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## Russia and Ukraine: Victory Is not Possible; Defeat Is not an Option

This contribution identifies Russia's perspective on the crisis in Ukraine and highlights, within an analytical framework, key debates and points of contention that have emerged during 2014. From a Moscow perspective, the European security system is characterized by NATO-centric dominance and balance-of-power Cold War "bloc mentalities" that the West has yet to overcome. Sergey Karaganov explains that the major cause of "Russia's confrontation with the West" was Western behaviour and Russia's reaction to this. The West "pursued a Versailles policy de facto, albeit in 'velvet gloves,' that is, avoiding direct annexations and contributions, but continuously limiting Russia's freedom, spheres of influence and markets, while at the same time expanding the sphere of its own political and military interests through NATO expansion, and its political and economic pursuits through EU enlargement. One lie followed another, including the promise that the states in this new European zone would come round and assume a more constructive stance with regard to Russia. But the opposite happened: the elites in the new EU countries, especially Poland and the Baltic states, became even more hostile and whipped up anti-Russian sentiment in the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union."<sup>1</sup>

Russia feels that it has been excluded from strategic decision-making in Europe and that unless it acts with force to uphold its legitimate state interests, its political and economic geostrategic interests (Eurasian Economic Union, EEU), identity (conservative modernization within a Greater Russian space or "*Russky Mir*"), and ideological preferences (strong executive authority within a popular autocracy), it will be ignored. As Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov has noted: "The events in Ukraine were not a manifestation of new trends, but rather a culmination of the course implemented by our western partners for many years with regard to Russia."<sup>2</sup>

Russia neither trusts the West nor believes that it has received or is currently receiving the respect it deserves. Russia has had an integral role shaping European culture and politics for over three hundred years. Its emergence as a great European power was sealed with the Treaty of Nystadt (1721), which saw the defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War. For Russia, the

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1 Sergey Karaganov, The Watershed Year: Interim Results, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 18 December 2014, at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Watershed-Year-Interim-Results-17210>.

2 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the meeting with members of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow, 4 June 2014*, 4 June 2014, at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/F772ADD4C6B7E17744257CEF005C7A2C](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/F772ADD4C6B7E17744257CEF005C7A2C).

lack of trust can be attributed to perceived double standards and hypocrisy regarding Western interventions or approaches to possible interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. History matters: Ancestral memories of 1941, 1919, and 1812 still influence the Russian collective psyche, as do enduring myths in Russian political discourse centred on NATO's broken promises and the fact that Russia has only been a nation-state, as opposed to the centre of an empire, since 1991.

Central to President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy philosophy is the notion of Moscow as a resurgent great power, with Russia rescued under his leadership from the "dustbin of history". Power-shifts and the rise of non-Western centres of global power promote the emergence of a multi-polar world with Russia as one of the independent poles and thus a key actor in global decision-making – a power that is now firmly on the "right side of history". Russian power has a broad base, built on Russia's economic strength – it is one of the top ten global economies (eighth), with the third largest sovereign wealth fund. As the July 2014 BRICS summit in Rio highlighted, an alternative democratic polycentric international order is being created. With the waning of the West, market-democratic universalism loses its appeal, and the political and economic model of "sovereign democracy" rises. This alternative and, in Russia's view, increasingly attractive model is one in which human rights, democracy, and humanitarian intervention are tools of the West, which uses the language of virtue to impose a *realpolitik* agenda on the world.<sup>3</sup> Russia's nuclear triad (submarine-launched and land-based missiles and strategic bombers) secures strategic autonomy, and the stability of society and the state is prized as a core political value.

For Russia, the West's alleged support for a "fascist junta" in Kyiv and its weak response to Russia's attempt to uphold international order are symptomatic of the end of the Western-centric structure and order – the hegemonic status of the West is over. The West is no longer the unquestioned bearer of geopolitical order, economic power, and military supremacy. Beginning in 2004 and highlighted by his Munich Speech in February 2007, his speech at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008, and his March 2014 address to the Federal Assembly in Moscow, President Putin has consistently argued that the unipolar system is harmful and designed to "sweep us into a

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3 Cf. Sergey Markov, [American Fantasies], in: *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 March 2014: "Therefore, the new Cold War is not a struggle between two empires, but a struggle by one empire, which is in decline, but is unwilling to go and is desperately clutching at its might, against the entire world, especially those resisting it. It is not Russia, but precisely the majority of the world's countries unwilling to be held hostage by the fantasies of American senators and presidents that Washington is doomed to fight." (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.) See also: Sergey Markov, After Kiev Coup, the West Will Focus on Moscow, in: *Moscow Times*, 27 March 2014, at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/after-kiev-coup-the-west-will-focus-on-moscow/496915.html>.

corner because we have an independent position”.<sup>4</sup> According to this understanding, the US imposes its own model of globalization, economics, policy, and culture – and the role of other countries is secondary. At the Valdai Club in October 2014, President Putin went on to characterize US policy as dysfunctional, destabilizing, and decadent: “A unilateral diktat and imposing one’s own models produces the opposite result. Instead of settling conflicts it leads to their escalation, instead of sovereign and stable states we see the growing spread of chaos, and instead of democracy there is support for a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.”<sup>5</sup>

*“Maskirovka” vs Colour Revolution*

This self-image and understanding of global power-shifts and their strategic effects is critical to any assessment of Russia’s actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Three main necessary facilitating or enabling factors for Russian action were present in the case of Crimea: first, the assertion that a collapse of “legitimate executive authority” had taken place (with President Viktor Yanukovich fleeing the country) and that the interim authorities in Kyiv were a far right, neo-Nazi “junta”, which is how they were characterized in the Russian media and by leading political figures in Russia, including the president and foreign minister; second, the fact that Crimea boasted a majority “ethnic Russian” population with a common language, heritage, and identity, as well as supportive local elites; lastly, the existence of prepositioned Russian military bases as well as proximate military forces based on Russian territory.

