternative diplomacy, including Track II diplomacy, science diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy, business diplomacy, and para-diplomacy.

Track II diplomacy

Montville defines Track II diplomacy as “unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict” (1991, 162). Academics and experts could take part in Track II level diplomacy, which is valuable in a time of crisis. Scholars from Canada and Russia are concerned over the lack of knowledge the two nations have about each other. Most Canadians and Russians lack understanding about one another, thus inhibiting better comprehension of past, present, and future drivers of competition and cooperation (Lackenbauer 2019, iv). Reciprocal academic contact and cooperation between Russia and Canada have significantly reduced since 2014, but it is important to maintain bilateral contacts to prevent an even greater failure in relations. At best, the goal of expert dialogue is to come to a consensus on the ways forward in different aspects of Russia-West relations, Russian-Canadian relations, and to work out recommendations for decision-makers on how to improve relations.

One example is the conference, ‘Canada-Russia Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arctic’ hosted by Carleton University in November, 2016 and co-organized by Global Affairs Canada and the Embassy of Russia to Canada. The conference brought together diplomats, researchers from Canada and Russia, policymakers, government officials, businesspeople, and Indigenous leaders, and focused on the need for dialogue between Canada and Russia concerning the Arctic (Rubinstein 2016).

Parliamentary diplomacy

The Canada-Russia Parliamentary Association was established in 1998. In 2014, Ottawa suspended bilateral parliamentary ties with Russia as a result of the Ukraine crisis. However, contacts between members of parliament (MPs) continue, particularly on issues related to the Arctic, and expanding parliamentary dialogue could serve as an effective mechanism for discussing spheres of common interest and potential cooperation. A good example of constructive inter-parliamentary cooperation is the Russian-French report on the prospects of relations jointly prepared by parliamentarians from both countries (Federation Council 2018). Parliamentarians from Canada and Russia could follow this example.

Para-diplomacy

The development of relations between the Canadian provinces and the Russian regions could contribute to improved relations between Moscow and Ottawa. This level of cooperation and diplomacy is defined by some experts as para-diplomacy, meaning the activities of subnational units abroad (Akimov 2018a, 25-33). These units have enough potential and capability to carry out independent policies abroad, even while remaining part of the nation. As Russian scholar

Akimov argues, parts of the Russian Federation and the Canadian provinces have accumulated extensive experience in developing bilateral contacts (2018b, 9). Despite political difficulties, regional cooperation can and should develop as there are specific common grounds for interaction.

The most active in this field are the Canadian provinces of Quebec, British Columbia, Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta, while on the Russian side, increasing interest in forging ties with Canadian counterparts has been shown by Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Republics of Tatarstan and Sakha (Yakutia), the territories of Krasnoyarsk and Krasnodar, and the regions of Primorye and Murmansk (The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Canada n.d.).

Business diplomacy

The Canada Eurasia Russia Business Association (CERBA) is working on promoting relations between Russian and Canadian companies. The Association unites over 200 corporations and its main goal is to improve and increase trade relations between Canada and Russia. According to the Association, cooperation between Canadian and Russian business did not stop with the outbreak of the “war of sanctions” (RCaBC 2020). In addition, business diplomacy activists are trying to deal with the phenomenon of self-sanctioning, when foreign companies that are not included in any sanctions list nevertheless prefer to voluntarily avoid business with Russia for fear of restrictions. Such self-sanctioning inhibits Canadian-Russian trade relations. Nathan Hunt, the CERBA Chairman of the Moscow Board of Directors and a co-founder of the RCaBC (Russia-Canada Business Council), believes that business diplomacy has the potential to establish bilateral relations, and that active dialogue between business representatives can compensate for the lack of diplomatic communication at a high level.

