

Russia, Ukraine and the Eastern Partnership: From Common Neighborhood to Spheres of Influence?

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ABSTRACT *This paper provides an analysis of the most recent changes in Russian foreign policy that became a matter of global concern in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. The author advocates for a discourse-based approach to comprehend the new shifts in Russia's international posture. First, Russia has launched its own normative policies that incorporate a set of conceptual arguments, such as portraying Ukraine and Russia as allegedly bound by civilizational ties. Second, Russia is not only unilaterally imposing its power; it is also exploiting the opportunities for raising its role, which are embedded in the structure of its relations with post-Soviet states. Third, Russia's policies are largely inconclusive and inconsistent, which is conducive to the dispersal of hegemonic discourse and its potential fragmentation.*

Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine triggered a feeling that drastic changes are happening in the system of international relations that is still weakly articulated academically. Policy commentators mostly intuitively claim that after the events in Crimea and in eastern Ukraine the structure of East-West relations underwent drastic alterations, which permanently altered the status quo. There are strong voices claiming that in this new reality, we should primarily focus on the often underestimated issues of physical force, military strength and energy resources. A new wave of *Realpolitik* epistemology seems to be underway.

Unlike these voices, I deem that ideational issues still matter for unpacking the intricacies of new trends. How identities are articulated, how norms are implemented and how new ideas are infused in the debate are all of utmost salience for studying international relations in times of crisis. Ukraine is an ideational and normative challenge to the Kremlin, which by and large over-

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Policy commentators mostly intuitively claim that after the events in Crimea and in eastern Ukraine the structure of East-West relations underwent drastic alterations

shadows rational calculus. Paradoxically, while both countries build their international identities on the post-colonial assumption of “rising from the knees,” the way the two do so are strikingly dissimilar.

It is from this perspective that the question of Russia’s instruments in areas of vital interest can be most effectively studied. What does Russia want in its policies toward the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan? Are these policies rational or emotional, offensive or defensive? What toolkits would Russia be able to apply against neighboring countries with

strong pro-European ambitions, and how effective would Russian pressure be in the long run? It is this set of questions that inspired me in this analysis.

In this paper I argue, first, that Russia has launched its own normative policy toward the EaP countries that incorporates a set of conceptual arguments, such as portraying Ukraine and Russia as allegedly bound by civilizational ties, referring to the core conservative tenets of international politics – the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention – or reactivating the Soviet mythology. Second, Russia is not only unilaterally imposing its power, but also exploiting the opportunities embedded in the structure of its relations with post-Soviet states. Against this backdrop, Russia sees its policies as mostly reactive and defensive rather than offensive, which is overwhelmingly denied in the West. Third, Russia’s policies are largely inconclusive and inconsistent, which is conducive to the dispersal of hegemonic discourse and its potential fragmentation.

Russia and the EU build their policies on drastically dissimilar concepts of power and divergent conceptualizations of the state and its functions. That is why I base this analysis on the idea of competing realities, which might be instrumental in explaining the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy from accommodation and imitation of the West in the early 1990s to the current contestation and challenging of alleged Western hegemony.

More specifically, I offer two main propositions. First, normative disconnections are becoming increasingly important in all EU-Russian relations. Unlike the past two decades, Putin’s Russia nowadays conveys its own normative messages to its neighbors. They may be either hypocritical or vulnerable, but they are part of the Russian hegemonic discourse. Of course, Russia’s normative arguments drastically differ from the normative base of the EU’s eastward policies, but the very prominence of a normative (and sometimes even value-based) logic in Russia’s policies toward its neighbors certainly deserves attention. Moscow understands that realist policies are mainly be conducive to

an economic and financial integration, bereft of political underpinning that Moscow strives for. This is why Russia is keen on developing a number of normative frameworks to streamline its integrationist policies.

Second, most of the disagreements between Moscow and Brussels boil down to different interpretations of sovereignty. Russia's vision of sovereignty is grounded in a number of assumptions:

- Unity, centralization and hierarchy;
- Supreme authority autonomous from both society and other international actors;
- Territorial instinct, geographical expansion and fortification of borders;
- Coercive and punitive measures of control and surveillance (“power over lives and deaths”¹);
- Domination of political reasoning as exemplified by exceptional decisions not necessarily harmonious with the law.

Realist Models of the International System

This vision of sovereignty is grounded in a realist approach to international politics, with the cornerstones of a Westphalian system of sovereign nation states and the principle of non-interference. The most important models of foreign policy in realist interpretation are *spheres of influence or interests* (that can evolve into a *balance of power*) and *great power management* (known as a concert of great powers). The common denominator for all these models is the Kremlin's eagerness to be recognized in the West as a legitimate hegemon in the region.