The tools and capabilities needed to act can also be understood as three-fold. First, Russian state-controlled media propaganda provided a compelling one-sided narrative of Western hypocrisy, double standards, and interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine, which was said to have resulted in chaos and the potential for spillover into Russia.<sup>6</sup> Second, President Putin had the “political will” to act and was supported by compliant state institutions such

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4 Address by President of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 18 March 2014, at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>. See also: Jonathan Eyal, How the West swept Russia into a corner, in: *The Straits Times*, Singapore, 24 March 2014.

5 President of Russia, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, Sochi, 24 October 2014, at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/23137>.

6 Cf. Ulrich Clauß, Deutsches Meinungsbild im Visier von Putins Agenten [Putin’s Agents Target German Public Opinion], in: *Die Welt*, 12 June 2014, at: <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article128985210/Deutsches-Meinungsbild-im-Visier-von-Putins-Agenten.html>; Ulrich Clauß, Anatomie des russischen Infokriegs in Netzwerken [The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare in Social Networks], in: *Die Welt*, 31 May 2014, at: <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article128584422/Anatomie-des-russischen-Infokriegs-in-Netzwerken.html>; Paulius Garkauskas, Rusijos propaganda nustebino net patyrusius ekspertus [Russian Propaganda Surprised Even Experienced Experts], *Delfi*, 31 March 2014, at: <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/rusijos-propaganda-nustebino-net-patyrusius-ekspertus.d?id=64391398>.

as the Duma and the constitutional court. Third, strategic directives from the Kremlin were translated into action by Russian military intelligence exercising operational control through local paramilitaries (*Samoobrona*, members of the separatist “Self-Defence Force”) on the ground supported by Russian Special Forces (“polite little green men”).

The purpose and identity of such forces are highly contested. Edward Lucas, among others, argues that the conflict in eastern Ukraine is a case of *maskirovka* (disguised or camouflaged warfare) utilizing instruments of humanitarian and social war technology. As such, this is “new-generation warfare”, in which “psychological warfare, intimidation, bribery and propaganda”<sup>7</sup> are used to undermine resistance, reducing the need for firepower. At the same time, special forces, paramilitaries, and local elites act in a coordinated manner under Kremlin direction. The scripted rhetorical-kinetic sequence – “ultimatums, declarations of war, invasions, counterattacks, second and third fronts, and finally a negotiated surrender, payment of reparations and a new territorial settlement” – is replaced by invasion by stealth. General Philip M. Breedlove, NATO’s supreme commander in Europe, in a blog posted on NATO’s website reported: “It’s hard to fathom that groups of armed men in masks suddenly sprang forward from the population in eastern Ukraine and systematically began to occupy government facilities. It’s hard to fathom because it’s simply not true. What is happening in eastern Ukraine is a military operation that is well planned and organized and we assess that it is being carried out at the direction of Russia.”<sup>8</sup> In line with this perspective, the US State Department argues that Russia is actively seeking to destabilize eastern Ukraine: “While Russia says it seeks peace, its actions do not match its rhetoric. We have no evidence that Russia’s support for the separatists has ceased. In fact, we assess that Russia continues to provide them with heavy weapons, other military equipment and financing, and continues to allow

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7 Edward Lucas, The Russian way of war, in: *European Voice*, 29 April 2014, at: <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/the-russian-way-of-war>. For “new-generation warfare”, cf. Jānis Bērziņš, Russian New Generation Warfare: Implications for Europe, *European Leadership Network*, 14 October 2014, at: [http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russian-new-generation-warfare-implications-for-europe\\_2006.html](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russian-new-generation-warfare-implications-for-europe_2006.html). See also Paweł Wroński, Rezerwa na wsiakij słuczaj, [Reserves Just in Case], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 May 2014: “These changes are particularly important from the standpoint of the tactics known as ‘myatezhnye’ (mutinous) wars, which Russia is using in eastern Ukraine. There, regular armed forces have been at a loss to deal with ‘little green men’ – special forces soldiers concealing their identity, appearing as representatives of the local population.” (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

8 Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Philip Breedlove, *Who Are the Men behind the Masks?* At: <http://www.aco.nato.int/saceur2013/blog/who-are-the-men-behind-the-masks.aspx>; see also: Andrew Higgins/Michael R. Gordon/Andrew E. Kramer, Photos link masked men in Ukraine to Moscow; Growing accusations tie them to Russian military and intelligence forces, in: *International New York Times*, 22 April 2014; Prof. Roman Kuźniar, Putin polubił wojnę, [Putin Has Grown Fond of Warfare], in: *Rzeczpospolita*, 8 April 2014.

militants to enter Ukraine freely. Russia denies this, just as it denied its forces were involved in Crimea – until after the fact.”<sup>9</sup>

