

The Rising Cost of Russia's Authoritarian Foreign Policy

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The swift military annexation of Crimea in March 2014 has raised numerous questions and revived many myths about Russia's imperial identity and ambitions. It has been too hastily interpreted as a sign of Soviet-style imperial revival, in continuity of Tsarist rule. If this was Russia's motivation, the Ukraine adventure was no success. Moscow stepped back from annexing Ukraine's Eastern provinces, and had to recognize the legitimacy of elected President Petro Poroshenko and agree to negotiate with him. The downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 by pro-Moscow combatants with a Russian surface-to-air SA 11 missile on 17 July 2014, which killed 298 people, provoked world outrage and sharpened sanctions against Russia, which now sees its international reputation and its economic prospects seriously damaged. The new Ukrainian authorities, on the other hand, have capitalized on Russia's seizure of Crimea and support of armed subversion in the Eastern provinces to accelerate the rapprochement with Western Europe.

What do Russian leaders really want? Do they have a well-defined strategy in regional and world politics? Do they mainly want to recoup past losses, to regain great power status, or are they pursuing innovative policies of influence? Do they seek to rebuild an old-style, yet smaller empire, or to build an influential modern state? It may well be that, until the Ukrainian events of 2013-14, Vladimir Putin was hoping to attain all goals concurrently: a strong modern state, with a consolidated sphere of privileged interests, and increased clout in world politics. In his policy towards Ukraine, the biggest of the 'in-between' states (the states located between Russia and Europe), he failed on all counts. Kiev's ability to resist outside pressures and implement an internal democratic exit from the crisis has, by contrast, revealed Russia's preference for unresolved conflicts, weak governments in its neighbourhood, and a confrontational stance towards the West.

In the wake of Ukraine's 2014 events, Putin may find out that none of his goals is attainable, and that all he can hope for is the consolidation of his own regime within the limits of the marginally extended (with Crimea) Russian Federation, and the persistence of a grey 'preferential' zone composed of eight post-Soviet authoritarian states.¹ The chances of an effective Eurasian Union emerging in the near future have been severely curtailed by Kiev's escape from the forced embrace (Cadier 2014).

This chapter argues that neo-imperial words and deeds since 2012 indicate that far from having a well-defined strategy of classical territorial re-conquest, Putin's regime uses foreign policy and control over its neighbours as a crucial tool in protecting its power inside Russia. The danger of democratic contagion from Ukraine and Georgia to Russian society has been a huge concern since the colour revolutions of 2003/2004. Since then the Kremlin has chosen to fend off democratic and pro-European aspirations in post-Soviet societies and denounce protest movements as instigated by the USA and western NGOs. I will argue that Putin's foreign policy is authoritarian rather than imperial in that it is first and foremost concerned with regime consolidation at home.

In the first section of this chapter, I will analyse Putin's claim to a great power status and how it justified a revived East-West confrontation and unequal relations with the smaller neighbouring states positioned between Russia and Europe. In the second part, I will argue that the Ukrainians' fierce resistance to Russian destabilization actions in the country's Eastern region in 2014 was a watershed and deeply unsettled Russia's relations with Europe and with the in-between states. The last section underlines the contradictions within the Kremlin's current ideological creed. How can Moscow call for the preferential treatment of 'ethnic Russians' and, at the same

¹ Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan

time, pretend to be a multinational power, in continuity with Soviet power? The cost of subversive intervention is high. As a result, Putin's Russia may well be an outcast in world politics for some time to come, and, more dangerously, may be tempted to adopt a lasting war-scare strategy.

Besieged Fortress Syndrome and Russia's growing isolation

Times have changed. Military might, nuclear deterrence, and the semi-autarky provided by a hydrocarbon rent-economy, cannot now make a sustainable great power. There is no path back to the USSR. The Soviet imperial model is gone for good. Putin himself has admitted on several occasions that trying to reconstitute the Soviet Union would be foolish. Yet he wants to regain positions and claim parts of what, according to him, has been unjustly lost in 1991, the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' (Putin 2005). And he claims that a hostile West jeopardizes the security of Russia and the post-Soviet space. He seems to want Russians to think of themselves as under threat, therefore in need of protection by their leader, their army and police. Have the mentalities and behaviour of the besieged fortress syndrome, intensely fuelled by Soviet-style war-scare propaganda, returned? If so, can a besieged fortress both antagonize its neighbours by encroaching over their sovereignty, and increase its global influence in 21st century world affairs?