Although Russia’s policy toward Canada is mainly reactive, there are cases of Russian proactive behaviour. Russian business and industrial circles continue to support the activities of the RCaBC, which was established in 2004. The Canadian Co-Chairman Gilles Breton says, “both Canadian and Russian stakeholders are doing a great deal to keep the initiative alive and thriving. The RCaBC platform responds to real business needs and serves to advance the common economic and commercial interests of our two countries” (RCaBC 2020). Russian Co-Chairman Alisher Usmanov claims that despite the complexity of interstate relations, the Council has managed to protect dialogue and business cooperation in many areas (mining and metal manufacturing, energy, information and telecommunication technology, transport) and among the largest Russian and Canadian companies: Kinross Gold, Bombardier, Barrick Gold, Magna, ERM, Rosatom, Severstal, Alrosa, Rostselmash, and Evraz. Besides supporting business ties, the Council contributes to educational developments by organizing cultural and sporting events, and bilateral student conferences, and by supporting Russian language studies in Canada (RCaBC 2020).

The Arctic

Dealing with common challenges presented by the Arctic region was one of the most productive areas in the Canada-Russia relationship before the crisis of 2014, and it remains the least affected by the crisis. Cooperation in the Arctic and the North remains a priority in Russian-Canadian relations and is one of the most promising areas for cooperation. To achieve this cooperation, there are a common preconditions and niches of opportunity, but there are also potential risks.

Common preconditions

Russia and Canada are two major Arctic nations and have similarities in their approach to various issues. Both countries share the division of the Arctic based on direct longitudinal lines drawn from the North Pole. This sector method is more relevant than the median line method which would establish areas proportional to each country's coastline.

Canada and Russia both strictly respect procedure and try to resolve territorial disputes using negotiations based on international law. For example, Russia, Canada, and Denmark have a territorial dispute over the Lomonosov Ridge. Each of them is seeking to extend the border of its shelf through a submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. However, this dispute does not prevent the countries from cooperating on other issues in the Arctic. The unilateral establishment by some states of the external borders of the continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean, bypassing earlier agreements, could create increasing tension between the Arctic countries (Zagorskii 2019, 114). Thus, it is crucial to stay within the framework of international law and follow the UN rules and procedures.

Russia and Canada also hold similar positions on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage. Russia considers the NSR as its historically developed national transport route and has adopted several acts regulating its navigation. Canada claims the Northwest Passage as part of its historic internal waters, which means the waterways are under the complete control of the Canadian government. In both cases, the countries meet disagreement from the US, since the US considers Arctic waters international. In the case of the Northwest Passage, the dispute has existed for almost 50 years and the US and Canada have 'agreed to disagree.'

The US-Russia situation is riskier due to the overall character of their relations. The US is at a disadvantage due to difficulties in proving that both Arctic routes can meet the necessary legal criteria for international straits. So far, the debate on the legal status of the NSR waters has no practical implications. However, the situation might change with the Arctic sea ice melting and Russia planning to use the NSR on a much larger international scale (Todorov 2017, 88). Russia and Canada are concerned about the future actions of non-Arctic states on the status of the NSR and the Northwest Passage. East Asian countries advocate greater transparency in the region. They support the idea of loosening Russian and Canadian control and call for the future "internationalization" of these Arctic routes (Konyshev and Sergunin 2015, 38).

Both countries acknowledge the leading role of the Arctic Council in strengthening cooperation and defining the rules of behaviour. The Council was established at Canada's request in 1996, and the idea was supported by Russia. Both sides support the idea of priority for the eight Arctic states (Russia, Canada, the US, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Sweden), and have voted for clearly defined procedures for observers, including non-Arctic states (Nuuk Declaration 2011).

Russia and Canada were the first to be critical about China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore gaining observer status in the Arctic. Their main concern was protection of interests of the Arctic states and preservation of the effectiveness of decision-making within the Council. In 2013, the states listed above, as well as Italy, were granted observer status with the main condition that they recognize the sovereignty and jurisdiction of the Arctic Council member states in the Arctic.

