

# LONG READ: How Russian diplomacy lost its influence on Putin and failed to stop the war

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BBC News Russian

**Over the past decade the Russian Foreign Ministry has been increasingly sidelined, powerless to influence policy, and reduced to echoing the aggressive rhetoric coming from the Kremlin.**



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*By Sergey Goryashko, Elizaveta Fokht and Sofiya Samokhina.*



**The invasion of Ukraine was not so much a failure of diplomacy as an illustration of the irrelevance of the Russian Foreign Ministry in the decision-making process in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Over many years now Russian diplomats have seen their authority and position eroded, and their role increasingly reduced to echoing the aggressive rhetoric coming from the Kremlin. BBC Russian asks former Russian and American diplomats, and ex-Kremlin and White House insiders, how Russian diplomacy ended up in such a crisis, and whether there's any hope of reviving the back channels and personal contacts which will one day be needed to help bring the war to an end and negotiate a lasting peace.**

## **"Robots with papers"**

On 12 October 2021 Victoria Nuland, one of the US State Department's key point people on Russia, was coming to the end of an hour and a half meeting in an office in the Russian Foreign Ministry's headquarters on Smolenskaya Square in Moscow.

Sitting across the table from her was Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, a man she had known for years and was used to having good conversations with on a one-to-one level. But this time things were different.

Ryabkov was speaking robotically and seemed to be reading out Moscow's official position from a piece of paper.

After leaving the Russian Foreign Ministry building, Nuland made a few brief remarks to journalists, saying the negotiations had been productive, and she was glad to be back in Russia.

Ryabkov also described the talks as useful but lamented that significant progress had not been achieved. "We can't rule out further escalation," he said "We made this clear to our American counterparts."

Privately, Nuland was shocked, according to two people who heard the story directly from her. They told the BBC that she had described Ryabkov and Deputy Minister of Defence Alexander Fomin, who was also present, as "robots with papers." It was as if they were having a conversation for people who were not in the room, she said.

During the meeting, Ukraine had not even been on the agenda. The discussion had revolved around the work of diplomatic missions in the US and Russia (both of which had been severely impacted by mutual expulsions of diplomats), as well as the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and the ongoing tensions in Moscow-Washington relations.

That summer, Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden had begun strategic arms control negotiations in Geneva. Several weeks after Nuland's meeting at the Foreign Ministry, the US would announce it had evidence showing Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, and the next senior US official to visit Moscow would be the head of the CIA, Bill Burns.

## **Parallel careers**

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Both Sergey Ryabkov and Victoria Nuland have dedicated their diplomatic careers to Russia-US relations. Ryabkov began with a posting to the Russian Embassy in Canada, he spent six years in the United States, and went on to hold various high-ranking diplomatic positions.

He became Deputy Foreign Minister in 2008 and has since overseen relations with Washington. His American counterparts saw him as a practical and calm negotiator. Even when understanding between the two countries deteriorated, communication with him was still possible.

Nuland has specialised in the USSR since the 1980s, shifting her focus to Russia after the Soviet Union's collapse. Over the past 40 years, she had been a youth leader in a summer camp in Odesa, spent half a year with Soviet fishermen on a trawler in the Russian Far East, and served in more than a dozen diplomatic posts. When she arrived for her meeting in Moscow in October 2021, she was US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the third-highest position in the State Department.



Victoria Nuland's meeting with Sergey Ryabkov, in October 2021, left her shocked, US diplomats said.

©AFP via Getty Images

The fact that Nuland was in Moscow at all, was the result of some successful diplomatic bargaining. In 2019, she had been placed on a Russian blacklist, in response to the US refusal to grant a visa to Konstantin Vorontsov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Deputy Director of the Department of Non-Proliferation and Arms Control.

Vorontsov had been expelled from Brussels in the spring of 2018 after the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK. He was one of nearly 150 Russian diplomats declared persona non grata by nearly two dozen countries as a result of the incident.

For the Russian Foreign Ministry Vorontsov's case had become a huge bone of contention. In 2019, the Russian delegation at a UN disarmament commission disrupted proceedings to voice a protest about it. Boris Bondarev, a former Russian diplomat who was working at the time as a counsellor at the Russian mission to the UN Office in Geneva, told the BBC he was amazed by the fervour with which the Foreign Ministry pursued demands for Vorontsov to be granted entry to the US. He described the situation as "chasing after a fly and burning down the whole flat."

Even Iranian diplomats pleaded with their Russian colleagues to let them discuss international issues and try to resolve their problems with the Americans in private. But their plea fell on deaf ears. "It didn't matter to us. We're Russian, and we can't be wrong," says Bondarev summing up his colleagues' approach.

## **Banging fists and talking nonsense**

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In December 2021, Boris Bondarev received an email at work with an official Foreign Ministry document attached outlining a starkly new approach to relations with the US and NATO.

"I read it and thought, what nonsense is this, it's like a kindergarten," he recalls. "One of the conditions was that NATO could not accept any new members... It just doesn't work like that!"

The document Bondarev had received was the text of Russia's ultimatum to the US and NATO. At a time when the West was openly discussing the prospect of Russia invading Ukraine, Moscow was demanding "security guarantees."

The essence of Moscow's demands was that NATO would refrain from expanding further east, that it would not accept former Soviet countries as members, and would return its troops in Europe to 1997 levels.