Theoretically, the *great power management* model is feasible, but in practice it does not work due to mutual misperceptions and incorrect assessments of intentions. The idea of an EU-Russia co-management of the Ukrainian energy transportation system was previously refuted by Russia, while the Putin-Yanukovich proposal to start trilateral EU-Ukraine-Russia talks was rejected by Brussels.

The conflictual tug-of-war between the EU and Eurasian Union might be interpreted from the viewpoint of *power balancing*. Yet this model fails to work as well due to the fact that Russia and the EU have different types of power that do not necessarily match or balance each other. The crisis in Ukraine only confirmed this discrepancy.

Russia overtly strives for the *spheres of influence* model, while the EU decries it. Moscow has reacted to the EaP by accelerating the Eurasian integration proj-



An armed man stands near to Pro-Russian protester's barricade in front of the occupied police station in Slaviansk, Ukraine, April 13, 2014.
EPA / Roman Pilipey

ect, which only strengthened the perspective of the Russia-promoted (and the EU-denied) concept of zones of interests. The war against Georgia in August 2008 confirmed Russia's strong penchant for spheres-of-influence policies in its "near abroad."

Yet there are several weak points in the Russian logic of spheres of influence. First, there are domestic factors, especially in Ukraine and Moldova, that make this model highly questionable from the viewpoint of its societal legitimacy. Second, the common neighborhood is not only about EU-Russia geopolitics; it involves other important actors with stakes in the region (Turkey, China, Iran, etc.), which complicated all possible lines of political demarcation. Third, Russia's interpretation of the mass protests in Ukraine as a new edition of the Orange Revolution, with all its previous negative connotations, was generative of a strong perception among Russia's neighbors that the Kremlin-promoted idea of spheres of influence is hardly compatible with democracy. It presupposes the dependence of rulers like Viktor Yanukovich on Moscow rather than on their own people. Fourth, Russia's discourse on respecting its "legitimate interests" and "areas of influence" betrays Moscow's overt penchant for exceptionality and freedom of action that ultimately means impunity from external influence. This certainly delegitimizes Russia's policies of "reunification" pursued in the post-Soviet area.

More importantly, Russia's narrative rebuts even a hypothetical possibility for indigenous political action that does not necessarily have to be directly co-

ordinated with external actors. This reveals a significant difference between the EU and Russia, which is manifested in their divergent attitudes on the subjectivity of neighboring countries located in-between the two poles. The EU's policies may be better comprehended through the Foucauldian concept of governmentality that includes the transfer of administrative and managerial practices across the border in order to enable partners to take care

The current crisis in Ukraine has widened the existing political, ideological and normative gaps between Russia and the EU, and created new ruptures

of themselves and therefore make their own decisions as its pivotal component.² In other words, the EU aims to strengthen the capabilities of its neighbors to act independently and pursue their interests accordingly. Being consistent in its governmentality policies, the EU respects decisions taken by its partners and never applies sanctions against those countries that discontinued their association agreement negotiations with the EU, like Armenia and Ukraine under the Yanukovich regime. The EU keeps its options open for

Azerbaijan, which expressed little interest in adjusting its legal system to meet EU standards from the onset of the EaP.

Russia's policy is conceptually grounded in the presumption that its neighbors are inherently unable to make autonomous political moves, which leads Russian discourse to explain developments in countries like Georgia or Ukraine as a submission to external actors, such as the U.S. Russia persistently denies the subjectivity of its neighbors and portrays many of them as targets – if not victims – of a malign imposition of Western recipes. In this logic, Maidan is not a grassroots revolutionary movement, but an artificially U.S.-inspired action. The same was logic applied to the regime of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia, which was perceived in Russia as overwhelmingly manipulated from abroad. This highly securitized approach to spheres of influence borders on an aptitude for conspiracy theories.

“Realist Conservatism” and Russia’s Soft Power

As I ventured to demonstrate, Russian foreign policy has a realist background, and the annexation of Crimea, along with instigation of domestic violence in eastern Ukraine, seems to illustrate this sympathy for realism. Indeed, there are some vindications for this trend. First, the *‘finalite politique’* of Russia's strategy in what it calls “near abroad” is the idea of spheres of influence, which explains Russia's reluctance to accept any legitimate role for the EU or NATO in this region (the possible roles of China is herewith ignored). Second, Russia exten-

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sively uses its military resources not only in Ukraine, but also in Georgia and Armenia. Third, Moscow is not a politically neutral player, since it takes sides (in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, as well as Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and thus acts

politically. In the meantime, the crisis in Ukraine has drastically enhanced the appeal of nationalist ideas that were activated by the Kremlin for both domestic and international purposes.