In the globalized world of the 21st century, it is increasingly difficult to separate domestic rule from regional and international affairs. Borders are porous, individuals travel and migrate, businesses reach out abroad, economic interests are never strictly national. In authoritarian governments, both spheres are kept under the control of ruling groups, which impose a convenient definition of the national interest and national security. Today, as in the past, they need to build a self-serving ideology by which their domination at home is explained and reinforced by a compulsory, and often biased, vision of the world outside. Unlike during the Cold War, however, the

global competition is economic and political rather than predominantly military, and national protectionism is no longer a viable alternative.

Since 2000, the Putin leadership has invested considerable time, energy and money into rebuilding 'greatpowerness' (*derzhavnost'*) in the face of what is still perceived in Moscow as Western hegemony. It clearly wants to be a power that matters in most international issues, and that can impose its will on foreign actors, and it claims rights to a sphere of influence. Fifteen years on, the results are mixed. They satisfy neither the Kremlin, nor its western partners, and they infuriate a few of its neighbours, prominently Ukraine and Georgia. The Kremlin is far from achieving its stated ambitions, whereas Western states see Moscow's return to the regional and international scenes with very mixed sentiments.

Russia finds itself more isolated and rebuffed than it has been since the 1930s. It lacks strong and reliable allies. It has failed to support state building and the emergence of prosperous societies in post-Soviet countries. Putin's regime has consistently pursued a policy of *primus inter pares* in the Community of Independent States (CIS) and in the painfully emerging Customs Union and Eurasian Union rather than a genuine multilateral strategy with long-term goals (Greene, 2012). Not surprisingly, it is surrounded by authoritarian and corrupt, yet not fully subservient, partners. Putin cannot rely on loyal allies and has to seek compromise with each CIS government. There is no deep sense of belonging together, of working towards a common goal in regional and international affairs. It is a clear feature of post-Soviet authoritarian regimes to distrust any foreign government, even a close partner. The Russian and the Kazakh presidents, for instance, have built a business-like relationship, based on strictly defined common interests, with the ultimate aim being for each to preserve his own sovereign autocracy (Kukeyeva, 2010). In other words, Russia's foreign policy is 'authoritarian' not just in its making and objectives but also in its choice of partners.

The list of Moscow's 'allies' outside the post-Soviet space is revealing. In the Ukraine crisis, Russia could count on the support of ten states at most, states that are usually

defined as failed states or dictatorships (Mendras, 2014).² Russia can be regarded as a new outcast in world politics. At the international level, it has maintained a special status mainly thanks to its permanent seat in the UN Security Council, and to oil and gas. The government has used its veto to block resolutions aimed at conflict resolution, as the Syria and Ukraine cases amply demonstrate, and has impeded multilateral mediations and decisions. This “Nyet” strategy may be reaching its limits in 2014 however and seems to be only aggravating Russia’s growing isolation. Even when China votes together with Russia, it prudently lets Moscow take the political lead.

Furthermore, the G8 has reverted to the G7, Russia’s voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have been suspended, the Russia-NATO partnership has stalled, to name just a few of the institutional consequences of Putin’s aggressive policies against Ukrainian sovereignty.

In the economic sphere, Moscow seems to be overlooking the structural changes taking place globally and in particular the challenge posed by fast-raising emerging economies, which are in fact increasingly outpacing Russia. As Hart and Jones (2011, p 74-76, particularly figure 7) aptly argue, “emerging powers are often in a position to exert much greater economic leverage over many weak and fragile states than are the Western powers”, but Russia remains very marginal in this trade dynamic. China and India fare much better by comparison. Russia’s economic trajectory is going

² On 27 March 2014, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted a resolution critical of Russia’s policy in Ukraine by a large majority. Only Russia and 10 other states, with no surprises, voted against (Belarus, Armenia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, Syria, Zimbabwe, Sudan, North Korea) while 58 states abstained. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>

downwards, and the trend has accelerated with the Ukraine adventure and retaliatory western sanctions, including banking restrictions that have negative repercussions on the emerging countries' capacity to invest in Russia.

Russian rulers still think of their country as huge and powerful and cannot think of it as a regional power, which shares regional interests with other sovereign states. By putting pressure on some former Soviet republics, and desperately trying to prolong past legacies and dependencies, the Kremlin is not securing an effective, consensual political alliance. This is no forward-looking regional strategy, but rather a crooked plan to reconstruct capacity and influence on the basis of an ill-developed 'union' of former Soviet republics, meant to remain subservient to Russia's interests. Moscow's old preference for bilateral deals with each capital certainly hinders new strategic thinking in favour of a robust alliance of states.

