RUSSIA CHALLENGES THE WEST IN UKRAINE

Carolina Vendil Pallin
Swedish Defence Research Agency

Events in Ukraine have made many re-evaluate their view of Russia and suggest new approaches. While there are good reasons to do so, there is also every reason to revisit some old lessons and draw the right conclusions from events further back in time than the annexation of Crimea. First, Russian domestic politics will continue to play a prominent role in deciding Russia's room for manoeuvre in its security policy. Second, change can only come from within Russia – the West (mainly the US and Europe) will be able to influence events only on the margins and perhaps not always receiving the intended response. Finally, and perhaps at first a bit paradoxically taking the first two points in view, what the West does will matter. It will matter because it will influence developments inside Russia in a long-term perspective if there is an alternative model. But even more importantly, what the West does will decide what position it finds itself in when Russia does change.

Domestic politics and Russian national security

Domestic politics will set the limits of what range of action is available to the Russian leadership in the foreign policy arena. This is in no way unique to Russia. Domestic politics will always influence foreign policy and at times vice versa. However, domestic politics at times drives Russia to take decisions that go against its foreign policy goals and that even are detrimental to its national security – not just with hindsight but even at the time the decisions are made.

To provide a few examples, in 2013 unrest and pogroms against immigrants erupted in the Moscow suburb of Biriulevo. A Russian had been murdered and rumours spread it that the murderer 'looked as someone from the Caucasus'. This prompted a demonstration against immigrants in this Moscow suburb and ended in riots, where their shops

and property were destroyed and looted. Russian newspapers described the area as a war zone and many of the slogans in the demonstration were decidedly intolerant of immigrants and even racist.

The interesting aspect was the authorities' response. The local authorities did try to identify the main perpetrators of crime during the riots, but on a regional level, the policy response was to hunt down illegal immigrants from the South Caucasus and Central Asia and send them home (see e.g., RBK 2013; ITAR-TASS 2013). On the federal level, Putin commented the event by blaming the local authorities for letting the situation get out of hand. He claimed that 'the discontent of the residents had been mounting for years' and 'the local officials, regrettably, often preferred sitting in their offices' (Forbes 2013).

If one of the goals of Russian foreign policy is to attract countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), in this case the Central Asian states, into the Eurasian Union then showing contempt for these states' citizens and to send them home in humiliating circumstances will undermine this goal. Moscow can most certainly put pressure or even force states to join the Eurasian Union, but this will be more costly and also have consequences for how Russia is able to proceed with the project.

Russia has also often pointed to the threat that unrest and conflict in Central Asia after the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan would pose to Russian national security. Again, the decision to send home immigrants from Central Asia will be unwise. The economy of countries like Tajikistan is highly dependent on remittances from their citizens working in Russia.[1]

In other words, if national security is a priority, then Russian authorities were taking measures that were clearly counterproductive. However, if the overarching goal is to shore up the popularity and legitimacy of the Russian political leadership domestically, then it is more understandable.

[1] In spite of this, the Russian government in 2011 decided to send home Tadzhik illegal immigrants in a direct response to a Russian pilot having been arrested in Tadzhikistan (Lenta 2011).

That the Russian leadership was well aware of the dangers involved became evident when Putin stated that Russia would not consider introducing a visa regime for Central Asia and the South Caucasus (something that Alexei Navalnyi had demanded in the wake of the events in Biriulevo) since this would 'push [the countries of the CIS] away rather than attract them' to Russia (NEWSru 2013).