Yet the realist components of Russia's foreign policy conservatism should not be overrated. Putin and his ideology increasingly prefer to accentuate identity rather than material interests. This is well illustrated by Russia's annexation of Crimea, which is overwhelmingly portrayed by the officialdom as an indispensable element of retrieving Russian territories and reassembling the fragmented world of Russian-speakers. Russia's "normative offensive" is more identity-driven than grounded in rationality and economic calculus. This explains why the Putinist version of *realism* merges with the *conservative* tradition in international relations, which is present in many other countries as well.

Conservatism remains a highly contested concept in political theory and comes in many varieties. The Kremlin's conservative turn, which evolved into the core element of Moscow's official political philosophy since the commencement of Putin's third presidential term, has to be understood against the backdrop of the events of 2011-2012, when the regime faced harsh domestic opposition (mass protests that questioned the legitimacy of the ruling elite) and international challenges (related to the far-reaching effects of the EaP).

Both conservatism and realism are inherently anti-universalist and opposed to the global expansion of liberal principles and lifestyles. Against this backdrop, it is not incidental that pro-Kremlin discourses were meant to gradually set up both substantive and procedural alternatives to the EU's normative leadership, while being perfectly aware of Brussels' sensitivity to norm-related matters. The Kremlin's conservatism has to be understood within the framework of the debate on EU normative power as ideational diffusion, which operates through the emulation of EU norms. Normative power, as an ability to shape conceptions and ideas, can be viewed as a form of hegemony projected through soft power. As many analysts opine, the EU's normative hegemony was conducive to the production of "essentialized differences between two spatial markers ('Europe' and 'East'), a practice that is heavily imbued with an identity dimen-

sion: ‘we’ are the former, ‘they’ are the latter.’³ It is against this background that Moscow launched its own normative discourse grounded in its interpretation of conservative ideology.

Conservatism advocated as a basis for Russian foreign policy explicitly counter-distinguishes Russia (and potentially its partners in Eurasian integration) from the liberal emancipatory Europe. This type of discourse repositions Russia from its previously advocated belongingness in Europe to an alliance with forces eager to counterbalance and de-center the West. The rearticulation of this conservative turn deprives Russia of one of its earlier arguments addressed to its neighbors, which promoted a strategy of moving together towards a wider Europe. In the meantime, Putin’s accentuation on conservative values might have some traction among large social groups within neighboring countries where societal traditionalism trumps liberal emancipation, such as Hungary and Turkey.

Within the conservative interpretation, the state claims its status as the ultimate source of the truth, which evidently contradicts the currently dominating European political and intellectual traditions.⁴ Another point of disagreement between mainstream Europe and Russia boils down to the supremacy of *human rights* over the interests of *society as a whole* (understood in Russia as its Orthodox majority). It could be argued that an imperial Russia cannot tolerate the domination of citizens’ rights over religious traditions that are conservative by definition.⁵

Russia’s conservative agenda contains a number of variations:

- A *civilizational approach* that is seemingly consonant with an UN-supported concept of “dialogue of civilizations” in general and the Rhodes Forum in particular. This approach may come in three different versions – as an ideology of Eurasianism, as an apology of an alleged “eastern Slavic unity” or as a pro-European discourse. The latter has been intentionally marginalized by the Kremlin starting with Putin’s third presidency, which attempts to portray its integrative efforts in the near abroad as contributing to the strengthening of a common Europe.

- The *re-actualization of the Soviet legacy* as a normative foundation for furthering the post-Soviet integration. The Kremlin not only instrumentalizes and politicizes its status as the successor of the Soviet Union, but also projects its traumatic interpretation of the fall of the USSR to other former Soviet republics. This discursive strategy, despite being incompatible with the EU’s normative logic in most respects, still envisages certain symbolic references to the EU that, according to the Kremlin’s narrative, has started its integrative project with a lower level of interdependence yet ultimately achieved a great

deal of success. Of course, Russia continues to claim that it does not intend to revive the old Soviet practices ultimately conducive to the Cold War. Yet this is exactly what Russia is doing – steadily reviving its imperial identity and making no difference between nation state and empire. This creates tensions with some neighbors: for example, Ukrainian self-perception is contrary to an empire. Ukraine is painfully and painstakingly building its nation state, and Ukrainian identity is very much grounded in the idea of being culturally and ideationally European. Ukraine defines itself through constitutive references to its European neighbors, which is completely non-existent in the Russian hegemonic discourse.