Both the demands themselves and the subsequent publication of the ultimatum were unprecedented steps in diplomacy. They surprised not only recipients in the West but also many people in the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Bondarev and his boss did some digging to find out where the document had come from. They discovered it had been drawn up by the Kremlin, and that no-one at the Foreign Ministry had even questioned it.

"They just said, Yes Sir! We will comply," says Bondarev. "It's the usual Russian MFA thing - we are little people and it's nothing to do with us."

Questions should have been asked about the ultimatum, says Bondarev. 'For example about the demand to return NATO troops to their 1997 positions. Moscow seemed to have forgotten that in 1997 there were 300,000 American military personnel stationed in Europe at that time, as opposed to 5,000-7,000 in 2021.



Boris Bondarev, a former Russian diplomat in Geneva: Russia's Foreign Ministry's documents sometimes sounded 'like kindergarden'. ©Boris Bondarev

"Everyone was behaving as though Russia was the only country on the planet, and other countries didn't have any legitimate interests," he says.

Russia experts were also surprised by the ultimatum. "This is not at all the way Russian diplomacy has ever worked, even under Putin," says Alexander Gabuev, Director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center based now in Berlin.

Firstly, Russia had openly outlined its red lines.

"You immediately paint yourself into a corner and it's more difficult to find a way out," says Gabuev.

Secondly, Moscow actually seemed to be asking NATO to pretend, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the USSR, that the alliance had lost the Cold War.

On 10 January, 2022, two Russian deputy ministers - Ryabkov from the Foreign Ministry and Fomin from the Ministry of Defense - met with the Americans at a dinner in Geneva. The United States was represented by First Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control Bonnie Jenkins. They gathered to discuss the Russian ultimatum.

“It was awful,” says Bondarev. “The Americans were like - let's negotiate. And instead Ryabkov starts shouting - ‘We need Ukraine! We won't go anywhere without Ukraine! Take all your stuff and go back to the 1997 borders!’ Sherman is an Iron Lady, but I think even her jaw dropped at this.”

Bondarev, who had known Fomin and Ryabkov for a long time, was also surprised.

“[Fomin] never gave the impression of being some buttoned-up soldier or at all standoffish. He was a normal guy, who used to tell funny stories about his time serving in Africa,” he says.

“[Ryabkov] was always very polite and really nice to talk to. And now he's banging his fist on the table and talking nonsense. For so many years he was studying America and suddenly he's realised they are the enemy and we need to go to war with Ukraine?”

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Bondarev would become the highest-ranking employee of the Russian Foreign Ministry to resign in protest over the war.

On 2 February 2022, the responses from Washington and Brussels to Moscow's demands were published by the Spanish newspaper El Pais. NATO offered negotiations on undertakings not to deploy offensive missile systems and troops in Ukraine, and on wider issues of strategic security in Europe. The US also proposed limiting nuclear weapons and the Americans were even ready to talk about the Tomahawk missiles they had deployed within striking distance of Russia in Poland and Romania - something which had long worried Moscow.

Alexander Gabuev was in touch with a number of Russian diplomats at the time, and says they were pleasantly surprised by the American proposals : “Wow, now we have to sit in Geneva for another couple of months, and we will put on paper ideal agreements that will really strengthen security,” he recalls them saying.

As Gabuev sees it, it would have been possible at that time, for the Kremlin to score a big diplomatic victory, albeit by dint of some blackmail, but Putin had already decided to go to war, and so, in the end, talks with NATO were just a smokescreen.

The president eventually announced that the alliance had ignored “fundamental Russian concerns”.



Ben Rhodes (left) who served in President Obama's administration doesn't think any new diplomatic strategy could have changed US-Russia relations, because it would not have changed Putin. ©Pete Souza/The White House via Getty Images

By this stage it was becoming increasingly clear that it was Putin alone who was pulling the strings and that it was no longer possible to use diplomacy to try to change his mind.

A former White House official has told the BBC that from as far back as 2010 American diplomats had seen their Russian counterparts becoming increasingly frustrated at their declining influence and lack of any authority when it came to issues of particular concern to Putin.

As the years went on, there were to be more and more such issues.

Ben Rhodes served as Deputy National Security Advisor in Barack Obama's administration from 2009 to 2017. He was also a speechwriter for the American president.

He told the BBC that he doesn't think any new diplomatic strategy could have changed US-Russia relations, because it would not have changed Putin.

"That's the tragedy of it all. Sometimes there's just a limit,.." he said.

"I've come to believe that Putin had crossed over to a really dark side and [he] was never coming back."

## **"Hostages of protocol"**

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"Russia is ready to cooperate with NATO... right up to joining the alliance."

It's hard to believe it now, but these words were spoken by Vladimir Putin' in comments made to the BBC in March 2000.

"I cannot imagine my country isolated from Europe," he said.

In July 2023 there is no longer a need to imagine such a scenario.

All direct flights from Western countries to Russia have been banned, sanctions have been imposed against Russian officials and state-owned companies, a broad coalition of states provides military aid to Ukraine, Russia is excluded from the Council of Europe,

and the International Criminal Court in The Hague has issued an arrest warrant for Putin over the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children.