The second obvious example is Ukraine. If the goal was to attract rather than force Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, then outright supporting the corrupt and increasingly unpopular Viktor Yanukovich was unproductive. However, if the main goal was to prevent a colour or velvet revolution in Russia, the policy makes more sense (Horvath 2013). Indeed, 'the establishment of regimes, including when the result of the legitimate organs of state powers having been overthrown, in states bordering the Russian Federation that conducts a policy contrary to the interests of the Russian Federation' is qualified as a 'main military danger' in the revised Russian Military Doctrine that was made public in December 2014 (Military Doctrine 2014, §12:n; Kofman & McDermott 2015). In 2013–2014, the Russian political leadership was still smarting from the humiliation and shock of having had large anti-regime demonstrations in Moscow in 2011–2012 and the overarching goal became to ensure that no 'Maidan-style demonstrations' would ever be occur in Russia (Persson & Vendil Pallin 2014, p. 25). If, on top of that, the Russian political leadership is unable to conceive of a demonstration as being indeed organised from below and representing popular will, then it makes even more sense. In the Kremlin, the West – ultimately the US and more specifically the CIA – was behind the orange revolution and the following colour revolutions, the Arab Spring, Maidan and even the recent protests in Hong Kong.

Domestic politics will not determine foreign and security policy. It will, however, dramatically reduce the room for manoeuvre in security policy. The way foreign policy is framed and interpreted in the Kremlin also seems to determine how foreign policy events are framed and acted upon. If the political leadership is indeed convinced that there is a plan in the West to achieve regime change in Russia and to undermine Russia, then every demonstration at home and hostile statement from

neighbouring states are interpreted as part of this evil plan. The main objective of the Russian leadership is to preserve the current political system, the underpinnings of which are authoritarian rule, Russian patriotism and underlining Russia's status as a great power.

Change will come from inside Russia

The dilemma should, however, not be reduced just to one about regime security and certainly not only about Putin. It is much more complex and it is vital to understand that change can only come from inside Russia. The EU, individual European countries and the US sometimes overestimate their ability to influence events inside Russia by turning off and on sanctions or being amicable with certain leaders. These tactics have often failed and even produced the opposite of the desired results and risks failing miserably in the future as well. A graphic illustration of how the West has tended to focus on persons rather than on policies. During Dmitri Medvedev's presidency there were calls for support for Medvedev against Putin. This represents a misinterpretation of how politics works in Russia; there were never two distinct teams within the Russian political leadership. Moreover, Medvedev was on the watch when the war in Georgia was initiated and for all his talk of innovation, no significant democratic or economic reforms were carried out during his presidency. Even had there been two teams competing for power in Moscow, Western support could easily have become liability rather than an asset for Medvedev in the struggle for power. Finally, meddling in Russia's internal power politics by expressing support for individual politicians is insulting and sends the wrong signals to Russia. Expressing support for certain policies and condemning those that go against the values and established institutions and practices the West would like to see, is not. Instead it signals commitment to these values and principles and makes the West less vulnerable to accusations of 'double standards'.

Furthermore, interpreting what we are seeing around us as a new Cold War or Russia as a new Soviet Union will lead us to the wrong conclusions. The international arena is different from that of the Cold War – the rise of China is just one of many changes that lead to a radically different setting. But Russia has also changed. The first

generation not to have spent a single day in the Soviet Union is entering into adulthood now; economic growth has given rise to new values and norms at least among an urban middle class; at the same time economic inequality has increased substantially – more or less everyone has enjoyed some income increase but the bulk of the energy incomes have ended up among the wealthy and the urban middle class; ethnic, religious and regional tensions are increasing and an economic downturn risk accentuating all of these divisions inside society (for an overview of the socioeconomic development and values in Russian society, see Vendil Pallin 2015).

Sociological studies have showed that individualistic values such as human rights and freedoms have been on the increase among the younger cohorts and the middle class, but also that a growing demand was present for a return to tradition, moral values that are perceived to have been lost and strengthened nationalistic sentiments. When the Russian political leadership decided to promote Russian patriotism they were tapping into sentiments that were already present among the population (see, for example, IS RAN 2013, p. 15). It is not all created by propaganda; there was a popular demand for recovering Russian national pride, intolerance towards homosexuals and immigrants was on the increase and there was a deep-rooted wish for stability and order. These sentiments co-existed with demand for rule of law and the freedom to travel and express opinions freely and similar values.