– The normatively loaded idea of *sovereignty* as an underpinning principle of international relations, which transforms into Russia's defense of the Westphalian normative order and the rule of international law. Many pro-Kremlin speakers claim that the dilemma faced by Ukraine, Moldova and perhaps other EaP countries is between preserving (allegedly within the Eurasian Union) or losing (within the EU) their sovereignty. More specifically, Russia pragmatically uses the concept of sovereignty as leverage against the governments of Moldova and Ukraine, which, in Moscow's interpretation, are willing to delegate their sovereignty to the EU.

Arguably, both in its domestic and "export" versions, conservatism became the basis of Russian soft power – a concept that needs further reconceptualization and reframing. Genealogically, the idea of soft power, as conceived by American scholar Joseph Nye and his multiple followers, was connotative with the spread of democratic values and norms of governance. Yet the Putin regime's policies made clear that authoritarian regimes can develop their own versions of soft power, based on the promotion of explicitly illiberal principles aimed at challenging the normative hegemony of the West. That is why we should not discard soft power as a Russian foreign policy tool, even against the backdrop of the de-facto application of military force in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Rather one should engage in a critical debate on the variety of regime-specific interpretations of soft power.

At least two major points betray the vulnerability of Putin's understanding of soft power. First, it is not used for engineering new communicative spaces for shared norms, ideas and values, but rather for a top-down imposition of Russian worldviews and foreign policy principles on its neighbours, allies and partners. In this respect, soft power might correlate with Russian neo-imperial project. Secondly, Russia does not utilize soft power for the sake of fostering Europeanization and comprehensive modernization; instead, Moscow uses soft power to voluntarily detach itself from the group of democratic nations that share common normative approaches to world politics. It is against this backdrop that the whole political pedigree of Russia's soft power has to be as-

sessed, with such cornerstone concepts as multi-polarity, sovereignty, spheres of influence, domestic and foreign policy conservatism, and the protection of Russian speakers.

Limited Rationality

Two major issues pop up at this juncture. The first is how effective and rational is Russia's realist conservatism? This question boils down to the conceptualization of Russia's national interests in the neighboring areas, and a cost-benefit analysis.

Russia's policies are certainly based on some rationale. First, Russia was intentionally and consistently reducing the whole set of *normative* issues pertaining to the EaP (with the attractiveness of European values at its core) to purely *material* arguments (how costly is the integration with the EU for Ukraine, who gets what, how generous are the EU's offers to Kyiv or Chisinau, etc.).

Second, Russia has effectively used its *security* trump cards, which are particularly powerful in the case of Armenia's discontinuation of association talks. In Ukraine, Russia used its forces to organize the referendum in Crimea, and orchestrated military rebellion in eastern Ukraine.

Third, Moscow is fully aware of the economic importance of the millions of Russia-based migrants for most neighboring countries. Since migrants are often employed by violating Russian laws, their deportation from Russia would cause negative effects to the country of origin, both economically and socially.

Fourth, in some cases, Russia selectively refers to *legal* arguments. Indeed, the Russian-Ukrainian Agreement on Strategic Cooperation of 1997 does contain a clause (article 6) stipulating that each party ought to abstain from actions that might be detrimental to the other partner. In Russia's eyes, this justifies the restrictive economic measures that Moscow applied against Ukraine as a reaction to its association negotiations with the EU. Yet Moscow completely disregards other legal commitments, such as respecting the territorial integrity of Ukraine as part of the Budapest memorandum of 1994 that Moscow co-signed with the UK and the U.S. WTO regulations are also largely ignored in Moscow despite Russia's membership in the organization.

Russian foreign policy has a realist background, and the annexation of Crimea, along with instigation of domestic violence in eastern Ukraine, seems to illustrate this sympathy for realism



People attend a rally in front of Crimean flags at Lenin Square in Simferopol, Crimea, Ukraine, 15 March 2014.

EPA / Yuri Kochetkov

Fifth, it is noteworthy that some of Moscow's policies are consonant with local discourses in neighboring countries. The Kremlin does its best to exploit a situation of "normative fatigue" in many EaP capitals due to their frustration with the inability to meet the EU's high normative standards. Against this backdrop, Russia pragmatically offers its mostly authoritarian neighbors a partnership that would not require serious domestic changes. The explicit disregard for the EU's normative basis for integration can be rhetorically justified by referencing the conservative norm of non-intervention as one of Russia's foreign policy tenets, yet what it hides is Russia's commitment to a status-quo type of policy devoid of strong connotations with European values.

Yet Russia's rationality is of only limited character. The annexation of Crimea made it clear that Russia's strategy can be enormously costly, and Russia has paid a dear price for its pursuance due to the unprecedented worsening of relations with the West, including the EU, NATO and the G7 countries. Financially, sustaining separatist and irredentist territories is a heavy load for the Russian budget, already overburdened by enormous investments in North Caucasus and Far East, and in corruptive mega-projects like the Sochi Olympics, among others. All this profligacy takes place against the backdrop of an economic slowdown and troubles with modernization. Besides, by unilaterally integrating separatist territories, Russia could devalue the legitimacy of the Customs Union project. Neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan were consulted before taking decisions that ultimately triggered economic sanctions from both Western and Russian sides.