"We really did discuss whether to join NATO or not," says a source who worked in the Kremlin in the early 2000s. "It was Putin's initiative, no-one forced him. The atmosphere was more liberal then. Officials didn't just want to please - everyone tried to solve real problems."

During Putin's first two presidential terms, and even during Dmitry Medvedev's time in office, Russian diplomats had notable achievements to their credit, says Alexander Gabuev.

"In 2003, they agreed on a bloodless transit of power during the Georgian revolution. In 2004, we resolved territorial disputes with China and finally demarcated the border. In 2003, we negotiated with Europeans on four areas (economy, justice, science, and security), and later on the ways of modernising the country. During Medvedev's time, diplomats resolved territorial disputes with Norway."



Former diplomats say Lavrov had no choice but to change in order to keep in line with Putin. ©AFP via Getty Images

However, even during those years, people with "limited creativity and critical thinking" found their way into the Russian diplomatic corps, recalls another source who worked in the Kremlin in the 2000s.

"The Foreign Ministry is a semi-military organization, where the creative component was absolutely minimal. People use a specific foreign ministry language where there are no proper names. Everything is written in the passive voice. Ambassadors always refer to themselves in the third person. This jargon implies detachment. You're like a soldier in the army."

In the 2000s, many diplomats were already "hostages of protocol", says the former Kremlin official. He recalls travelling to Washington as part of the official delegation in the early 2000s. Americans suggested changing the sequence of meetings for convenience, at the last minute.

Yuri Ushakov, Russia's ambassador to the US at the time (now an assistant to Putin on foreign policy), was outraged, as the source recalls. "This is a provocation! he shouted. We had a pre-approved schedule! We cannot agree to this; it violates the protocol!"

In 2004, as the Kremlin source told the BBC, presidential administration officials recommended to Putin that Sergey Lavrov should be appointed as Russia's new Foreign Minister. He was, they said a person with an "international perspective and his own position." He understood both the US and Europe and was considered to be an intelligent and interesting guy. "Lavrov was a very different person back then," the source says. "He has changed a lot over the years."

Former diplomat Boris Bondarev says Lavrov had no choice but to change in order to keep in line with Putin. There's not a country in the world where a minister can hold different opinions from the president and still keep his job, he says. Lavrov has managed to hold on to his job for nearly 20 years.

In the run up to the war both Putin and Lavrov repeated Russia's perceived grievances against NATO - that Russia had been 'lied to' and given false promises by Western countries both about NATO expansion and Russia's own prospects of joining the alliance.

When the BBC spoke to the Russian ambassador to the UK, Andrei Kelin, he reiterated a similar line.

"We should have immediately dealt with the Westerners more harshly, reacting much more sharply to the NATO expansion, which occurred in 1997," he said.

## **A new Cold War**

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The first signal that a new Cold War was beginning came in 2007 with a speech Putin made to the Munich Security Conference. In a 30-minute diatribe, Putin had aggressively accused Western countries of attempting to build a unipolar world.

Konstantin Kosachev, now the Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council and then the head of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, heard the speech live. It was, he told the BBC, a "deeply personal speech" which reflected Putin's "vision of how relations between Russia and the West should be built."

According to Kosachev, it was at that moment that the West "missed a phenomenal chance to establish cooperation with Russia." Western countries, on the other hand, think it was Russia that missed the chance.

## **Mr Everything Will Work Out**

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Michael McFaul, Russia expert and former US ambassador to Moscow, used to describe himself as "Mr. Antiscepticism, and Mr Everything Will Work Out".

He's exactly the same age as Konstantin Kosachev, and over the course of their long careers, both men have transformed from romantics who believed in the great potential of dialogue between their countries, to irreconcilable opponents who are convinced of the impossibility of cooperation in the current conditions.



In his speech in Munich, in 2007, Putin accused West of attempting to build a unipolar world. ©AFP via Getty Images

McFaul, 59, is currently a professor at Stanford University and regularly advises the Biden administration. In a one-and-a-half-hour conversation with the BBC, he emphasized three times that he is no longer young and has a long memory for times when relations between Washington and Moscow were different.

Today, McFaul is convinced that the US has only two instruments to strengthen its national interests: to provide as much weaponry as possible to Ukraine and to impose as many sanctions as possible on Russia.

Kosachev, agrees that relations between the two countries are in deep crisis. "Diplomacy simply does not exist, all communication is broken," he says, but he puts the blame squarely on the US side. "It was not us that caused relations to break down."

McFaul was born in the US state of Montana at a time when, in his own words, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union were very high.

In 1981, when he entered Stanford, Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States. Two years later Reagan made his famous speech calling the USSR an "evil empire".

Despite never having been to the Soviet Union at that time, McFaul started at Stanford with the hypothesis that if Americans could better understand Soviet people and communicate more with them, tensions in the relationship could decrease. At university, he immediately enrolled in courses in Russian and Polish languages.

Konstantin Kosachev initially welcomed McFaul's 2012 appointment as US ambassador to Russia. In the early 2010s, he was head of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs and, unlike many other State Duma deputies then and now, he was not there by chance.

Kosachev was born into a diplomatic family and still nostalgically remembers his childhood "behind the embassy gates" in Sweden. When he was in the sixth grade at school he had already decided to follow in his father's footsteps, get a diplomatic education, and ultimately become a diplomat.