A Russian analysis provides an alternative interpretation: “Colour revolutions” themselves are in fact “camouflaged aggression”, a new type of warfare in which the actions of an armed opposition are co-ordinated by foreign states’ military staffs, rather than manifestations of local protest against corrupt and badly failing authoritarian rule. The actions of separatists in southeast Ukraine can be seen as a kind of “colour counter-revolution”. The use of covert means, including NGOs, as a feature of contemporary warfare, has been highlighted by Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov: “The events in Syria and Ukraine and the activities of Greenpeace in the Arctic serve as an example of this. The reaction time for the transition from political-diplomatic measures to the use of military forces has been maximally reduced.”<sup>10</sup> At an international conference on security issues held by the Russian Ministry of Defence in Moscow in 2014, Vladimir Zarudnitsky, head of the Main Operations Directorate (GOU) of the Russian Ministry of Defence stated: “First, the countries organizing the overthrow of the undesirable government use their military potential to apply overt pressure, with the goal of preventing that state from using its security forces to restore law and order. Then, as the opposition launches military operations against government forces, the foreign states provide military and economic aid to the rebels. After that, the coalition of countries can carry out military operations to defeat the government forces and assist the armed opposition forces to seize power.”<sup>11</sup> He was referring to NATO rather than Russian contemporary practice.

In terms of norms, values, and beliefs, Russia has invoked the restoration of stability through support for “legitimate executive order”<sup>12</sup> in the

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9 US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Russia’s Continuing Support for Armed Separatists in Ukraine and Ukraine’s Efforts Toward Peace, Unity, and Stability*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, 14 July 2014.

10 Chief of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, [The General Staff Plans Integrated Measures for Strategic Deterrence for the Prevention of Military Conflicts – Chief of the General Staff], *Interfax-AVN military news agency*, Moscow 27 January 2014. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

11 Cited in: Alexander Golts, Are Color Revolutions a New Form of War? In: *The Moscow Times*, 2 June 2014, at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/are-color-revolutions-a-new-form-of-war/501353.html>. See also the statements made by Russian Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov at a conference organized by the MGIMO Institute of International Relations, cited in: Russia not to allow NATO’s military challenges to turn into a threat – Russia’s DM, in: *The Voice of Russia*, 9 April 2014, at: [http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014\\_04\\_09/Russia-not-to-allow-NATOs-military-challenges-to-turn-into-a-threat-Russias-Deputy-DM-5916/](http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_04_09/Russia-not-to-allow-NATOs-military-challenges-to-turn-into-a-threat-Russias-Deputy-DM-5916/).

12 Yuliya Latynina, [The People and Violence], *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, Moscow, 14 April 2014: “Having fled from Kyiv on 21 February, Viktor Yanukovich headed to Kharkiv for the Party of Regions Congress. There Mr Yanukovich was supposed to say that power in Kyiv had been seized by fascists funded by the West, to proclaim a Donetsk Republic, and to request Russia to send in troops to provide protection against the Western fascists. But the organizers of the putsch chickened out, the congress was a fiasco, and Yanukovich

face of illegitimate Western-backed fascists determined to instigate a “pogrom”, “bloodbath” and “genocide”. In March 2014, Sergey Markov, a pro-Kremlin commentator, directly stated that the destabilization of Ukraine occurred: “as a result of Washington’s actions in Ukraine where it has staged a crude coup d’état and brought ultra-radicals, including neo-Nazis, to power.”<sup>13</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov echoed this analysis in June 2013: “We warned our western colleagues many times that it is inadmissible to swing the fragile internal political situation in Ukraine, about the serious consequences of creating a spot of instability in Europe. Despite this, there was gross interference in internal Ukrainian affairs, the anti-constitutional coup d’état based on ultranationalist and neo-Nazi forces was staged and supported.”<sup>14</sup>

Igor Zevelev captures well the different dynamics and logics in Russia’s changed strategic calculus: “By spring 2014 Moscow had developed a seemingly irrational combination of the logic and rhetoric borrowed from the discourses concerning three spheres: (1) national identity (involving the ideas of ‘compatriots abroad,’ ‘the Russian world,’ ‘a divided people,’ and ‘a greater Russian civilization’); (2) international security; and (3) domestic stability. In all these spheres, the Kremlin sees threats emanating from the West.”<sup>15</sup> Russia was therefore determined to protect co-ethnics and Russophone compatriots from danger. The notion of righting “outrageous historical injustice” and reuniting “historically Russian land” is used to justify intervention, as is Russia’s historical great power role in the region, to use the metaphors of President Putin: “The ox may not be allowed something, but the bear will not even bother to ask permission. Here we consider it the master of the taiga, and I know for sure that it does not intend to move to any other climatic zones – it will not be comfortable there. However, it will not let anyone have its taiga either. I believe this is clear.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, the fear of a post-Yanukovich Ukraine joining NATO and closing Russia’s military base in Sevastopol is also a factor: “We are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or our historic territory. I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors.”<sup>17</sup>

In domestic terms, Russia’s gains are numerous. First, the demonstration of Russian military and national power helps to mobilize and consolidate a base in support of the president among the structures of state security (*siloviki*). The ideological construct of “*Rusky Mir*” appeared to provide Putin with a malleable concept and framework for action. On 27 July 2013,

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got drunk and flew off to Donetsk in a helicopter.” (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

13 Markov, cited above (Note 3) (author’s translation).

14 *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the meeting with members of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow, 4 June 2014*, cited above (Note 2).