Thus, the Arctic Council remains a key platform for interaction. General political disagreements at a global level are, however, starting to impact on interaction in the Arctic Council. For example, in 2019, at a meeting of the heads of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the countries of the Arctic Council, for the first time in the organization's history, they failed to sign a final declaration because, in contrast to the position of other members, the US declined to acknowledge the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Also, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, criticized Russia's struggle for influence in the Arctic and China's New Silk Road project. While this particular case did not involve Canada, political confrontation on issues beyond the Arctic agenda and negative trends in Russian-Canadian relations may, in the end, have an undesirable negative effect on the Arctic agenda. Additionally, the Arctic is becoming a more open region with a growing number of active players, state, and non-state actors. Therefore, it is crucial to keep this region free from conflicts, both military and economic. Russia and Canada should look more actively for opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation in the region, bilaterally and multilaterally.

Divisive Issues

Hard security and lack of trust and transparency are key divisive issues between Canada and Russia. Assessments of military and non-military threats have changed little since 2014, thus there is no arms race in the Arctic. However, there is a growing sense of uncertainty about the future direction of military and political developments in the region. The escalation of tension may be due to incorrect mutual interpretations of military activities, including the increased number of military exercises, which are taking place in the context of negative political rhetoric and the absence of trustworthy military communication. To avoid additional risks, it is necessary to restore dialogue and cooperation at the military level (Zagorskii 2019, 11, 113). Until 2014, the Arctic states were cooperating along military and political lines. However, when relations between Russia and the West were aggravated by the Ukraine crisis, meetings were suspended. As a result, Russia no longer has multilateral representation in discussions of regional security issues.

According to Russian officials, there is no reason for "bringing military working methods to the Arctic" (Mid.ru 2020). Russia was in favour of resuming the previous practice of meetings of the chiefs of staff of the armed forces from the member countries of the Arctic Council to ensure the required level of confidence (Mid.ru 2020). The sides could probably start with expert consultations.

The sanctions regime is another issue dividing Canada and Russia. Russia's policy toward Ukraine in 2014 was followed by the regime of mutual sanctions between Canada and Russia, which also affected the Arctic in some regards. However, in terms of scope, content, and duration, the restrictions imposed by Canada have been more moderate than those imposed by the US (Nemova and Issraelyan 2017, 367-371). In December, 2014, Canada announced export restrictions on technologies used in Russia for oil exploration and production. Such restrictions negatively impacted the Russian oil and gas industry, which is dependent on foreign equipment and technology. There have been instances when US sanctions have created difficulties in economic cooperation in the Arctic. For example, a joint venture between Chinese COSCO (China Ocean Shipping Company) and Canadian Teekay, which owns and operates an Arc7 ice-class liquefied natural gas (LNG) tanker for the Yamal LNG project, had to change its shareholder structure in order get out of the US sanctions and to continue delivering Yamal LNG gas to Novatek (Fadeeva and Dzyadko 2019).

Niches for Cooperation

Until 2014, there was multifaceted cooperation between Russia and Canada in the Arctic (Konyshev and Sergunin 2013, 150-156). Regardless of sanctions and the lack of transparency in hard security issues, there are still areas where the two Arctic states have more common interests than disagreements, where cooperation is possible, and where there have been some positive results since 2014. Most of this cooperation, however, is taking place in multilateral formats, rather than on a bilateral basis.

Since 2014, opportunities for economic cooperation and investment have become more limited, and as of 2020, just a few projects are successfully operating. As mentioned above, the Russian energy company, Novatek, relies on several shipping companies and joint ventures to transport LNG produced at its Yamal LNG facility to markets in Europe and Asia. The largest of these joint ventures is a partnership between Teekay, whose headquarters are in Vancouver, and the China LNG Shipping Company (Teekay Corporation 2017).

In the Chukotka region, which is part of the Arctic zone of Russia, the largest Canadian investor in the Russian economy, Kinross Gold, has production assets. Kinross has had success in Russia, operating four mines in the country over the past 24 years. Twenty percent of its current production comes from its Russian mines, Kupol and Dvoinoye (Canadian Mining Journal 2019). Moreover, as reported in August, 2019, Toronto-based Kinross Gold is expanding its portfolio in Russia with the acquisition of a large, open-pit development in the region. Several other Canadian companies are operating in the Russian Arctic region. Among them are Silver Bear Resources which announced a silver project in Mangazeisky in its 2017 Operational Update (News Ykt 2019; Silver Bear Resources PLC 2018).