In 2009, Lavrov and Hillary Clinton pressed their famous red "reset button" in relations. McFaul, who by then had become a special assistant to Obama on the National Security Council, was involved in developing the "reset." Together with the then Deputy Chief of

the Russian Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, McFaul led the Russian-American Civil Society Working Group.

Before joining the State Duma, Konstantin Kosachev had worked in the Soviet and then Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as at the embassy in Sweden. He also served as an advisor on international affairs to several prime ministers, including Yevgeny Primakov and Sergey Kiriyenko. He also participated in the "reset" of Russia-US relations and praised McFaul's "conscientious and creative" work.

Former Obama speechwriter Ben Rhodes recalls those years and notes that the US and Russia achieved many things during that time. They reached agreements, like allowing America to supply its troops in Afghanistan through Russia, they signed the new START treaty, discussed Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, and imposed sanctions against Iran.

But always in the background overshadowing things was Vladimir Putin, now no longer president but his influence, and disillusion with the West still clearly felt. "Putin was still pulling a lot of strings behind the scenes," says Rhodes.



In 2009, Michael McFaul was involved in developing 'reset' in relations, advocated by Hillary Clinton and Sergey Lavrov. ©Getty Images

Obama first met Putin, when the latter was Prime Minister, in 2009. They had breakfast "Russian-style" with a samovar and were accompanied by a folk instrument orchestra. Putin was more interested in presenting his view of the world than discussing cooperation. Throughout the conversation, he blamed Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, for betraying Russia.

In the coming years, Putin would deliver similar lectures on Western betrayal to European leaders as well. The most recent Western leader on the receiving end was French President Emmanuel Macron, who flew to Russia in February 2022 in a last-ditch attempt to stop Putin from going to war.

Ben Rhodes says it was clear to US officials working on Russia during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, that Russian diplomats were actually reporting back to Putin and not to Medvedev. For this reason Obama would sometimes organise one-on-one meetings with Medvedev, without any diplomats being present.

"It's a bit strange to be talking to the president of a country and know that the foreign minister and others are not really reporting to him," says Rhodes.

"We knew that people like Lavrov were closer to Putin than Medvedev. And so we were constantly trying to figure out: okay, what is Medvedev empowered to be doing? What is he not...? Like, you know, missile defense. We were trying to negotiate some kind of agreement with Medvedev, and it was pretty clear that Medvedev didn't have any room to discuss that. That that was something that Putin took an interest in."

It soon became clear, that there would be no "reset" in relations between the countries.

Rhodes and McFaul link the negative change to three events. Firstly, the Arab Spring, during which dictators were overthrown in several countries. Secondly, the US involvement in Libya, which convinced Putin that America's goal was to overthrow regimes in other states. And finally, the Russian street protests of 2011-2012, for which the US authorities expressed support.

In the autumn of 2011 Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev announced that they were effectively swapping jobs, with Medvedev confirming he would not be seeking a second term, opening the way for Putin to stand for president again.

McFaul spelled out frankly for Obama what this would mean.

"The bigger aspirations we had were over," he told him.

In early 2012, McFaul arrived in Moscow as the new US Ambassador. His prediction came true, the Surkov-McFaul commission wound up the following year and the much heralded 'reset' came to an end.

"Anyone who says that it was never possible to do business with Putin, would be not telling the truth," says Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, a US think tank, and who previously worked at the US State Department.

"But the question really is whether something has fundamentally changed. It's true that it's become, over the years, increasingly difficult for Western leaders to talk to Putin. There is a lot of, from what I understand, obligatory sort of telling the leader of whatever country just how many sins this country has committed against Russia."

## **Megaphones and emotional statements**

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*"Look at me! Don't look away! Why are your eyes darting about?"*

*"Excuse my language – but we s\*\*t on Western sanctions!"*

*"Go talk to peacocks!"*

*"F\*\*\*ing morons"*

*"The 'faggot strategy' of the Kyiv regime is nothing new to anyone."*

*"Let me speak. Otherwise, you will really hear what Russian 'Grad' missiles are capable of."*

These quotes are not fragments from political debates on social media. This is how Russian ambassadors and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs communicate with other diplomats and journalists on the international stage and in the media.

The language of Moscow's foreign policy (now often compared to that of common thugs) started to change rapidly after Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, according to BBC sources. These changes became symptomatic of the collapse of any hope that relations with the West could improve.

Even some Russian insiders are willing to admit this. To achieve significant diplomatic victories, one needs to master not only language skills and etiquette, but also an understanding of the psychology of those with whom they communicate, says Konstantin Kosachev. Real diplomacy, he says, is carried out behind closed doors through painstaking negotiation, not through megaphones and emotional statements.



During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency it became clear to US officials that Russian diplomats were reporting to Putin and not to him. ©Universal Images Group via Getty Images

One of the drawbacks of being an ambassador, according to Michael McFaul, is not knowing diplomatic language. "I was not accustomed to speaking diplo speak. That very constrained diplomatic language. And as a result of that, I made some mistakes."

One of the most prominent symbols of this new more outspoken chapter in Moscow's foreign policy is Maria Zakharova, who took over the Department of Information and Press of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2015.