15 Igor Zevelev, *The Russian World Boundaries: Russia’s National Identity Transformation and New Foreign Policy Doctrine*, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 June, 2014, at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/print/number/The-Russian-World-Boundaries-16707>.

16 President of Russia, cited above (Note 5).

17 *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, cited above (Note 4).

on the 1025th anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus, President Putin highlighted centrality of a “single people” in the *Russky Mir*: “We know today’s reality of course, know that there are the Ukrainian people and the Belarusian people, and other peoples too, and we respect all the parts of this heritage, but at the same time, at the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people.”<sup>18</sup> By March 2014, Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko declared: “Russia has a special mission, we are responsible for the Russian world,” while Chairman of the State Duma CIS affairs committee Leonid Slutskiy (Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, LDPR) echoed these sentiments: “We participate in a geopolitical, civilisational battle for the Russian world, for the Russian language, and we have no right to allow a collapse of the Russian world.”<sup>19</sup> A spirit of euphoria was captured by Deputy Speaker of the State Duma Sergey Zheleznyak (of the United Russia party) who characterized the joining of Crimea to Russia as a “triumph of unification, of reunification of Russian spirit, Russian culture, Russian history, Russian civilizations”.<sup>20</sup> He further asserted that Russians are “peacekeepers, we are the carriers of traditional values which can save the world from disaster”.<sup>21</sup>

Second, such sentiments reinforced the strong conservative rebound that had occurred in Russian society following Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, thus maintaining and enhancing the legitimacy of Russia’s system of governance.<sup>22</sup> Domestic political “consolidation” – an alternative interpretation characterizes this process as a further “tightening of the screws” – can now be justified as a necessary response to Western sanctions and in opposition to Western values, norms, and beliefs, propagated in Russia by an unpatriotic “fifth column”, “foreign agents”, and “national traitors”.<sup>23</sup> In Russia, official internal narratives that seek to explain unprecedentedly high opinion poll ratings through 2014 for the president would note his ability to frame

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18 President of Russia, *Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine’s Civilisational Choice conference*, 27 July 2013, at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5783>.

19 *Sunday Night with Vladimir Solovyev*, Rossiya 1 TV, Moscow, in Russian, 1930 UTC, 2 March. Transcribed from: [russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/21385/episode\\_id/971115](http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/21385/episode_id/971115)

20 Special edition of the talk show “*Politika*”, Channel One TV, Moscow, 2010 UTC, 18 March 2014. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

21 Ibid.

22 Cf. Aleksandra Samarina, [Vladimir Putin’s New Majority. President Relies on Indigenous Russians. Or Is It Citizens of Russia?] in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 9 October 2012; Liliya Shevtsova, [Death throes], *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, 5 February 2013; Aleksandra Samarina, [Kremlin’s Theory of Strength of Materials. Fragmentation of Elite Growing in Light of Decline in Popularity of Country’s Top Leaders], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 24 August 2012. (All three accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

23 Andrey Kolesnikov, [A Game of “Zarnitsa”. Presidential Staff Invite Russian Citizens To Engage in Teambuilding – To Rally Around the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church on the Basis of “Patriotism”] (the headline alludes to the Soviet-era wargames known as “zarnitsa”), in: *Novaya Gazeta*, 24 October 2012. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.) See also: Brian Taylor, *Putin’s Crackdown: Sources, Instruments, and Challenges*, Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo 277, September 2013, at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/putin%E2%80%99s-crackdown-sources-instruments-and-challenges>.

and deliver public policy as well as foreign and security policy in ways that connect with the societal preferences of a “silent majority”. Putin’s support rests on a broad constituency consisting of middle-income, conservative nationalists; the politically timid and apathetic; and the exhausted who either yearn for, or at least are prepared to tolerate, a strong hand and authoritarian stability against less certain and predictable alternatives. Putin’s approach and agenda chime with a traditional political culture supportive of the notion that Russia under Putin has been restored to great power status with its associated emotion-laden (patriotic pride, dignity, respect) values, and fearful of disorder and chaos (humiliation and terror).

Although Putin assumed power in 2000 through the non-charismatic route – he was selected from within the system – he now manifests primarily as a leader with a national mission, the only individual able to protect and safeguard a patriotic electorate and so regenerate and strategically renovate the nation. As Vyacheslav V. Volodin, a presidential deputy chief of staff, stated in October 2014: “If there’s Putin – there’s Russia, if there’s no Putin – there’s no Russia.”<sup>24</sup> President Putin’s regime, which could theoretically remain in power until 2024, can become “anti-fragile” and resilient if continuous short, victorious virtual or actual wars and crises with consequent external reactions maintain regime legitimacy even while domestic economic performance stalls due to a declining industrial and economic base on the cusp of authoritarian stagnation. Such a foreign policy further squeezes a minority entrepreneurial and creative class that is unable to function at home in the face of a state-sponsored “sovereign democracy” ideology that has morphed into triumphalist conservative nationalism in the context of an ongoing chronic state of emergency.