Science has been a platform for cooperation in the Arctic for many years, both during and following the Cold War. Fortunately, the 2014 crisis had little influence in this sphere. Moreover, the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation came into force in 2018. This is one example of scientific diplomacy in a period of crisis in relations. The agreement provides a legal framework for regulating research which widens opportunities for better understanding of the region.

It is important to build cooperation among the universities of the Arctic countries, and to develop student and academic exchange programs to foster future developments in the region. The University of the Arctic, a network of more than 150 higher education institutions, could serve as a basis for such cooperation, and indeed, Russian and Canadian universities already use this network (RISS 2016).

Environmental protection and pollution control are areas of high concern for almost all governments, regardless of their political views. Collaboration on these issues should remain depoliticized and could serve as a good example of multilateral cooperation. Ensuring environmental safety is a priority of international cooperation in the Arctic. Main goals include the preservation and protection of the Arctic environment and the elimination of the environmental consequences of economic activity in the face of increasing climate change.

There is a trend toward the intensification of shipping in polar waters, which brings new opportunities as well as challenges. Multilateral discussions on maritime safety and prevention of

marine pollution from ships, have taken place under the auspices of the International Marine Organization. As a result, the International Polar Code came into force in 2017. It sets binding international standards for commercial ships operating in Arctic and Antarctic waters, and the ratification of these measures opens a new era of protecting Arctic nations and the marine environment.

Russia was an influential actor along with Canada and other Arctic coastal states in the negotiations that led to the adoption in 2018 of the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean. Canada and Russia are interested in a stable, secure, and sustainable Arctic region and see themselves as responsible actors, dedicated to legal norms and principles.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that from 2014 to 2020, there was no positive shift in Russian-Canadian bilateral political relations. Neither side has taken measures toward rapprochement. The cases highlighted in the article – the Ukraine crisis, the Skripal case, and the Kerch incident – are significant as indicators of the different positions of Russia and Western countries, including Canada. However, there is no direct conflict between Russia and Canada. Canadian foreign policy toward Russia has been made in response to Russian actions (Russia's policy toward Ukraine) or presumed Russian actions (the Skripal case), while Russian policy toward Canada has been mainly reactive. These policies can be summarized as action-reaction, and sanctions-countersanctions, leading to a crisis in bilateral relations.

There are several key factors that explain these negative dynamics. Canadian relations with the US and NATO partly affect its strategy toward Russia. However, most importantly, the Ukraine crisis remains one of the central factors currently affecting Russian-Canadian relations, as the two countries do not agree on the causes of the crisis, nor on how to resolve it. As long as irreconcilable differences exist and parties cannot reach a common political dialogue, managing the confrontation but not overcoming it is a reasonable aim. A policy of small steps and cooperation in areas of common interest could help to reach this goal. Analysis shows that cooperation between the two countries is developing in certain niche areas, even during the crisis. There are limited results as regards Track II diplomacy, para-diplomacy, and business diplomacy, but these spheres have the potential for further development. Russian-Canadian cooperation continues in the Arctic, though mostly in multilateral frameworks. Despite some negative trends, the countries have enough common interests for cooperation in science, the environment, fisheries and navigations, and search and rescue. The Arctic region was one of the most productive areas in the Canada-Russia relationship before the crisis of 2014 and, as this analysis demonstrates, it remains the area the least affected by the crisis. To provide a basis for future dialogue, when time comes for political, economic and other collaborative opportunities, it is crucial to keep lines of communication and cooperation open, at least in those areas where Russian-Canadian joint interests currently exist, as illustrated by the arguments of experts from both sides who support the idea of political dialogue between Russia and Canada (Coulon 2019; Issraelyan 2017; Kinsman 2018; Paikin 2018; Westdal 2016; Breton and Dutkiewicz 2020).

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