"Before her, diplomats behaved like diplomats, speaking in refined expressions," says former diplomat Boris Bondarev. "We express concern about acceptable outcomes, hoping for consensus... Blah-blah-blah..."

Many at Smolenskaya Square, the MFA headquarters, he says, were convinced that someone "bright and more lively" should be selected for the press secretary position. But no one expected the replacement to be quite as eye-wateringly 'bright' Bondarev admits.

With Zakharova's arrival, MFA briefings started to resemble theatrical shows, and she herself became one of the most recognizable Russian officials. She actively manages her social media pages, posting her own poetry, caricatures of Western politicians, and thoughts on international politics (the quote about Kyiv's 'faggot strategy' comes from her [Telegram channel](#)).

Zakharova's frivolous style regularly led to scandals. In 2016, she put on a derogatory accent on TV propagandist Vladimir Solovyov's show, as she spoke about how Jewish support had contributed to Donald Trump's victory.

In 2018, she promised – with a wink – to organize a trip to Chechnya for a Finnish journalist who was asking about the persecution and torture of gay people in Chechnya.

And in 2020, even Putin had to apologize after Zakharova insulted Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić when he visited the USA. She suggested he behave at meetings with US officials like the Sharon Stone character in the Hollywood film 'Basic Instinct' who crossed her legs provocatively during an interrogation.

Zakharova's style was followed by other officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry. By that time, the United Nations platform had already become a place of constant bickering between the then Russian Permanent Representative Vitaly Churkin and foreign diplomats. According to media reports, in 2012, he threatened the Prime Minister of Qatar that his country "would no longer exist" if he did not "change his tone". Churkin later denied this.



Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, was the indication that the much heralded 'reset' came to an end. ©AFP via Getty Images

Churkin advised the UK to "clean up its conscience" and "get rid of colonial habits", and he accused his American counterpart, Samantha Power, of behaving like "Mother Teresa." When Power met members of the Russian female punk band Pussy Riot (who

were jailed for a performance at a Russian Orthodox Cathedral), Churkin suggested she go on tour with the group and start at the National Cathedral in Washington.

Churkin's successors went even further. In April 2017, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative Vladimir Safronkov, while commenting on the speech of the British delegation, demanded that the UK representative "not look away" and then added: "Don't you dare insult Russia any more!"

Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN in recent years, told the German representative presiding over a Security Council meeting that he would not comply with the meeting's regulations: "You can turn your wonderful hourglass as much as you want, but I will take as much time as I need."

In recent years, this kind of communication style has become the norm even for many ordinary diplomats, says Boris Bondarev. He recalls an incident at a small event in Geneva in 2021. According to Bondarev, the Russian delegation blocked all proposed initiatives, and at some point, colleagues from Switzerland approached them.

"They said, 'Guys, this isn't right, we're making concessions, but you're not conceding anything!' And in response, we said to them, 'Well, what's the problem? We are a great power, and you are just Switzerland!' Almost in those exact words. That's [Russian] diplomacy for you," says Bondarev.

To be fair, in recent years, the tone has changed not only in Russian diplomacy but also in other countries, albeit on a smaller scale. In 2013, Japan's representative for human rights at the UN, Hideaki Ueda, demanded that foreign colleagues "shut up" at a meeting.

In 2019, the then UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson used the same words against Russia. And Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, last year referred to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz as an "offended liver sausage" (*Die beleidigte Leberwurst* meaning an insulted loser).

This behaviour is related to the fact that politics "is becoming more public," explains political scientist Alexander Gabuev: "A significant part of politics is defined by public opinion, and the one who shouts louder appears more favourable, not the one with more reasonable arguments. Western diplomats have begun to play to the public too."

Russian Ambassador to the UK, Andrey Kelin, believes that this new aggressive rhetoric might soften in time.

"Such statements simply reflect the current political situation, which is confrontational enough," he told the BBC. "As for what will happen next – we'll see."

## **"Are you an ambassador or what? Why are you talking to them?"**

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A former top manager of a major Russian corporation tells the BBC a joke.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov is meeting U.S. Secretary of State Blinken. "Sergey," says Blinken, "I feel a bit dizzy." "No wonder," Lavrov replies, "it's because I am spinning you on my \*\*\*\*\*" (a Russian prison slang expression for deceiving someone).

The businessman tells the BBC that he heard the joke from someone who works at the Russian Foreign Ministry.



With Maria Zakharova's arrival, Moscow's press briefings started to resemble theatrical shows.

©Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

One reason Russian diplomats are increasingly using the language of the street is that they are aiming their pronouncements not just at foreign colleagues, but more importantly at a home audience.

Political scientist Gabuev notes in particular that Zakharova, for example, maintains her social media presence exclusively in Russian: "She is an internal propagandist, just like [the editor-in-chief of the Russian state-controlled broadcaster RT] Margarita Simonyan. Her task is to evoke pride in Russia's foreign policy among the electorate. This is a marker of how diplomacy has changed — it is no longer the interface for communication with the outside world."

A former Kremlin official told the BBC he agrees with this viewpoint. According to him, the focus of Russian diplomacy has also shifted towards domestic audiences because "they are not being heard in the West anyway".

According to Bondarev, an even more crucial target audience for Russian diplomats' tough rhetoric are their own bosses.