Third, Russia has instrumentalized the Ukrainian crisis to consolidate its wider conception of an alternative domestic order that is conservative and patriotic – defining itself in opposition to the West and its values. Russia has framed Ukraine’s crisis in terms of a contest between rival civilizational models that rest on different norms, values, and beliefs – Russia invests itself as a bearer of alternative values it is prepared to defend, with force if necessary: “The country’s conservative rebound is real. The question is the degree to which he [Putin] can manipulate social change.”<sup>25</sup> “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” becomes the neo-traditional state dogma – fuelled by pride, patriotism, paranoia, and populism. Russia understands itself to be leading an ideological alliance of states that privilege ultra-conservative traditional fam-

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24 Cited in: If there is no Putin, there is no Russia, in: *Pravda.ru*, 23 October 2014, at: [http://english.pravda.ru/society/stories/23-10-2014/128877-putin\\_russia-0](http://english.pravda.ru/society/stories/23-10-2014/128877-putin_russia-0).

25 Maxim Trudolyubov, Russia’s culture wars, op-ed, in: *International New York Times*, 8 February 2014. See also: Liliya Biryukova et al., [Spiritual ties to be exported. For first time defence of traditional values becomes official aim of Russian propaganda abroad. Several ministries and departments to coordinate this work], *Vedomosti*, 13 January 2014; Tatyana Stanovaya, [In An Attempt To Understand The President’s Intentions], *Politkom.ru*, 16 December 2013. (Both accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)



ily values and respect for authority above the relativist liberal values of a morally bankrupt West.<sup>26</sup> Russia's internal perception and official (increasingly stereotypical) strategic narratives highlight the embattled bear caught in an existential trap – to fight or be conquered. Russia's imperial history, ethnicity, and identity, as well as a blurring and instrumentalization of the distinction between opposition and treason, are now tools in the service of power.

Timothy Snyder argues: “Eurasia was meant from the beginning as an ideological and political rival to the European Union, not just something that sits next to it and has a similar name. It is based on opposite principles – not the support of liberal principles but opposition to liberal democracy.”<sup>27</sup> Russia has moved from a soft vision of Europe (via the failed “Medvedev Initiative” – a legally binding collective security treaty proposal that fell on stony ground) to a hard division of Europe via the use of undeclared military force with impunity in response to “the West’s refusal to put an end de facto and de jure to the Cold War”.<sup>28</sup> The EU is viewed through a zero-sum prism – Russia or Europe? The EU’s Association Agreement is now declared to be incompatible with Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union concept. Increased antagonism towards NATO as a “strategic adversary” helps reinforce a besieged fortress mentality and justify a 770-billion US dollar, ten-year rearmament and modernization programme, while virtual/cyber and proxy normative battles with NATO can increase as Russia pressures CIS states to limit military exercises under NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) and other forms of co-operation.

Not only does political, social, economic, and even cultural estrangement from the West provide ideal incubation conditions to nurture this conception, but to repudiate Crimea’s annexation would be to undermine Russia’s foundational narrative and special mission: its very identity. If the West (in the shape of EU and NATO member states) has been training mercenaries and snipers, and supporting neo-Nazis and violent anti-Semites in Ukraine – something that prominent Duma deputies and serious analysts are seriously, or at least publically, contending – why should Russia be concerned with disapproval from such quarters? On the contrary, criticism would indicate that Russia is in the right. Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada Center, has highlighted a two-week-long propaganda and disinformation campaign, unprecedented in post-Soviet times, aimed at manipulating public opinion. It is built

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26 Cf. Timothy Snyder, Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine, in: *New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2014, at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/mar/20/fascism-russia-and-ukraine>.

27 Cited in: Jack Grimston, Moscow meddling in Bosnia, warns Ashdown, in: *The Australian*, 17 March 2014, at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/russia-meddling-in-bosnia-warns-ashdown/story-fnb64oi6-1226856285941?nk=c0649e9c0e2bab0ea9609ce952d54ece>.

28 Sergey Karaganov, Europe and Russia: Preventing a New Cold War, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 June 2014, at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Europe-and-Russia-Preventing-a-New-Cold-War-16701>.

on several simple ideas and techniques: “infringement of the rights of Russians and the Russian-speaking population, threats to their wellbeing and lives”,<sup>29</sup> discrediting the supporters of the Euromaidan pro-European protest movement (labelling them bandits, Nazis, Banderites); “chaos and lack of leadership in Ukraine” since opponents of Yanukovich took power; and so on – has ensured negative mobilization of a greater part of the Russian society, reviving its dormant imperial complexes.<sup>30</sup>

President Putin’s strategic calculus as to the likely costs and benefits of the annexation of Crimea must have concluded that the benefits outweigh the costs. At worst, Putin calculates that the West will be alienated in the short term, at best that Russian action can divide and highlight splits between those states that view Russia as strategic partner and those that consider it primarily an adversary.<sup>31</sup> This thinking is clearly informed by Western historical practice, not least the experience of a divided and half-hearted EU and NATO reaction to the Georgia crisis in 2008 (the “Tagliavini Report”).<sup>32</sup> Following the financial crisis, solidarity and shared responsibility are less in evidence – Western states prefer to act according to their own immediate interests and priorities, privileging this above the longer-term interests of the preservation of peace in the international system. Economic interests and interdependence, whether it be Russian gas (Germany), arms sales (France), or banking and investments (UK), also tend to moderate Western responses. The US’s perceived need to use Moscow’s leverage in global strategic hotspots, to act with it in concert to contain the fallout in Syria, manage the Iran nuclear dossier, or the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclear programme, constrains the backlash. The ability of Russia’s public intellectuals to articulate a compelling narrative of moral equivalence shapes an internal perception that Russia is now a free actor in the international system.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of foreign policy gains, we can break these into three. First, regarding Ukraine, Russia is presented with a geopolitical victory in the form of its ability to “divide and destabilize” or “partition and destroy” Ukraine.