As the case of Ukraine shows, Russia runs the risk of overspending by dragging the country into its sphere of influence. The price to be paid for reinstalling Russia's sway over Ukraine is enormous, yet the Kremlin believes that it is necessary in order to be recognized as a legitimate actor in a wider Europe and Eurasia. Moscow is ready to disburse money from the National Well-being Fund for economically questionable, yet politically salient purposes beyond Russia's borders. The EU is not, which adds one more point to the list of drastic differences between Moscow and Brussels.

Russia's lavish expenditures in Ukraine, Belarus and Armenia will inevitably ignite domestic debate on the rationality of sponsoring foreign countries, given the fact that many policy spheres in Russia itself are largely underfunded. In the coming years, the government will certainly have a hard time explaining and defending the economic rationale of its Ukraine policy.

Failed Socialization

The second question that looms large is how Russian *Realpolitik* conservatism functions with another major issue on Russia's foreign policy agenda – obtaining legitimacy for its policies from key international institutions and individual actors. Legitimation relies on certain norms that could justify the undertaken measures. Russia is experimenting with a number of normative points, from the accentuation of sovereignty to appeals to the Soviet past, yet still desperately lacks support in its anti-Western policies.

Against this backdrop, a number of weak points in Russia's strategy can be identified. First, Russia is weak in implementing its soft power. It lacks regional strategies for its near abroad comparable to the EaP, the Black Sea Synergy, etc. A particularly strong blow against Russia's soft power resources is the growing appeal of anti-immigrant, nationalist and racist discourses all across Russia. Civilizational discourse, wrapped in Eurasian clothes, remains Orthodoxy-based, which certainly has its limitations for many neighboring countries.

Second, Russia's claimed role as the key security provider in the post-Soviet region remains questionable after the intentional destabilization of Ukraine and annexation of a part of Ukrainian territory. Due largely to Russia's support for separatist territories all across the former Soviet Union, Moscow has earned a reputation of being an unreliable security partner, and Russia's policies toward Ukraine have only strengthened this negative perception. Moscow vociferously proclaimed itself the leader of post-Soviet Eurasia, but lacks a successful record of conflict resolution, which is particularly evident in its policy towards Ukraine.

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Third, Russia's realism does not extend to a clear comprehension of the key realist concept – that of interests. Russia might imagine itself as only reacting to the supposedly unfriendly policies of the West, yet the question of the nature of the alleged threats to Russia remains

highly debatable. The EU does seek to expand its normative order, but in many cases it reacts to demands from its neighbors for inclusion. The EU does not unilaterally impose its norms and does not punish those partners that choose to stay aloof, be it Armenia or Azerbaijan. Besides, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area can be used by Russia to gain entry into the EU market – a perspective that Russian policymakers completely miss in their blueprints.

Conceptual Pitfalls

The main controversy of the Kremlin's policy is that Russia has voluntarily deprived itself of a key argument that earlier shaped its relations with its Eastern European neighbors – building a wider Europe together. Russia failed to acknowledge its interest in associating with the European normative order and turning it into a political argument for convincing its neighbors of its pro-European strategy. As a reaction to the protests in Ukraine against Yanukovich's pro-Russian tilt, the Kremlin has reformulated Russian identity as un-European or even counter-European. This is how the Kremlin propaganda machine currently works, arguing that EU membership is conducive to economic degradation and political dependence on Brussels or Berlin. Yet by voluntarily distancing itself from the EU, Russia invalidates its own idea of “moving together to Europe,” which – though highly hypothetically – could constitute the basis for a new, non-confrontational Russian foreign policy.

In fact, this betrays the core rationale for Russia's resistance to Europeanization in the neighboring nations – the Kremlin's reluctance to deeply modernize the country. It is only unmodernized and unreformed Russia that has the reason to consider a more EU-bound Ukraine as a challenge to Russian interests. In a wider sense, the Kremlin comprehends that the closer the EU normative order moves towards the Russian borders, the harder it gets to maintain the most essential characteristics of the ruling regime, including its corruptive economic system, clan-like political system and an underdeveloped civil society. It is in this sense that, in spite of a politically correct denial of the impossibility for EaP countries to integrate with both Russia and the EU, Moscow believes that they will ultimately have to make a “historical” choice between two different models of development.