It may also be that Kremlin strategists and ideologues believe that only by threatening the West with insecurity and possible war, by making the conflict with Ukraine a world security emergency, will they achieve their goal: to be a power that cannot be ignored, even if endorsing the rather unenviable role of the 'spoiler'.³ If Putin was genuinely anxious to combat his country's 'isolation' – an isolation that is allegedly the driving force of Western policies, as official Russian commentators

³ It is worthwhile taking a look at how Putin's official discourse has evolved since 2000. Probably his own assessment has evolved as well. It is highly improbable that he set a foreign policy course for his country once and for all in 2000, and has been pursuing unchanged goals in the 15 ensuing years (see Margot Light's contribution to this volume). Perhaps he always had a hidden revanchist agenda, at first trying to hide his anti-Western emotions but later letting his frustrations and anger come out in full force. But he could not have anticipated the major upheavals in world politics, such as 9/11 and US decisions to go to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, or predicted the global financial crisis of 2008. His political craft was to adjust and respond swiftly to exogenous factors, to take advantage of unexpected developments, bank on the oil and gas trade, and dare to take a more and more confrontational stance against Western partners and international customs.

claim (see, for example, Bulatov, 2014, Moissejev, 2014) - then he has surely missed the target.

Judging by his actions, Putin seems to believe that, in order to regain world status, he must impose Russia's regional domination over smaller states governed by dependent and corrupt leaderships. He might also have overrated his capacity to replace recalcitrant leaderships with servile puppets, most obviously in Georgia in 2008. This misconception helps to explain his failure to attract Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine into a regional cooperation agreement. The Russian president wants to restore an exclusive 'sphere of influence', which is very different from devising an innovative regional strategy free of the colonial legacy. In reality, Putin can neither rebuild an old style empire, nor restructure a modern effective community of states around Moscow. His choice of outright conflict and violations of sovereignty in Ukraine indicates that he now understands this point, and is preparing for a long confrontation with Europe and America.

Ukraine and the challenge to Moscow's sphere of *exclusive* influence

The in-between states play a crucial role in Russian-Western relations. They are at the centre of the equation, geographically, culturally, politically, and in security terms. They are the old buffers, the 'younger cousins', but also, and more importantly, the *avant-postes*. The six countries of the Eastern Partnership are very different one from the other; three are still autocracies (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus), Georgia and Moldova struggle with weak sovereignty, marred by secessionist territories, and slow democratization. After twenty years of Lukashenko's one-man rule, isolated Belarus depends heavily on Russia economically and militarily. Clearly, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are today more attracted toward the European economic sphere, and even to Turkey, than to Russia.

The in-between countries also have similarities: they are members of some of the same organizations as Russia, notably the Council of Europe and the OSCE, and some have signed, like Russia, partnerships with NATO and with the EU. Since the

Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 Putin has been determined that none of them should enter as a full member a multilateral organization of which Russia is not part. In the last ten years, he has put much energy into blocking membership accession processes to NATO and the EU. Whenever he sees an advantage in raising tensions, he denounces the West's attempts to seduce the in-between states. He perceives the rather modest Eastern Partnership packages offered to the six states as directed against Russia.⁴ Russia itself is bound to the EU by several agreements. Most importantly, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1997 for ten years, but negotiations over a new PCA have stalled since 2008 (Moshes, 2009).

Since the colour revolutions of 2003-4 in Georgia and Ukraine, Putin has fiercely opposed western style democratization in the 'near abroad'. He sees in the westernization of neighbours a major blow to Russia's great power ambitions. He has thought it productive to continue to disrupt internal politics in the near abroad, to make their economies dependent, and to foster territorial/minority conflicts in all these countries (with the exception of Belarus which has no significant 'minority').

As Allison explains:

[T]he CIS coloured revolutions during 2003-5, which Putin characterized as 'state projects' by Western powers, strongly reinforced his determination to resist 'external intrusion' in general in Russia's neighbourhood. This impulse was reinvigorated in 2011, when the Arab spring showed the vulnerability of longstanding authoritarian rulers and the Libya intervention confirmed how action for humanitarian objectives led by Western states could easily escalate into a determination to replace the local leadership (Allison, 2013, pp. 215-6).

Beyond the strategy of keeping neighbours in a situation of weak state sovereignty, Putin is concerned that if new democratic governments become more self-sustaining

⁴ See David Cadier's contribution to this volume.

and successful, they will stand in the way of Russia's great power recovery. He believes that democratization and Europeanization of his 'sphere' will make Russia less powerful, thereby proving once more that his understanding of 'power' outside goes with a 'specific' form of rule inside, inside Russia and its satellite states, and that Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a 'Common European Home' gathering all societies from the Atlantic to Vladivostok was buried for good a long time ago (Gorbachev, 1987). The fear of democratic contagion westward drives the Putin leadership towards brinkmanship in Georgia, Ukraine, and perhaps in Moldova and Armenia in the not too distant future, if no lesson is drawn in Moscow from the rising costs and dangers of wreaking havoc in Ukraine.