After any international event, the participants send official telegrams to Moscow, summarizing the meetings. This practice has been in place long before Russia's relations with the world began to deteriorate. Its significance in the career of Russian Foreign Ministry staff cannot be overestimated.

"A poorly written telegram can cost a career. You have to demonstrate broad-mindedness, not take on any unnecessary burden, and attribute achievements to yourself. This is a separate art for a [Russian] Foreign Ministry official in terms of personnel," a person, who is well acquainted with the ministry's work, told the BBC.

In recent years, the style of such telegrams has become increasingly aggressive, as former diplomat Bondarev explains. The main focus of these messages is not to report on real achievements and compromises but to showcase how passionately diplomats

defended the country's interests. A typical content, according to Bondarev, would be something like: "We really gave them a hard time! They couldn't even make a sound! We heroically defended Russian interests, and the Westerners couldn't do anything and backed down!"

For example, the ex-diplomat recalls how after the investigations at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into the Skripal poisoning telegrams were sent to Moscow with expressions like "crush the scoundrel," it was chillingly reminiscent of the language used by the Stalinist press in the 1930s. Similar rhetoric was also heard during internal meetings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The ministry top brass favour this style of communication, says Bondarev. "As a result, diplomatic telegrams come in from anywhere, Ecuador, Tanzania, or any other place, and they're all about how the ambassador in question 'stood up against something'," says Bondarev.

He explains that not all diplomats appreciate this approach, but no one wants to stand out from the rest because if everyone writes about "putting Westerners in their place," and you write that you "achieved consensus," you'll be looked at with disdain. "Are you an ambassador or what? Why are you talking to them? You must bang the table to make them understand," he adds.



Russian diplomats often use prison slang favoured by Vladimir Putin. ©Getty Images

Russian diplomats not only imitate each other but also take their cues from the president, according to Gabuev. Over his years in power, Putin has become known for his use of prison slang, from the famous "wipe them out in the outhouse" (about rebel fighters in the North Caucasus). to a more recent phrase: "Like it or not, put up with it, my beauty" (a reference to a prison song about rape).

Russian diplomats do not see any room to soften their combative rhetoric. The higher the position, the harsher the statement should be. Silence is not an option — if you are not loud enough, someone else will be appointed in your place.

"[Russian Ambassador to the UN Vasily] Nebenzya finds it hard to do this," says Bondarev. "He has that crazy and inadequate [Deputy Ambassador] Polyanskiy. But he can't push him out in front all the time. Otherwise Moscow will tell him - if you keep 'acting up' all the time, maybe you should go home, and Polyanskiy will become the ambassador in your place."

In 2014, Ukrainians took to the streets in mass protests against the then president Viktor Yanukovich. Ukrainians call the ensuing momentous events, the "Revolution of Dignity". Moscow says what happened was a coup. Within weeks, Russia annexed Crimea and intervened militarily in the conflict in Donbas, leading to an ongoing war. In response, sanctions against Russia began to be imposed.

The events in Ukraine were the final straw for Moscow's relations with the West. All diplomatic contacts toughened after that, as Ben Rhodes recalls: "Putin would go on and on and on about how the US had sponsored a coup to overthrow Yanukovich. And at first Obama would debate that and argue with him about that. At a certain point, we just started saying, "Look, our interest is in Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rules of the international system".

Simultaneously, the Russian Foreign Ministry continued to engage with American colleagues on some security issues, but the international community recognized that diplomats had no control over what was happening in Ukraine. This was primarily because Putin was making all the decisions himself.

"As Putin became an autocrat and the most experienced bureaucrat in his position, his own conviction that he knows everything grew stronger," says Alexander Gabuev. "And these people [diplomats] become unnecessary to him."

Gabuev illustrates the decline of the Foreign Ministry's influence in key international policy matters with an example:

"When Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states [in 2008], Lavrov and his key deputies were consulted. They were asked to write a lengthy memorandum, and the Foreign Ministry even opposed the idea. In 2014, Lavrov already knew in advance what would happen [in Ukraine], but other [top] diplomats did not."

In 2022, when Putin sent troops over the border into Ukraine, Lavrov only found out what was about to happen a few hours before the war began, according to a report in the Financial Times.

In 2014, Russia's relations deteriorated not only with the US but also with Europe, particularly with its main ally, Germany. Kadri Liik, a senior research fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, recalls the shock in Berlin over the annexation of Crimea: "Germany knows how things end when they begin with an Anschluss."

During those years, Germany was seen as Russia's "only real friend" in the West. Putin had a special relationship with the long-standing German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. She grew up in East Germany, where Vladimir Putin, served as a KGB officer.



Russia's representative in the UN Vasily Nebenzya compared Western countries to Nazi Germany and demanded the war in Ukraine to be called 'special military operation'. ©Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

After the war began, Poland, Latvia, and other countries accused Germany of continuing to keep ties with Russia (for example, in the gas sphere) even when it became clear that Moscow was seeking confrontation with the West.

By 2023, this cooperation came to an end, and Germany turned into one of Kyiv's main allies in the war against Russia, even rejecting Russian gas. One of the reasons for this breakdown in relations, according to Liik, was the lack of any meaningful attempt by the Russian Foreign Ministry to intervene. "Among Russian diplomats, there are people who understand the real sentiments in the West. They could have conveyed to the Kremlin that, well, listen, we risk losing our best friend in Europe."