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29 *Situatsiya v Ukraine i v Krymu* [The Situation in Ukraine and Crimea], Levada Center Press Release, 13 March 2014, at: <http://www.levada.ru/13-03-2014/situatsiya-v-ukraine-i-v-krymu>. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

30 *Ibid.*; see also: Anna Arutunyan, Kremlin to tighten screws in wake of Kiev unrest, in: *Moscow News*, 24 February 2014, at: <http://themoscownews.com/politics/20140224/192255055.html>.

31 Cf. Tomasz Bielecki, Zmusić Putina [Force Putin], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 March 2014; Leon Hadar, Will America re-pivot to Europe? Whether Ukraine crisis strains US-EU ties or solidifies them, US policy towards E Asia may be affected, in: *The Business Times Singapore*, 12 March 2014.

32 Cf. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, *Report*.

33 Aleksey Pushkov, chairman of the State Duma’s International Affairs Committee, has stated: “If the West has recognized the Kiev Maidan as ‘an expression of the Ukrainian people’s will’, then it should recognize that the people of Crimea also have the right to express their will.” At: [https://twitter.com/Alexey\\_Pushkov/status/438604919395078144](https://twitter.com/Alexey_Pushkov/status/438604919395078144); See also: Valeriya Chepurko et al., [Fedor Lukyanov, political analyst: is February 2014 in Kiev a copy of October 1993 in Russia?], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 20 February 2014. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

Nana Gegelashvili, director of the Centre for Regional Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences' United States and Canada Institute, argues that Russia's role as a power broker in the CIS has been reinforced: "Russia, as the successor of the USSR, is still capable of regulating and determining their territorial integrity – the key problem of practically each post-Soviet country."<sup>34</sup> From a Russian perspective: "The principle of responsibility to protect is perceived in Russia as nothing more than the efforts by the society of democratic states to reap the benefits of democratic peace theory by means of military intervention. Russia is worried that the West has a pre-established consensus about which side to support in internal conflicts (rebels over non-democratic governments) and that its frequent commitment to regime change leads not to settlement but to the further escalation of conflicts."<sup>35</sup> This has the effect of binding the wider CIS periphery to the Russian Federation in a dependency relationship, while also underscoring Russia's "order-producing" and "managerial" role in the region and thus its "centre of global power" status.

However, Russia's rhetoric in support of "Novorossiia" and the "Rusky Mir" have resulted in a number of reversals that became more apparent as the year progressed. First, we can look to a shift from Central Asian bandwagoning to balancing behaviour, and growing doubts in the region as to the EEU's objectives, costs, and benefits. Central Asian states are uneasy at Russian use of force against a former Tsarist territory with a limited history of statehood and internal divisions. As Alexander Cooley noted with regard to Kazakhstan: "Though officially supportive of Crimea's referendum, Kazakh authorities are concerned about the potential for Russia to similarly interfere in Kazakhstan on the pretext of defending the rights of the country's sizable Russian minority (many of who hold Russian passports), as well as the potential damaging impact of Russian media campaigns."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, President Nazarbayev used his annual address in 2014 to underline Kazakh statehood and Kazakhstan's right to make its own strategic choices – China and the Silk Road were highlighted, the EEU was not mentioned.<sup>37</sup> Prior to this, President Nazarbayev had also stressed the economic rather than political nature of the EEU, stating: "Whenever the rules specified by the treaty are neglected or defied, Kazakhstan retains the right to forsake Eurasian Union membership.

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34 Nana Gegelashvili, [Effects of the Ukrainian Crisis: The Georgian dimension], *Politkom.ru*, 11 April 2014. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

35 Yulia Nikitina, *Russia's Policy on International Interventions: Principle or Realpolitik?* Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo 312, February 2014, at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russia%E2%80%99s-policy-international-interventions-principle-or-realpolitik>.

36 Ryskeldi Satke, Kazakhstan Opposition Fears Ukraine's "Russian Spring", in: *The Diplomat*, 12 April 2014, at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/kazakhstan-opposition-fears-ukraines-russian-spring>.

37 Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *The Address of President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev to the people of Kazakhstan. November 11, 2014: Nyrlı Zhol – The Path to the Future*, 11 November 2014, at: [http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page\\_218343\\_](http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page_218343_).

Astana will never belong to organizations that compromise Kazakh sovereignty. Our sovereignty is our most precious asset. This is what our grandfathers fought for. We will do everything to protect it.”<sup>38</sup> Belarus has exploited opportunities to drive up costs of integration with Russia to gain concessions.

States in the region also resist being dragged into a political battle between Russia and the West and will look to use China to hedge and balance. China combines neoliberal economics with political authoritarianism, and a narrow legal positivist perspective on respect for international law, statehood, and borders: “China has never interfered in Central Asia’s internal politics, never voiced an opinion on inter-regional disputes like borders or water rights, and never, publicly, had anything but praise for Central Asian leaders. It is in China’s interest that the situation remains as it is now.”<sup>39</sup> China’s brand and normative appeal has greater resonance than before when contrasted with that of a neo-imperial self-styled “Master of the Taiga”, particularly when underwritten by a 40 billion US dollar fund to develop the “Silk Road Economic Belt” through Central Asia – which some have dubbed a “Marshall plan with Chinese characteristics” – complemented by an Asia Infrastructure Investment Development Bank, launched in October 2014, with expected initial subscribed capital of 50 billion US dollars.