Therefore, when some Western officials and experts insist that Ukraine must be a bridge between us and Russia, they express unrealistic expectations that Moscow could still offer reliable security options for all countries concerned, in the military, energy, and political realms. And they discount Putin's preference for a confrontational stance towards Europe and all governments keen on Europe.⁵ If Ukraine moves closer to Europe, it also moves toward democracy, for the two cannot be dissociated. In the Kremlin's black-and-white conception, Ukraine will thus not be a "bridge" or any kind, but a hostile neighbour and one more challenge to his one-man rule.

In all his official speeches and interviews since the Maidan protest began and Yanukovich was toppled, the Russian president has denied legitimacy to the popular movement and to the formation of a new government, followed by a fair presidential election on 25 May 2014. The sharpest denial of Ukrainian democracy building, which Putin insisted was the result of direct western interference, was expressed in his 18 March Duma speech (Putin, 2014). The entire Russian media and institutions have been called to the Kremlin's service to mock the Ukrainians' fight for better

⁵ See the contribution by Makarychev and Yatsyk in this volume

government, less corruption, and respect for their national sovereignty. (For some examples, see Bulatov 2014, Moissejev 2014)

Moscow's preference for 'frozen' conflicts in the near abroad has been amply studied (see, for example, Blank, 2008 and the publications of the European Union Institute for Security Studies). The novelty in Putin's policies since 2008 is the 'un-freezing' of unresolved territorial issues: the war in Georgia in August 2008 that led to Russia recognizing the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; using the Transnistrian conflict as a lever to put pressure on the authorities in Chisinau (Popescu and Litra, 2012), and the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Not only has the Kremlin fuelled conflicts, and more often than not hindered conflict-solving initiatives, but it has also chosen to militarize many of the contentious issue and, more broadly, to 'securitize' the region of the 'in-between' states, trying to lock them into a position of dependence and weak sovereignty. As Trudolyubov argues, 'For the Russian leader, there is no such thing as independence: If a country is not a Moscow vassal, then it's a vassal of Washington or Brussels' (Trudolyubov, 2013).

Military power, heavily supported by civil and military intelligence, has become the privileged instrument in the Kremlin's policies at the border of the European Union and NATO. Officially, despite open facts and figures, the Russian authorities continue to deny that their own military and intelligence, and mercenaries, are the active combatants in the battle for Eastern Ukraine. They understand how crucial it is not to call the conflict a 'war', for that would imply that Moscow is waging an undeclared war in Ukraine. Russia has also relied on the military factor in its policy towards Georgia. For instance, it announced the merging of the Abkhazian army with the Russian army in October 2014, a direct provocation to Tbilisi which has not recognized the unilateral independence of Abkhazia⁶. The gap between the Kremlin's official declarations of appeasement and military initiatives is astonishing.

⁶ <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27714>

In the Ukrainian conflict, Putin has initiated a spiral of violence much more dangerous than in 2008 in Georgia, but he has also met unexpectedly fierce resistance from the Ukrainians. Russian rulers and experts had clearly underrated Ukraine's resolve and capacity to fight back against the Moscow-led insurgency. This can be explained by Moscow's strategy of influence and penetration in Ukrainian institutions since Yanukovich's election in 2010. The army had been infiltrated and weakened⁷, and it might have given up without fighting, had not the new government and ordinary citizens supported the military effort after Crimea's humiliating annexation. Russia has taken Crimea, and created a lawless zone in part of Donbass, but it has failed to cut off the entire Donetsk and Luhansk regions from Ukraine and proclaim a new state, Novorossiia.⁸ The Russian authorities also underrated Western governments' outrage, and resolve to defend Ukraine's sovereignty. It was the first time all NATO states had acted together to prevent Putin from getting his way in foreign affairs.

Putin does not fear conflicts, and has so far used them successfully to consolidate his power at home: Chechnya in 1999-2004, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Ossetia, Syria since 2011, Ukraine. Success may have made him overconfident that he need not worry about Western responses, nor about domestic criticism from parliamentarians or the intelligentsia. Knowing that European countries generally wish to avoid any form of foreign entanglement, he banked on European restraint in

⁷ The infiltration of the Ukrainian army has been discussed in Ukrainian publications, notably in Zerkalo nedeli, <http://www.zn.ua/> http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Russian_military_intervention_in_Ukraine. This entry on wikipedia gives more than 300 references on the military aspect of the conflict : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Russian_military_intervention_in_Ukraine

⁸ The conflict also exposed the limits of Russia's intelligence and military capacity, even after several years of real improvements. See Renz, 2014.

the Ukrainian crisis, and he was wrong. Targeted sanctions against high officials and CEOs struck Moscow by surprise, even though they had been threatened.