One thing that did not exist before the war in Ukraine was the enemy image that now permeates Russian propaganda and is reflected in opinion polls. The enemy evoked is external (mainly the US and NATO) and internal (national traitors and fifth columnists). Russians predominantly negative towards the US were not in a majority before February–March 2014 (with the exception for dips in attitudes towards the US during the bombings of Kosovo in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the war in Georgia in 2008). Sentiments towards the EU have been overwhelmingly positive ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but even this has changed with the annexation of Crimea (Levada Centre 2014b). Russians have also come to harbour a negative view of Ukraine. Ukrainians are demonised and even dehumanised in Russian

political rhetoric and propaganda (Levada Centre 2014c). Add to this the witch-hunt for internal enemies: 'national traitors' and 'fifth columnists' as they were dubbed by Putin in his address to parliament when the decision to annex Crimea was made public on 18 March 2014 (President of Russia 2014). This further accentuated a theme that had been present in Russian official rhetoric for almost ten years – that of a conspiracy against Russia in order to justify a negative mobilisation of the population (Levada 2005). The rhetoric and propaganda has delivered concrete results. In 2007, about 42 per cent of the population believed that internal and external enemies are threatening Russia – now that figure is over 61 per cent (Levada Centre 2014d).

It is in this atmosphere that the opinion polls that say that Putin is supported by 87 per cent of the population should be interpreted. This is not primarily a measure of how many would vote for him in a fair and free election but rather a population that rallies around its political leadership because it perceives that Russia is under threat (Gudkov 2014). Add to this that about a third answer that they are reluctant to give answers that are critical of the political leadership in anonymous opinion polls for fear of negative personal consequences and that an increasing share fear a return of political repression. (Levada Centre 2014a).

Russia is not as easy to predict as Putin's opinion ratings could lead us to think. It is worrying that intolerance and nationalism has been on the rise, but it has been so simultaneously with an increase of preferences for rule of law, civil rights and freedoms. In other words, we see an increasingly chauvinistic and authoritarian Russia, but demand for economic growth and political accountability have also been on the rise. Change can only come from inside Russia – whether a turn for the worse or a more promising one – but there is nothing predetermined about it. Deterministic analyses of how Russia will run out of money and have to change within 18 months are misleading and completely ignore the potential for negative mobilisation of the population against a perceived conspiracy against Russia and in the face of evoked internal and external threats.

What the West does matters

In spite of the fact that change must come from Russia, the policy response of the EU and NATO matters – and it does so irrespectively of how events in Russia develop. The fact that Russian domestic policy could thwart efforts to achieve a certain policy response and that change can only come from inside Russia is not the same as saying that policy choices do not matter. It is high time to ask what it is in the West – in the US and in Europe – that makes the Russian leadership think of it as a danger.

The answer is threefold. First, Russia did not count on Europe and the US being able to unite in delivering a response to Moscow's actions in Ukraine. The G20 summit in Brisbane was an illustration of this. Putin came to the G20 with the intention to separate economic questions from those of the future of Ukraine and the security arrangements in Europe (RIA Novosti 2014). It was a Russian attempt to break out of isolation. The journalist Yevgenii Kisilev (not to be confused with Dmitrii Kisilev on Russian national television), wrote a blog after the G20 summit under the title 'Kto kogo', or 'Who will prevail'. Kisilev's analysis was that the West finally came to the conclusion that Putin only respects strength and that the only law there is, is that of the law of the strong:

> Well, it seems the West thought, let's see who is the strongest. We are one billion against your 144 million, we have 60 per cent of world GDP against your 2 per cent, we have all the high-end production, all high-technologies in the world, all the greatest scientific research institutes, all the mightiest world mass media – so let's compare who is the strongest. (Kisilev 2014)

A united EU is indeed the stronger economy in spite of slumping growth figures; NATO's allies together are stronger militarily; and the political systems in the West are infinitely more stable than Russia's.