In the meantime, by claiming Russia's role as a guarantor of its post-Soviet neighbors' sovereignty, Moscow has in fact disavowed any parallels between the EU and the Eurasian Union. The latter, according to the sovereignty-centered interpretation of Russian policies, can only be an intergovernmental organization bereft of supra-national competences. This means that Russia is not going to model the Eurasian Union on the basis of EU experiences, which again will inevitably fuel anti-Moscow sentiments in Ukraine and Moldova.

Russian approaches to the EaP countries are vulnerable in many other respects. One of the weaknesses lies in the experimental and artificially synthetic nature of Russian discourses. Russia loses its credibility because of its promiscuous combination of different arguments – for example, explaining the economic rationale for sponsoring the Ukrainian and Belorussian economies through references to explicitly normative arguments of “Slavic brotherhood.”

Moscow tries to capitalize on a number of arguments that can have some traction in certain contexts, but under closer scrutiny turn problematic. Thus, the Kremlin points to the domestic roots of what it calls “the Ukraine crisis,” and avoids calling it the “Russian-Ukrainian crisis.” There are indeed domestic roots in the challenges that Ukraine faces – from the feeling of alienation in Crimea and the eastern provinces that date back to at least 2004, to the peculiar western Ukrainian identity that is both pro-EU and inward-oriented. Moreover, the domestic instability is instigated by the resources of those connected to the Yanukovich family to a large extent.

Yet many of the key Russian arguments look flawed. Qualification of the EuroMaidan as a coup d'état ignores the fact that revolt against tyranny is always part of democracy. Besides, the former president, Viktor Yanukovich, left the country himself after being cornered by protesters who accused him of multiple wrongdoings.

Radicalism and nationalism, to which the Kremlin often refers to as well, is indeed part of the Ukrainian domestic political landscape. Based on nationalistic exposures, the Kremlin tries to propagate that all of Ukraine is under the dominating influence of far-right radicals. Discursively, this thesis is well known – from the Soviet propaganda that equated Ukrainian nationalism with pro-Nazi sympathies to lambasting Viktor Yushenko back in 2004 as a fascist sympathizer. However, the truth is that it is Russia - not Ukraine - that cooperates with the most far-right, nationalistic forces all across Europe. It was the Kremlin that was the object of admiration of the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik⁶; and it were Russian officials who positively spoke about Hitler (Andranik Migranian⁷) and characterized Russians as the “Arian race” (Viacheslav Nikonov⁸).

Ukraine definitely has multiple domestic vulnerabilities, but these are intentionally instigated by Russia, which acts not as an “older brother,” but as an external force inimical to Ukraine’s independence. What Moscow tries to prove is that Ukraine is a failed state that lacks national identity and therefore can’t survive as a sovereign nation without Russia’s control and surveillance.⁹ The key thesis of Moscow is that Ukraine is an artificial country with unfixed identity, numerous domestic rifts and competing interests, and an inability to sustain its unity. Therefore, Ukraine has to delegate its sovereignty to Russia. In a radical version, the two countries form a single historical and political community.¹⁰ Moreover, Russia reserves a right to protectively intervene in Ukraine based on the “Russian world” concept,¹¹ which remains an inherently elusive and blurred idea.

What Putin evidently underestimates is that Ukraine’s identity-in-the-making is consolidating on the basis of a century-old anti-Moscow attitude. Russian language is not necessarily a symptom of political loyalty to the Kremlin; people can speak Russian and still be sympathetic with Ukraine’s identity. Besides, the Ukrainian Orthodox church is obviously loyal to the idea of a unified and single Ukrainian state, which deprives the “Russian world” concept of its coherence.

Politically, building Russia’s discursive strategy on the thesis of unquestionable historical, cultural and linguistic bonds between Russia and Ukraine seems quite risky for the Kremlin. If the two constitute a single political body, events like the EuroMaidan can spill over into Russia as well, which would certainly destroy Putin’s regime. Moreover, for the sake of consistency, Moscow would have to apply the principles that it promotes in Ukraine domestically, including federalization, which is an equally questionable prospect for the ruling elite in Moscow.

Moscow’s federalization argument in Ukraine seems to resemble the European principles of subsidiarity, grassroots democracy and respect for local identities on the surface. However, the annexation of Crimea, which for more than two decades enjoyed the status of an autonomous republic within Ukraine, invalidates the veracity of Russian claims for federalization. Russia itself implicitly demonstrated that it wants autonomy to morph into separatism and irredentism, with the aim of ultimately challenging the very existence of Ukraine.