### **“Blatant untruths”**

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From the 2010s onward it was clear to US officials that Putin was shaping his world view with little or no reference to the Foreign Ministry. And meetings with Putin were proving an increasingly frustrating experience.

"He would always obfuscate whatever the issue was, whether it was election interference or Ukraine or anything," says Ben Rhodes.

Putin continued to deny that Russian military was involved in Donbas. During their last meeting, he claimed to know nothing about Moscow's interference in the US elections, despite the evidence provided by the Americans.

"Every now and then [Putin] would say something kind of interesting," Rhodes continues. "I remember him saying one time to Obama something like: 'Nothing you could tell me could convince me that the US government isn't out to get me.' So every now and then you get a window into his psychology."

Russian diplomats increasingly followed Putin's example, and American officials began to talk among themselves about how Sergey Lavrov had taken a "tougher line" and sometimes come out with "blatant untruths".

By the end of President Obama's term in office Ben Rhodes says Russian Foreign Ministry employees seemed to have transformed irreversibly into "robots".

"I think by the end they had almost no influence," he told the BBC. "I think they could work on certain accounts that Putin didn't care about. But on the issues that Putin cared about – Ukraine in particular – I did not get the sense that those guys had much influence at all. So they just delivered the talking points that they were given."

## **"War is a continuation of diplomacy"**

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The arrival of the Trump administration in the White House did not improve relations with Washington, and after the Skripal Novichok poisonings in 2018, the United Kingdom became another country with whom Russia moved into confrontation mode.

In 2019, as the fall-out from the Skripal case continued, career diplomat Andrey Kelin, with forty years of experience, was sent as ambassador to London. He had been working on relations with Western countries throughout his career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Unfortunately," he says, with a hint of bitterness.

Kelin takes some pleasure in recalling that in 1989, he was the first Soviet diplomat to pass through the gates of NATO headquarters in Brussels. While in Belgium, Kelin worked on building relations with the West and organized meetings during the development of the new defensive doctrine of the USSR, which, among other things, stated that nuclear war could not be a means to achieve political goals.

"I had many encounters with others [diplomats in NATO], I had excellent relations with the British, and we played tennis together," he says.

These days Kelin no longer plays tennis with the British. In 2022, he was personally banned from entering the British Parliament. He also mentions that the Russian embassy in London was at one point almost left without gas and electricity, and insurance companies refused to insure the mission's cars.

Unofficial contacts with the British are now, in his own words, "to put it mildly, limited", Kelin admits. But he does not despair: "The European Union and the United States only make up 15% of the countries in the world," he says, and next door to the ambassador's residence in London, there are many other representations with whom he and his team can communicate, like Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

In the past year, the Western media has extensively quoted Kelin's statements about the war in Ukraine. He called the mass killings in Bucha, carried out by the Russian army, a "provocation by the West" and claimed that Russia had not yet "seriously started anything".

Kelin insists that both diplomatic missions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in general, have not lost their influence and continue to play a key role in informing the Kremlin about the situation abroad. He dismisses those who think otherwise as "armchair experts". "I have been in this job for 43 years and I understand quite well how the system works," he says.



Germany was seen as Russia's "only real friend" in the West. ©AFP via Getty Images

Kelin refuses to concede that either Moscow or individual diplomats bear any responsibility for the way relations with the West have collapsed.

"We are not the ones doing the destroying," he says. "We have problems with the Kyiv regime. There is nothing we can do about it."

He does not consider the decision of Russia to choose military means instead of negotiations as a failure: "War is a continuation of diplomacy by other means," Kelin remarks.

A similar opinion was expressed in a conversation with the BBC by Konstantin Kosachev, who insists that Russia is a "proponent of diplomatic methods and means for resolving major international problems".

"If we act differently, it is only after exhausting all other possibilities of resolving issues through diplomacy," he says.

## **"The USA can't snap their fingers and end this war"**

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After a year and a half of war, is there any hope that diplomacy (and diplomats themselves) could help to bring the fighting to an end?

Most of the people the BBC spoke to for this story think that's highly unlikely.

Even optimists acknowledge that the contradictions between Russia, Ukraine, and Western countries are too great, and there is currently no basis for any behind-the-scenes negotiations.

Usually, 95% of diplomats' work happens off the record, explains former diplomat Bondarev, involving "unofficial meetings and having coffee". According to him, such contacts have greatly declined after the war, as there is no longer much to talk about.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the series of mutual expulsions of diplomats over the past two years. The Russian news outlet RBK estimates that since January 2022, Russia has expelled 337 people, and Western countries have expelled over 600 Russians.

Russian diplomats who have managed to establish good contacts in the countries they are posted, are still able to conduct informal meetings with foreign colleagues, says Bondarev, adding that "it is currently not feasible for a Russian diplomat arriving at a new posting to speak to the Americans about anything".

However, sooner or later, dialogue will have to take place, says RAND analyst Samuel Charap. The only alternative to negotiations is "absolute victory," and it's unlikely either Kyiv or Moscow could achieve such a victory on the battlefield, he argues.

Even if Ukraine or Russia managed to regain or occupy significant territories, it would not stop the war by itself: "You're left with a negotiated end by default."