Second, Russia can challenge “North Atlantic interests”, the US’s credibility as the guarantor of order, and NATO’s position as the legitimizing framework of the US as a European power. As signatories to the 1994 quadrilateral Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances,<sup>40</sup> which provided statehood guarantees to Ukraine in return for denuclearization, the US, France, and the UK have seen their credibility and that of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime itself undermined. North Korea and Iran will draw their own conclusions from this. The Atlantic order is challenged by Russia’s ability to question the territorial status quo that has remained sacrosanct for 25 years. NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow has commented: “We have seen Russia rip up the international rulebook. President Putin and his government have tried to change borders at the barrel of a gun. They have actively subverted the government of a neighbouring state. And they have proclaimed a right to limit the sovereignty of territories which have at some point in history been part of Russia, or where large Russian-speaking communities live. All these actions call into question fundamental principles

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38 Sergei Strokan, Kazakhstan sees the Eurasian Union as a purely economic alliance and nothing more, in: *Kommersant*, 1 September 2014, p. 6.

39 Bruce Pannier, *China’s Limits in Central Asia*, RFE/RL, 30 November 2014, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/china-central-asia-/26717574.html>.

40 Cf. *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, signed on 5 December 1994 by Presidents of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the United States of America, and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, Annex to United Nations General Assembly/Security Council, A/49/765 and S/1994/1399, 19 December 1994.

that Russia subscribed to, and they put at risk the post-Cold War order that we have built with such effort together with Russia, not against it.”<sup>41</sup>

However, Western sanctions were in fact increased, and, alongside falling oil prices, Russia’s economy imploded in 2014, with capital flight, rouble devaluation, and rising inflation all portending a very difficult 2015. The Russian economy became hostage to the Ukrainian crisis, and the Ukrainian crisis itself highlighted a strategic trilemma from which Putin is unable to extricate himself or his country. Simply put, how can Russia maintain influence in Ukraine and by extension throughout the “Russian World”, preserve good relations among great powers, and also be at the heart of a new international order? How to break the rules and still be loved? Putin’s problems are multiple. The downing of a civilian passenger airliner on 17 July 2014 did much to turn European opinion, particularly in Germany. An admission of culpability would indicate that Putin was either unable or unwilling to control his own military and intelligence services. If unwilling, then the international community has to conclude that Russia has chosen to be a state sponsor of terrorism – in other words, a pariah, in need of sanctioning, isolation, and containment. On the other hand, if he was unable, then it follows that Russia’s military and intelligence services are autonomous, able to undertake unauthorized arms transfers and not just shape but determine Russia’s foreign and security policy. The emperor would truly have no clothes: Russia would appear to be a failing state, an unreliable and unstable partner for the West, and an unattractive global brand unable to even present a vision of an alternative international order, let alone lead one. The great power truce would be in jeopardy.

However, if President Putin backs off from oxymoronic “clear covert” support for the rebels, “real” Russian nationalists will talk of abandonment and appeasement in the context of their inevitable defeat. More importantly, Russian influence in eastern Ukraine will be visibly curtailed, at least in the short-term. Putin will have “lost Ukraine”, gained the liability of Crimea, effectively damaged the Russian economy, and scared many of Russia’s neighbours – to what end? Logically, therefore, Russia appears boxed in, with one self-defeating option left open: to deny culpability loudly and repeatedly and focus on shifting blame by elaborating conspiratorial explanations. Hence, the dominant official line is that, rather than a nexus between Russia and the rebels, there is in fact a connection between the US and Europe and the “fascist junta” in Kyiv, who are plotting to discredit Russia.<sup>42</sup>

Third, though annexation by force on grounds of minority protection is anathema to China, Russia could still maintain equality of relations with

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41 NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, *Looking towards the Wales Summit*, Rome, 13 June 2014, at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_111056.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_111056.htm).

42 Cf. Graeme Herd, Blown out of the sky: Putin and Russia’s strategic “trilemma”, in: *The Conversation*, 4 August 2014, at: <https://theconversation.com/blown-out-of-the-sky-putin-and-russias-strategic-trilemma-30059>.

China – indeed, a display of calibrated power would enhance Russia in the eyes of its strategic partner. From a Russian perspective, the threat of China’s economic and demographic domination in Central Asia is not considered as great a strategic threat as the US provoking a “Colour Revolution” in Ukraine. Russia also has an important global utility for China. Putin’s Russia is viewed as a geostrategic counterweight to the US, even if there are normative strings attached. China does not want Xinjiang to become the Ukraine of Central Asia, or a Donetsk People’s Republic referendum transposed to Hong Kong, though annexation of territory (Crimea) may tempt “security perimeter” hardliners in China with regard to island disputes. China seeks both to contain any potentially destabilizing fallout from the Ukraine conflict from spreading to its borders and to minimize the possibility of Russia’s implosion, given Russia’s utility in the international system.