In the face of Ukrainian resistance and western reprisals, the Russian authorities have been forced to get more and more involved in Eastern Ukraine, supplying arms, technicians, mercenaries and even soldiers. In order to deny armed aggression, Moscow has also needed to intensify the disinformation and propaganda campaign at home and abroad. Since March 2014, most publications, speeches, interviews in the government-controlled media have conveyed lies about Ukraine.

There are two ways of reading this extravagant distortion of facts and brainwashing of the population. One is to see the amazing capacity to make ordinary people believe any fantasy as proving Putin's authority and popular support. The second interpretation is less favourable: the autocratic president resorts to blunt lies because he needs to make society feel frightened by outside enemies, a society which thus will accept his risky adventures abroad, because they are presented not as "adventures" but as necessary reprisals against West-supported hostile actions.

The second explanation suggests that the Russian authorities feel caught in a spiral of intervention, and see no face-saving exit. However, a majority of Russians may be kept subdued by war-scare propaganda, national demagoguery and pay rises⁹, elites and the upper middle class increasingly worry about their government's war attitudes and isolation. The arrest in September 2014 of Vladimir Evtushenkov, a businessman and major shareholder in conglomerate Sistema, who had always been loyal to the regime, illustrates the mounting tensions inside the inner circles. Evtushenko was pressured to sell a majority of his shares in Bashneft, a minor oil company, to Rosneft, the major state holding headed by mighty Igor Sechin (See, for example: Roth, 2014). Conflict is bad for business, investment, competitiveness, and

⁹ Many *budzhethniki* (functionaries) saw their salaries rise in July 2014.

education. The Russian upper middle class seeks constant progress in their living standards. The 'nation in danger' discourse and violent diatribes in the media against Russia's countless enemies helped to gather support for Putin at first, but it might well backfire and dampen many Russians élites' confidence in the government's capacity to overcome the crisis. Behind the propaganda wall, there is anxiety and uncertainty. Thousands of Russian intellectuals, scientists, journalists emigrate to foreign countries every year. Leonid Bershidsky, a journalist who now lives in Berlin, explains that he is not a political refugee, but belongs to the new "emigration of disappointment", with a sense that "the battle for a different kind of Russia is lost" (Walker, 2014).

Putin is not invincible, and not reassuring. His regime is now entangled in its own contradictions and facing a serious crisis in the decision-making system, from inception to implementation. It is too small a group, too corrupt and clannish a spoil system, to produce reasonable policies. Like domestic policy, foreign policy has been de-institutionalized. Only Putin and his close friends and associates, the big moguls, intelligence networks, and the military industrial complex participate in decision-making, directly or indirectly (Mendras, 2012 ; Soldatov and Borogan, 2010).

This helps to explain why Western sanctions worked from the very start in April 2014. Individual sanctions hit key figures in Putin's circles, but also destabilized big companies and networks that are very privileged in Putin's system of favours. Moreover, sanctions are a form of humiliation for many Russians who have felt on top of the world since 2000 and the rise of hydrocarbon prices and ensuing growth (Mendras 2014).

Putin has been warning of a new Cold War since 2007 (Putin, 2007), and public commentators have followed suit, now insisting that today's East-West confrontation is worse than under Brezhnev. In actual fact, the situation is very different and may be best identified as a new, unprecedented, Russian-Western confrontation, where Moscow is standing alone against several dozen western states, from Canada and the USA to European countries, Japan and Australia. Few of Putin's allies support his

aggressive policy in Ukraine (Belarus and Kazakhstan, for example, do not). And doubt is spreading inside Russian elite circles. Respected experts began to introduce significant nuances when the international opprobrium against their country increased. Fyodor Lukyanov, for instance, who until the summer of 2014 had defended the official line in printed articles, expressed a critical warning to the president in August. It is worth quoting his argument (Lukyanov, 2014)¹⁰. While he had expressed his support for Putin's pragmatism in countering western influence in Ukraine and 'helping Crimeans', Lukyanov points out that Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly on 18th March by contrast:

...was definitely in the nationalist/romance genre as opposed to a work of realism. Bringing ideology into politics, especially romantic nationalism, commits a leader, tying his hands.... Russia is now bogged down in an internecine conflict in a neighboring country with unclear goals and questionable methods. What we can take from this situation is that Russia is undergoing a crisis of purpose... the fight for Ukraine, which began as a geopolitical squabble, has turned into a moment of decision about Russia's future path. (...) today the time has come to achieve new goals, ones that have yet to be defined.