The question is whether Moscow has its own “normative power” to set the standards of decentralization and the gamut of center-periphery relations. Russia can hardly be a good model for sustainable federalism. In terms of security, the crisis in Ukraine unveiled a clear interference of the Chechen subnational authorities in the sphere of federal competences, as Ramzan Kadyrov has publicly pledged to deploy thousands of Chechen fighters in Ukraine. In terms of the economy, the annexation of Crimea has spurred concerns over the amount of

federal funds that will need to be spent to transform the region into a showcase of Putin's policy of "reassembling Russian lands." The budgetary allocations for Crimea will significantly exceed central funding for the whole Far East in the coming years. These disproportions are likely to trigger a new wave of critical debate within Russia on financial federalism and the fair distribution of federal funds.

Moscow's insistence on the federalization of Ukraine shows that Russia is attempting to normalize itself by mimicking, appropriating and adopting Western political concepts, and by formulating its policy agenda in seemingly European terms. For example, Russia exploits the concept of global interdependence to refute economic sanctions as unsustainable. In other words, Russia wants to position itself as a country like all others, following the same political rules as Western governments but forced to react to allegedly unfriendly gestures from the West. Yet this is not always the case.

For instance, Moscow claims that it is the EU that started demanding that Ukraine make a political choice, to which Russia could not stay indifferent. However, at this point, Moscow falls into a logical trap: it is impossible to argue that the EU has nothing to offer Ukraine, while also insisting that the EU forced Ukraine to make a political choice. In reality, the EU's policy (including the Association Agreements) is much more of a technical instrument than Russia imagines, and it was Russia that politicized the whole situation by placing it in a false dichotomy of "either-or." The example of Turkey shows that a country may sign similar agreements and even join the EU's free trade area, while also enjoying the freedom to make foreign policy choices.

Ukraine Against the Backdrop of Russian Euroscepticism

Another element of Russia's discursive arsenal is the claim that Europe is of no help to Ukraine militarily and has little to offer politically. The EU is indeed indecisive and divided between different policy groups, with many right-wing and left-wing parties taking a pro-Kremlin position. Nevertheless, Ukraine is still one of the most pro-European countries among the EU's neighbors, ultimately signing the Association Agreement and continuing to move closer to the EU-structured normative order from which Russia has voluntarily excluded itself.

Regretfully, anti-European rhetoric in Russia is on the rise. The Russia Today (RT) TV Channel readily covers the most Euroskeptical parties all across



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Europe. Pro-governmental commentators like Alexander Dugin contemplate Russia's chances to subsume the crisis-ridden Europe.¹² Fiodor Lukianov, a pro-Kremlin journalist and the head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, mocked European politics for an alleged inability to give floor to a new generation of young politicians while referring to the reelection of an elderly Italian President.¹³ The Valdai Club engages in more sophisticated discourse, misrepresenting the pro-European sentiments in Russia as liberal (one of the most negatively marked words in the vocabulary of the Putin regime), and

then ritually asking a question of whether a European choice exists at all.¹⁴ Titles like "We are not Europeans? Thank goodness!" in newspapers reflect a Kremlin-fostered mood in Russia. Against this background, it is only logical that Russia and the EU failed to talk business in the Ukrainian case.

The Russian version of Euroskepticism is an interesting phenomenon as it develops in a country with neither the intention nor ability to join the EU. Thus, unlike similar platforms within the EU, the Russian anti-European discourse is much more political than economically based. In previous years, the Kremlin tried to play a more sophisticated language game by formally accepting the key European normative signifiers (democracy, human rights, etc.), while simultaneously infusing their own (sometimes implicitly non-European) meanings. Nowadays, the strategy is simplified, and a more clearly articulated anti-European narrative appeared.

Thus, in spite of these gaps and rifts between Russia and Europe, Putin's strategy is not entirely anti-European. It consists of two major elements: the diversification of Russia's economic options in Asia, specifically its relations with China; and forging political alliances with "Russia understanders" in Europe, who basically occupy the far-right (the National Front in France, Vlaams Belang in the Netherlands, Jobbik in Hungary, Ataka in Bulgaria, the National Democratic Party in Germany, the Northern League and Forza Nuova in Italy, Freiheitliche Partei in Austria, the Golden Dawn in Greece, the British National Party, etc.) or far-left (Comunisti Italiani) in European politics. Against this background, it is possible to presume that, first, Russia's widely publicized turn to the Orient is an expensive gesture whose main audience is Europe itself. As a recent gas contract with China made clear, Russia can only be an important player in Asian markets through its traditional role as energy supplier and by offering price discounts for political purposes. Second, in capitalizing on pro-Russian sympathies in both flanks of the European political spectrum, the Kremlin's policy transcends ideological lines and represents a pragmatic utilization of the divisions among European elites. This is the case particularly

in countries like Finland, Hungary and Bulgaria, whose governments are opposed to sanctions against Russia over Ukraine, and other EU member states (specifically the Baltic states) that insist on a consolidated EU response to what they see as Russian interference.