However, when China calculates how best to balance its needs for co-operation with Russia on a global level with growing competitive tensions with Russia in Central Asia, it does not have to take into account the prospect of alienating Russia and driving it into a US partnership or alignment. Similarly, if Russia will not give up on Ukraine, it cannot hedge against the risks of becoming dependent on Chinese capital and technology. Thus, while China will not actively oppose or contradict face-saving Eurasian Union rhetoric emanating from Moscow designed to bolster power and prestige, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Customs Union, and the EEU will increasingly be understood as virtual constructs and Russia as a virtual pole in the international system: “Russia will gradually change and fit into the niche that has been assigned to it in the world design – an important player, but not a decisive one, independent to the extent that its share of the global economy permits. In other words, extremely moderately.”<sup>43</sup>

#### *Conclusions:*

The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing destabilization of eastern Ukraine have brought into sharp focus key prior characteristic trends in the European security order. Russia’s self-perception of its standing, power, and status and its historical and psychological justifications for its actions in Crimea differ radically from the views of its neighbours in the Euro-Atlantic space. Russia appears to have emerged not only as a fully fledged strategic adversary to the “political West” but also with the belief that the West needs a strategic adversary – the US to bind European partners to its foreign and security policy agenda (maintaining primacy), Europeans to distract voters from domestic woes. By contrast, US and European leaders have characterized the

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43 Fyodor Lukyanov, [Apologia of unspoken words], *Rossyskaya Gazeta* website, Moscow, 24 December 2014. (Accessed in translation via the LexisNexis database.)

annexation as “illegal and illegitimate”, a “land grab” and Putin as a “thief”, “delusional”, and operating “without basis in reality”. External perceptions of Russia focus on its economic vulnerabilities and political instabilities.

Regime stability and political ambition are functions of the price of oil, and the Russian economy has contracted sharply as the price of oil has fallen to under 50 US dollars per barrel. Russia’s lack of allies and the prospect of stagnation rather than great power renewal and resurgence look set to be the reality. As the Valdai Club speech demonstrated, President Putin is well able to provide a compelling critique of the current international system, but has yet to articulate a grand vision of an alternative to a liberal, capitalist, and democratic order led by a US network of alliances, institutions, geopolitical bargains, client states, and democratic partnerships.

Is President Putin practising suicidal statecraft, or is he gambling that the design and implementation of strategic renovation of the state can only occur under the painful impetus of an anti-Western strategic context? If the latter, channelling the next phase of Russia’s historical development along a populist, anti-Western imperial restoration path secures elite preferences for what constitutes “sustainable order”: It crushes internal dissent; promotes technological sovereignty; increases the importance of the Russian-led integrationist EEU; accelerates Gazprom’s pivot to Asian energy markets; stimulates Russia’s domestic food production – “now growing at between 6% and 10%”<sup>44</sup> – and constrains and controls “Near Abroad” political transformations. Russia’s closed elite is young, cynical, dynastic, pragmatic, and extremely rich – 110 billionaires control 35 per cent of Russian GDP, the equivalent of 420 billion US dollars.<sup>45</sup> This elite is a combined political and economic group, resistant to foreign influence, operating in a closed political system and it isolates and ring-fences strategic economic areas from foreign capital. Russia’s elite supports the ongoing shift in Russia from legal-constitutional to traditional-charismatic legitimation since, were the corporatist nationalist state to reform, power continuity would not be possible.

Three destabilizing logics appear to be at work, serving to lock Russia into cycles of confrontation. First, the greater Russia’s economic weakness, the more likely assertive and anti-Western foreign and security policies are to emerge to compensate and distract. An escalation in “nuclear diplomacy” and signalling as cash gets scarce and budgets are squeezed is already occurring, as Putin responds to pressure to justify the political utility of high nuclear expenditure. Second, Russian internal propaganda ensures that the lower levels of external trust translate into higher levels of internal, albeit negative, mobilization. The logic here being that, to maintain societal support in an economic crisis, Putin needs to find an enemy, then declare a war – and

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44 The end of the line, in: *The Economist*, Moscow, 22 November 2014, at: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21633816-more-decade-oil-income-and-consumer-spending-have-delivered-growth-vladimir-putins>.

45 Cf. Ron Synovitz, *Russia Has Highest Level of Wealth Inequality*, RFE/RL, 10 October 2013, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-billionaire-wealth-inequality/25132471.html>.

Russia has not only run out of credible internal scapegoats, but its security services are loyal and powerful. Third, the worse the pain the greater the gain. The logic here being that pain and gain are not evenly distributed. In order to undertake structural reform of the Russian economy, some current elite vested interests will be undermined. Although destabilized elites could contemplate a palace coup, Putin has freed himself from elite dependency through garnering public support, and he himself can still determine who wins and who loses, thus ensuring loyalty. So the more some sections of the elite suffer, the greater societal support and the greater the prospect of real reform. Given the context of the 70th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) in 2015, the ongoing Ukrainian crisis will increasingly be reified through the lens of endurance, suffering, and sacrifice before final victory – helping consolidate a societal base in a time of economic hardship.

Thus, when we look to 2015, rather than a “charm offensive” in Western capitals, Russia appears set to escalate conflict in Ukraine’s east. Putin’s shrinking inner circle (Russia’s securitocracy) have a vested interest in maintaining conflict – it secures or ring-fences funding for their corporate interests. In addition, they gamble that a continuous state of emergency will lead to structural economic reform and so serve as the foundation for the strategic renovation of a “great power” state. 2015 will indicate whether this is indeed suicidal statecraft or if the gamble might be successful.