The crucial political issues of 'purpose' and 'prospect' for Russia and the Russians Lukyanov raises are certainly the key challenges for Putin. Can his rule do better than spoil relations with neighbours, and with the West? Other political scientists

¹⁰ Similar circumvolutions were noticed in Lukyanov's analysis of the war in Syria, from blunt denial of Russia's intervention in the conflict by arming Bashar Al Assad's forces, to hoping for the dictator to fall and the war to end. See the author's debate with him in Carroll, Lukyanov and Mendras, December 2012.

and analysts (such as Lilia Shevtsova, Georgi Bovt, Arkady Moshes,¹¹ express their dismay at the Kremlin's spoiling of relations with European partners, in the foreign media and a few Russian independent websites, but have little impact on the public sphere in Russia, since it is strictly controlled by the authorities (see, for example, Shevtsova 2014).

Brinkmanship can never be a lasting policy. Putin cannot afford to go to war with NATO, and he may not have anticipated Western governments' collective responses to his actions in Ukraine. He may have underrated the capacity and determination of the West. Until the summer of 2014, he may have convinced himself that the West would not risk a war to keep Ukraine out of his grip. The easy annexation of Crimea comforted him in this view. But his support of armed struggle in Eastern Ukraine, and, worse still, the military escalation after the tragedy of the Malaysian flight for which Moscow never held its cronies in Donetsk responsible, did away with the little credit Putin still had in Western capitals. The word 'aggression' is now widely used to define Russian actions in Ukraine. Putin has revived in his European neighbours, particularly the Baltic states and Poland, the fear of war. Since these countries are members of the EU and NATO, the security threat is automatically spreading to the whole region. Europe has worked hard to build peace, and it will not let such a situation of insecurity prevail. Ukraine is now, *par la force des choses* in Europe, despite Putin's insistence that it not be.

Regime consolidation and the contradictions of a Hyper-Nationalist Ideology in foreign policy

¹¹ Most Russian foreign affairs experts that hold strong critical views are under pressure and tend to be based abroad.

The West serves as the 'Useful Foe' in the building of Russia's closed, inward looking and clannish system of rule. Particularly since Putin's controversial presidential election in March 2012, every move on the European, American and NATO side is interpreted and used by the Kremlin as proof of a systematic policy of rollback of Russia's grip on its 'historical allies', the empire's former territories. There is an unmistakable interconnection between heightened domestic authoritarianism, mingled with nationalism, and the fierce anti-Americanism and anti-NATO diatribes. Resembling Soviet propaganda in animosity and black-and-white assertions, beneath the surface the message is more complex and perhaps more resentful. The xenophobic nationalism that is now inflicted upon a good part of society, via the media and Putin's behaviour, is a new phenomenon, more corrosive than the old Cold War opposition of two systems of rule.

By claiming special and exclusive rights over 'Russian speakers', Putin is asserting the inalienable right of the 'metropole', of the centre of imperial rule, over second-class peoples. By doing so, however, the president is contradicting his own doctrine of 'Russianness', of 'russkiy narod', based on a reinvented national-ethnic identity. Who are the 'genuine' Russians: native Russian speakers, Russian citizens (rossiyane), individuals holding a Russian Federation passport, anyone who speaks Russian but also speaks another language? The distribution of passports to citizens of Georgia residing in Ossetia and Abkhazia, to citizens of Ukraine residing in Crimea, Sebastopol and also in Eastern provinces, to citizens of Moldova locked in the separatist 'Transnistria' republic, is the best proof of the very shaky historical, moral or social foundation of the new Russian 'one nation state' credo.

How can Putin set for a goal the advance of a 'Russia for the Russians' together with neo-imperial attitudes, i.e. the denial of full sovereignty to other successor states of the former USSR? Can an expansionist drive be justified in terms of consolidating the 'nation', the national state? This is the crux of the matter. There is no empire if the goal is to build a 'nation-state'. As Mankoff underlines: 'The Kremlin is walking a narrow line, trying to garner nationalist support at home and give itself maximum

leeway in how it acts with its neighbours while avoiding the troubling implications of claiming to be the protector of ethnic Russians everywhere' (Mankoff, 2014, p. 66).