More specifically, there are at least two discursive strategies towards Europe that Russia pursues in the Ukraine crisis. The first one can be formulated as “Russia is in Europe.” Russia thinks of itself as a democratic country, which only reveals how democracy is perceived in Moscow – as majority rule, not as the protection of minorities. Russia claims that it is guided by a “European orientation,” which explains that belonging to Europe is viewed as being based on history and geography, rather than shared norms. In this light, the official discourse presents Russia’s policy in Crimea as “normal” in the sense that it is comparable to other cases with both positive (the reunification of Germany and the referendum in Comoro Islands) and negative (Kosovo) connotations.

The second strategy boils down to the maxim “Crimea is Ours.” It is proclaimed as a sacred place for Russia, symbolized and glorified as part of its imperial Self. What is more, the whole array of Crimea-related issues was securitized, i.e., elevated to the very top of Russia’s priorities, much higher than economic rationale.

This strategy betrays deep gaps between Russia and the West. What annexation means for most Western countries is portrayed as a family reunification in Russia. The difference is due to divergent language registers: the West prefers a legal qualification of the event, while the Kremlin sticks to a more political (even biopolitical) type of narrative. The Russian thesis of Crimea voting for its “independence” also has very little weight in the West.

Conclusion

The current crisis in Ukraine has widened the existing political, ideological and normative gaps between Russia and the EU, and created new ruptures.

First, against the backdrop of Russia’s policies toward Ukraine, it became obvious that Moscow’s understanding of soft power is drastically different from that in the West. The Kremlin’s soft power strategy is based on three key components: first, the idea of the “Russian world” that has evolved from a humanitarian to geopolitical concept with clear security dimensions; second, conservatism as a newly discovered ideology that is aimed to simultaneously secure the regime from external interferences and appeal to like-minded conservative groups across the globe; and lastly, resistance to what Moscow dubs the expan-

sion of the West, which, in Putin's eyes, might be appealing to countries whose elites share post-colonial or anti-American ideologies.

Second, what is often overlooked is the continuity of Russian policy. In the West, Russia's annexation of Crimea was largely perceived as a rupture with previous efforts to socialize in international milieu, and as a disruption of the existing international order. Yet the Russian government views its action in Ukraine as a continuation, rather than a cancellation, of its previous efforts to "rise from the knees." Arguably, the West overestimated Russia's resolve to integrate with the dominating international order and failed to notice a great deal of consistency in Russia's disputes with both the EU and NATO.

Third, even those in Russia who understand that Moscow's policy in Ukraine is not in line with international norms claim that Western countries (particularly the U.S.) acted similarly many times, which deprives them of the moral

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right to blame Russia. Indeed, many Western countries are not without sin in this respect. However, there is one profound difference between Russia and the West: Russia's reaction to the events in Ukraine elucidated a direct and inevitable linkage

between foreign policy interventionism and the toughening of domestic policies. This certainly distinguishes Russia from Western democracies. It is not incidental that Russia's annexation of Crimea and the creeping involvement in eastern Ukraine were paralleled by growing bans and restrictions within the country (e.g., foreign travel bans for employees of law enforcement agencies and judges, de-facto criminalization of second citizenship, greater control over new mass media and political blogging, etc.).

Fourth, the question of what Putin's Russia wants ultimately remains open. The simplest answer would be power, both soft and hard. However, this constitutes a problem, since this power-seeking strategy developed from a gross misinterpretation of the key drivers and vectors of world politics. In Putin's reading of international relations, the possession of physical force (energy resources and military might) is essential for being recognized as a member of the great powers club. This leads him to misunderstand why the West cannot accept Russia as a fully-fledged and equal partner, and why there is so much mistrust of Russia worldwide. What the Kremlin fails to comprehend is that the marginalization of Russia is not an intentional policy of the West; rather, it is an effect of the complex mechanisms of international socialization grounded in the normative principles of inclusion and exclusion. Russia is also reluctant to admit that the idea of spheres of influence – its most cherished concept – is only implementable on the basis of a certain normative

order, based on a variety of institutional and communicative power resources that Russia lacks.

Against this background, it might be concluded that the rules of the game for Russia will get more complicated with the rising costs for implementing the idea of spheres of influence. It is far from evident that Russia's policy in Ukraine is instrumental for promoting the Eurasian Union project, as the Kremlin claims. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan are skeptical about politicizing the integration project, and about negative effects of economic warfare between Russia and the West on their economies that are connected to the Russian market. The Kremlin's policy in Ukraine is not necessarily conducive to the consolidation of Russian power in other near abroad nations. By focusing too much attention on Ukraine, Russia runs the risk of losing its sway over other neighbors. ■

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