



RUSSIA-CANADA RELATIONS SPECIAL ISSUE: INTRODUCTION

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Those looking for good news stories on Canada-Russia relations in recent years will have found instead headlines with keywords and phrases such as ‘disinformation’, ‘cyber threats’, ‘propaganda’, ‘Kremlin lashes out’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘election meddling’, ‘major threat’, ‘damaged relations’, ‘failure of democratization’, and ‘anti-Russian sanctions’. Canada-Russia relations are indeed at a low ebb following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and crisis in Ukraine. Yet as the world’s two largest states, northern nations, neighbours across the Pacific, and as two powerful stakeholders in the Arctic, it is worth exploring what Canada and Russia hold as common interests and examining possibilities for moving toward greater cooperation. As the experts gathered together for this issue show, political interactions are the loudest but by no means the only fronts for interrelations. Beyond the headlines, at less visible levels, cooperation is already taking place, or is poised for development.

This special issue includes analyses of five crucial spheres of involvement: foreign affairs, trade, media, global politics, and military security. The authors are scholars from Russia and Canada who work at universities and scholarly institutes in Russia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Their analyses delve into the complexities of Canada-Russia relations and the long-term causes of the deteriorated relationship. They underline a pattern of misunderstanding and mistrust that, on the Canadian side, is able to draw from a well-developed pool of Cold War tropes and, on the Russian side, keeps perspectives on Canada often undifferentiated from policy and media about the United States.²

Given that we are at a critical point in Canada-Russia relations, it is crucial to have scholarly initiatives that can bring together expert knowledge and unbiased assessment, but until recently a research group with this specific focus has been lacking.³ This current issue is a project of the Canada-Russia Research Initiative (CRRI), a 2018 initiative housed at the University of Victoria. The organization and its website (thecrri.ca) were launched by Anna Tsurkan, who gathered

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² The leading organization dedicated to Russia-Canada affairs in Russia is the Russian Association for Canadian Studies, based in Moscow.

³ Other scholarly initiatives in Canada focus on Canada-Europe relations, such as the Jean Monnet Network on EU-Canada Relations at Carleton University, or on EU-Russia Relations, such as the Between the EU and Russia (BEAR Network) at McGill University, and the Jean Monnet Chair in the EU’s Relations with Russia and the Eastern Neighbourhood at Carleton University. All three of these initiatives have received support from the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

together a network of researchers working in the field of Canada-Russia relations. The first event of the CRRI, co-organized by Tsurkan and Megan Swift in partnership with the Canadian International Council, was a conference on 'Arctic. Media. Security' at the University of Victoria in November, 2019. In November, 2020, the CRRI hosted a well-attended webinar on the 'Past, Present and Future of Arctic Cooperation' that featured distinguished panelists, Her Excellency Alison Le Claire, Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, and former Ambassador Jeremy Kinsman. A roundtable, 'Introducing the Canada-Russia Research Initiative', will take place in August 2021 at the meeting of the International Council for Central and Eastern European Studies. This special issue is one of several projects intended to raise the profile and the quality of the dialogue around Russia and Canada.

This issue begins with Zachary Paikin's global perspective. Paikin, a researcher at the Center for European Policy Studies and Senior Visiting Fellow at the Global Policy Institute, looks at the changing relationship of Russia and the west in terms of the balance of power. He asks to what extent the neo-liberal hegemony established in Europe is coming under re-negotiation, given the fact that Washington has lost legitimacy in recent years by exercising unilateral power against an accepted post-war framework of multi-lateral European relations. In this same time period, Russia has undergone a Eurasian turn, focusing its attention toward non-European partners, which is creating an overall sense of a shifting European power dynamic.

Natalia Viakhireva, a program manager at Moscow's Russian International Affairs Council, provides a forthright analysis of foreign affairs in the last half-decade, the period that culminated in the current state of obstructed Russia-Canada relations. She argues that the way forward will not be through engagement at the political 'top', but rather through avenues of para-diplomacy wherein both sides can find areas of common ground. The most promising of these avenues is cooperation on Arctic affairs, where Russia and Canada hold two of the five permanent seats on the Arctic Council (along with Norway, Denmark and the United States). Russia and Canada, in fact, see eye to eye on vital issues, including determinations of national coastlines and territorial waters, an issue that will affect crucial commercial, transport, military, and environmental ventures in the years to come. The Arctic is thus one avenue that presents an opportunity for these two northern leaders to work in mutual communication.

Anna Tsurkan's article on cross-national media reporting, on the other hand, digs into one of the most contentious levels of engagement between Canada and Russia. The founder and project coordinator of the Canada-Russia Research Initiative, Tsurkan begins by examining how Canada reported the possibility of Russian election interference in and around the federal election of 2019, and how Russian media responded to these allegations. She concludes that even when no evidence of election meddling was found, as was the case in 2019, the way that Canadian media outlets reported about Russia reinforced certain narratives that, in effect, *became* the story. The same can be said about Russian media reporting on Canada, which consistently used negative language.

Nancy Teeple, a Fulbright scholar at the University of Norwich and post-doctoral fellow at the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, looks at the question of military security in the penultimate article of the collection. She argues that we reached a crucial turning point in 2020, given that key arms control treaties came to an end without a concrete signal of their renewal. Referencing the conclusions of Viakhireva's article, Teeple suggests that security in the Arctic is going to be a primary concern of the future, and one in which Canada and Russia will inevitably be important actors.

Many of the issues discussed here are reflected in the 2019 report on European security published by the German educational non-profit think tank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Their report is based on a poll of 1,000 respondents in each of seven countries in different regions of a transforming greater Europe: Germany, France, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, and Latvia. When asked whom they consider the greatest current threat to national security, France and Germany perceived it was the United States, not Russia, that posed the largest menace (Russia was indeed perceived as the greatest security threat in Latvia, Poland, and Ukraine). The report also described a “prevailing public perception that there is a common Europe and that Russia is part of it” (Krumm et al. 2019, 66). Without minimizing the extent of the strain in Russia-west relations caused by the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, there is an overall sentiment that “without Russia, any talk of security in Europe is pointless” (2019, 6). In other words, Russia can, should and must be included in important conversations going forward.

Based on the articles in this special issue, it is clear that deteriorated relations are likely to continue in Russia-Canada foreign affairs for the foreseeable future against the backdrop of a transforming Europe and a shift in the global balance of power. However, new areas of importance are emerging, especially in the Arctic, where Canada and Russia have good reasons to work together for mutual benefit. There will be much to watch, discuss, and analyze in the coming years.

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