Why have Russian strategists, historians, and spin doctors embarked on that slippery ideological path of a neo-imperial nation state where ethnic Russians are favoured over other peoples, while the latter are forced to belong and obey (Chechens and other Caucasians, small peoples of the North are the most exposed), and, at the same time, claiming a special right over all 'Russian speakers', which undermines the very notion of 'russkyi chelovek' (Russian person) since many ex-Soviet people who are not ethnic Russians continue to speak Russian. Discussions over the 'rebirth' of great power status, *derzhavnost'*, stand in contradiction with a strategy based on the right to gather in one successor state of the USSR, namely the Russian Federation, all 'ethnic Russian populations' (*russkiye naseleniya*) or 'Russian speakers' (*russkoyazichnyye*). The contradiction does not seem to bother official voices. Putin himself is often caught in double talk and untruths, but gets away with it at the public level. It is this singular disregard for a rational narrative, a convincing historical claim that calls for more questions and investigation.

Is hyper-nationalism really the source of Putin's popular support as a strong leader? The emphasis put on nationalism, on the defence of a besieged motherland, and the protection of 'Russians' abroad, is often read as a sign of Putin's uncontested power, based on massive popularity. The paradigm is expressed as follows: the nation stands firm behind the president, because only he can defend state sovereignty against hostile forces. Yet it may be not as straightforward, and nor as deeply anchored as is often assumed.

Only two years before the Ukraine crisis, Putin had endured his worst winter ever as Russia's leader. He and his party, United Russia, fell under direct attacks from a wide section of society. 'Putin go away!', 'Enough of Corruption!', 'Down with the party of thieves and crooks!', were the most popular slogans during the legislative and presidential campaigns. This impressive public contest, despite the threats of repression by an unscrupulous regime, could not have been an isolated burst of

anger. It was not limited to a few thousands pro-democracy activists. Hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations in Russia's big cities; many more followed the political movement on the Internet and social networks; a majority voted against Putin's party on 4 December 2011, and more than 40% of ballots were cast against Putin at the presidential ballot of 2 March 2012, according to independent observers' organisations.¹² After this profound humiliation, the freshly elected president embarked on the path of revenge and punishment. Never before had the government resorted to such bluntly repressive legislation and police and judiciary retaliation measures¹³.

Since his election, the president has devoted his efforts to two main tasks. Domestically, he has mobilized all the *siloviki* (power) organs, the judiciary, and the media into an all-out war against opposition, non-governmental organisations, and civil society at large. On the international scene, he has focused his action on restoring Moscow's central role as a rival of Western powers' policies, in Europe, in the Middle East and, when possible, in Asia as well. He wanted to take revenge over the humiliations of domestic affront by reviving his personal role in world affairs.

The propaganda machine was speeded up to accompany the process of regime consolidation inside and great power assertiveness outside. The 'élan national' of 2014 was not, therefore, in any way spontaneous. It required intense nationalist and

¹² Among independent monitoring reports, see the analysis of association *Golos* (Voice) : *Domestic Monitoring of Elections of the President of the Russian Federation*, 4 March 2012: *Preliminary Report*, *Golos*, March 5, 2012; CEDR, March 5, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-950073 and Doc. No. CEP-950001; Alexander Kynev, "Election Falsification and its Limits: A Regional Comparison Ahead of the Presidential Elections," *Golos* paper, in Russian.

¹³ One of the most criticised new laws was 'the foreign agents' law, compelling NGOs receiving funding from abroad to be registered as 'foreign agents'. See for instance: 'Russia: "Foreign Agents" Law Hits Hundreds of NGOs', *Human Rights Watch*, 29 August 2014, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/29/russia-foreign-agents-law-hits-hundreds-ngos-updated-august-29-2014>, accessed 29 October 2014

anti-‘enemies’ propaganda, aggressive television news with violent scenes that would never be shown on European news¹⁴. Pictured exactions were fabricated, or dug out of the archives of the second war in Chechnya and presented as the deeds of ‘Ukrainian fascists’. The need for disinformation and shock propaganda is a clear sign of the leadership’s lack of confidence in genuine and lasting popular support.

In order to renew his grip on public life and test people’s loyalty to his rule, Putin needs to exacerbate the sense of threat from enemies outside. And to make the threat real and tangible, he needs to build a one-dimensional ideology of Russia’s greatness and special historical mission. He therefore unremittingly nurtures the mythology of Russia being, in essence and by the will of Providence, a great power, a singular and mighty civilization (Pettersson, 2014). He also emphasizes the negative legacy of the many troubled periods when former leaders let the country become weak, and the absolute necessity to reverse such trends and re-conquer power, whatever the cost in political or economic terms. In Putin’s doctrine, the Khrushchev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin decades epitomize the paradigm of weak leadership-weak state when Russia lost territory, population, and world power (*derzhava*). And, the message is that every time Russia has embarked on reforms, it has begun to shrink and decline.