For Washington, a prolonged war increases the risks of direct confrontation between NATO and Russia, and potentially, in a worse case scenario with the use of nuclear weapons.

While a negotiated settlement is the preferred outcome, it's not necessarily going to happen any time soon, says Charap. American diplomats cannot just "snap their fingers" and get the two sides to the table, he adds.

"There's a lot of maximalist posturing before negotiations begin. In other words, signaling your willingness to compromise before you're even at the table sometimes can be seen as signaling weakness. And therefore they take maximalist positions. There's also the risk that in articulating a maximalist position you convince the other side that you have no intention of negotiating in good faith. And, unfortunately, you can see this dynamic happening right now."

There's also the question of Putin and whether he could or would ever participate in peace talks.

"Putin has changed pretty dramatically over the course of his term in power," says Charap. "And frankly, I don't know whether he's going to be willing to engage. And he himself is so toxic that it might take him delegating authority to somebody else to negotiate, even if he remains in power. But until we try, it's an untested proposition".

Recently, even in communication with states that Russia considers allies, such as the CIS countries or African countries, problems have arisen for the Russian president. South Africa, which maintains a neutral position on Ukraine at the official level, asked Putin not to attend the August BRICS summit due to the arrest warrants from the ICC in The Hague.

Both Moscow and Kyiv, at least in public statements, insist that the future of their countries will be determined on the battlefield, meaning they are counting on that absolute victory.

The Ukrainian authorities complain that Russia, as it often did in recent years, is once again offering ultimatums instead of compromises, such as demanding that Ukraine accept the annexation of occupied territories.

Kyiv has no intention to negotiate under such conditions, and their Western allies publicly support them in this decision.

The Ukrainian president has legislatively banned any negotiations with Putin in response to the formal annexation of four partially occupied regions of Ukraine. Zelensky has repeatedly stated that he is "not interested in talking" with the Russian leader. Putin responded, "They don't want to, and we don't need to."

## **Nowhere else to go**

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As of August 2023, it is certainly not expected that Russia will willingly return to diplomacy. The Kremlin has been and continues to rely on three main tools in its foreign policy: the military machine, the intelligence services, and geo-economic power (primarily related to energy resources), says Alexander Gabuev.

According to the expert, Putin considers these methods the most effective, mainly because they have yielded results in the past.

For a while, Putin still recognized the usefulness of communication channels, but he has stopped using diplomats as a way to informally exchange views, says Ben Rhodes. "They're the old school: intelligence service to intelligence service, military to military. These are not diplomats solving problems. These are gray men passing messages to each other. I think that's the world Putin wants to live in."

In recent months, it has emerged that discussions about the war in Ukraine have taken place between Sergey Naryshkin, the director of SVR (Russia's foreign intelligence service), and William Burns, the head of the CIA. But there have been no contacts between the leadership of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the US State Department. The security agencies negotiate prisoner exchanges, with varying degrees of success.

Even in the conclusion of the "grain deal" with Ukraine, which was mediated by Turkey and the UN, the Russian Ministry of Defence was involved. They also handle prisoner exchanges with Ukraine, again mediated by private individuals like the billionaire-businessman Roman Abramovich.

One might assume that, having faced failure with the West, Russian diplomats would redirect their talents toward other regions such as the Middle East and Asia, especially China.

"Diplomats who deal with these regions do indeed have more resources and opportunities; they do more and are more significant. But this is simply the result of the entire ship turning in that direction," explains Gabuev, an expert on Russia-China

relations. "It's all about trade, sanctions evasion, and such— few treaty-related issues. Such diplomacy is more of a technical discipline rather than something substantive."

In these dispiriting circumstances, why aren't Russian diplomats simply voting with their feet and resigning from the Foreign Service altogether?

A former Kremlin employee, told the BBC the same question could be asked of many officials in Putin's Russia. "It's a problem for everyone who's been stuck in their positions for 10-20 years. All your life skills atrophy. There's no other life for you. It's terrifying."

The source described a chance encounter with Sergey Lavrov a few months previously: "A tired man. Slightly dishevelled. War is not his thing, but he has nowhere else to go. He has long overstayed himself. And there's nowhere else for him to go besides retirement. So he just sits there, guarding his chair."

"These people are smart enough to know better, but lack the courage to do anything about it. That is what it is. The fact that they've been in those jobs for so long. They're just survivors. They're just apparatchiks of Putinism." says Ben Rhodes.

Boris Bondarev, one of the few former Foreign Ministry officials to walk away from the job, confesses to the BBC that he despite the evident degradation all around him, did also resisted leaving the diplomatic service for a long time.

"I'm not saying that I am a very principled person," he says. "We had people at the Foreign Ministry who left in 2014. There was Lavrov's favourite interpreter; allegedly, he almost begged her to stay, but she said, 'No, I can't'. If it hadn't been for the war, I probably would have stayed and put up with it. The job isn't so bad. You sit, suffer a bit, and in the evening, you go out—it's Geneva, a beautiful city. It's some sort of compensation. Many people think the same way."

So what does he consider to be his main diplomatic achievement, the BBC asks him.

"That I resigned," he says. "That was probably the most human decision I've ever made in my entire life."

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*English version edited by Jenny Norton.*

**Russia says it has never stained itself with colonialism. Is that true?**

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August 8, 2022



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