The important point to stress here is that the mythology is conveniently invoked to sustain a reactionary and personalized regime, when the latter is losing steam, and not the other way round. It is not the allegedly iron law of Russian greatness that makes people eager to follow the Kremlin’s hard line. It is, rather, the urgent need for domestic regime consolidation that urged Putin to step up the hyper-nationalist and anti-western, anti-democratization strategy. Since 2012, reactionary domestic policies

¹⁴ A number of articles were published on Ukrainian sites, like the weekly Zerkalo Nedeli’s website : www.zn.ua. See also frequent articles in 2014 in *The Guardian*, e.g. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/crimea-crisis-russia-propaganda-media>

are closely intertwined with a war scare and multi-conflict driven foreign policy. Putinism became more reactionary inside and more aggressive outside in words and deeds. The unprecedented level of negative emotions served to the public around the clock raises questions as to the actual meaning of the president's high ratings. Do opinions expressed by individuals to pollsters convey a well-entrenched understanding and representation of the leadership's action, or are they above all emotions stirred up by intense disinformation and brutal propaganda, emotions that may quickly subside were a more honest information be made available? The hyper-nationalist doctrine echoes real frustration and xenophobia in popular sentiments, but it is a double-edge sword. It may not be sustainable in the longer term, after fighting in Eastern Ukraine recedes and the gap between democratizing governments (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) and authoritarian regimes widens.

It is important to stress that anti-western sentiments have, once more, been sharpened by the hostility that has been worked up towards very close neighbours, the Ukrainians. In 2008, the anti-Georgian hysteria was nurtured by negative attitudes towards Europe and NATO and the same attitudes prevail in 2014. In both cases, the cost of the brutal campaigns against former Soviet brotherly nations is higher than any Kremlin official would reckon. The costs are already felt in terms of isolation, lack of trust, and economic uncertainty. To be surrounded by enemies, and imagined enemies, does not bode well for future peace and prosperity.

The blurred limit, the grey area between domestic affairs and foreign policy, is hindering Russia's definition of its own national interest, its ambitions for national development, and also hindering the devising of a reasonable, long term strategy for relations with other states, from the other Soviet successor states to the former western 'enemies'. The besieged fortress syndrome means more and more reactionary and self-protective policies.

CONCLUSION

To rely mostly on external conflicts, and at times interference in such conflicts, to impose one's power does not guarantee long-term influence. It exposes Russia's vulnerabilities and limited options for securing the 'new order' it so ardently calls for, but never defines at any length.

Facts are stubborn. The rouble is a weak currency, and the Russian stock exchange is not immune to Putin's erratic choices. The economy will continue to be a rent economy in the foreseeable future, probably a declining rent economy. The military will do slightly better than in previous years, and military industries might be the only dynamic sector, considering mounting challenges in the crucial energy sector and the increasing competition of other emerging markets. Another major concern is the North Caucasus, which will remain insecure and violent.

Wielding power in world politics is a constant challenge. It greatly depends on exogenous factors, on the relative weight of each country's economy, and fluctuations in expectations and perceptions. Even if the men in power in Russia remain in office, their international ambition is likely to be contested. They can make decisions, but they cannot always see them implemented outside the borders of the state. They foster nostalgia for past grandeur and anti-western attitudes among the Russian public, but one may suspect that their immediate goal is to consolidate their own political and economic clout at home, by using the 'image of the enemy' and war-scare rhetoric, and painting the outside world, even familiar Ukraine, as unsympathetic and threatening.

The irony of history is that attempts at restoration often produce unexpected results and may accelerate change. At first sight, the annexation of Crimea seemed to demonstrate that Moscow had embarked on a resolute strategy to regain parts of the lost imperial territory. But it may prove to be just the opposite. The ultimate limit of neo-imperial repossession may have been met.

In conclusion, Russia's foreign policy is better defined as 'authoritarian', rather than 'imperial' in essence, conception and implementation. There is a non-transparent, non-accountable decision-making process by which a small group of leaders may resort to force and intimidation, destabilize a foreign country, and try to justify such extraordinary actions by manipulating the media and the public at home, subverting and intimidating abroad, and never accounting for failures. Ultimately, the authoritarian nature of the political system is the key obstacle to a more congenial, less conflict-prone conception of the outside world, and it delays the emergence of a sober and forward-looking vision for Russia - and for its 140-odd million inhabitants' interests - in regional and international affairs.