Second, there is an obvious counter-argument in that the West has not proved ready to use military force, whereas Russia is. Kisilev's blog does end on the pessimistic note that the outcome of a battle of strength

between the West and Russia is obvious but for one fact – Russia is in possession of nuclear arms. However, just as Russia has been skilful in tailoring its use of military force and threat of force (Norberg & Westerlund 2015), this is something that the West can develop as well. Increasing the defence budgets of the European countries to the two-percent goal for NATO allies would be a sign of determination that Moscow will take note of. And two percent of 60 per cent of the world's GDP will be difficult to match by any increases of Russian defence expenditure when Russia's share of the world GDP is about two per cent and diminishing. Another important signal and well-tailored measure to withstand challenges to territorial integrity and national sovereignty is to strengthen border control.

Finally, a much-noticed aspect of Russia's operation against Ukraine has been that of information warfare. It is obvious from official documents and rhetoric that Russia considered itself as under attack in an information war well before its military operation against Ukraine (Franke 2015). Russia wants to develop its own soft power, but also finds it 'a double-edged sword' since it is convinced that foreign intelligence services have used soft power in Russia and that it constitutes a threat to Russian national security (Persson 2014: 28).

It is high time to recognise that when the EU was engaged in what it perceived as the innocent task of support for democratic values and human rights as well as economic freedom and rule of law, this was considered a hostile activity in Moscow. What used to be referred to as the second and third basked inside the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), constitutes a threat to Russia's current political system. But it is also a threat to Russia's goal to create a sphere of influence, since stronger political, judicial, economic and societal institutions in Russia's neighbouring countries reduces the possibilities to covertly influence these countries. Strong institutions, independent scrutiny, transparency and eradication of corruption are paramount to strengthen countries' sovereignty. This will be an integral part of providing sovereignty support – since the war in Ukraine has brought home the lesson that defending national sovereignty is at least as important as preserving territorial integrity.

Democratic values, human rights, rule of law and economic freedom and the institutions that go with these are effective in displaying the weaknesses of the Russian economic and political system to at least some sections of the elites. When asked what the West can do in Stockholm on 22 January 2015, the political researcher Lilia Shevtsova answered: 'Practice what you preach!' Indeed, sticking with the values and institutions that have helped build a Europe that lives in peace and prosperity will strengthen the West's position regardless of when and how Russia does change.

Bibliography

Forbes. 2013. 'Putin voslozhil vinu za pogrom v Biriulevo na mestnuiu vlast' at http://forbes.ru/news/246507-putin-vozlozhil-vinu-za-progomy-v-biryulevo-na-mestnuyu-vlast, accessed on 16.01.2015.

Franke, Ulrik. 2015. *Russian Information Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Stockholm: FOI Report, to be published.

Gudkov, Lev. 2014. 'The Technology of Negative Mobilization', *Eurozine*, 1 October 2014, at http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-10-01-gudkov-en.html, accessed on 06.02.2015.

Horvath, Robert. 2013. *Putin's Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet authoritarianism and the spectre of velvet revolution.* Abingdon: Routledge.

IS RAN. 2013. *Differentsiatsiya grazhdanskikh i politicheskikh praktik v Rossii: institutsionalnaya perspektiva.* Moscow: IS RAN.

ITAR-TASS. 2013. 'Pervaia gruppa nelegalnyih migrantov, vyiavlennykh posle sobytii v Biriulevo, otpravlena na rodinu', 31 October 2013 at http://itar-tass.com/glavnie-novosti/754325, accessed on 16.01.2015.

Kisilev, Yevgenii. (2014. 'Kto kogo?', *Ekho Moskvy*, at http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/kiselev/1438438-echo/, accessed on 16.01.2015.

Kofman, Michael and McDermott, Roger. 2015. 'No Return to Cold War in Russia's New Military Doctrine – analysis', *Eurasia Review*, 3 February 2015 at http://www.eurasiareview.com/03022015-no-return-cold-war-russias-new-military-doctrine-analysis/, accessed on 04.02.2015.

Lenta. 2011. 'Rossiia veshlet 100 tadzhikskikh migrantov v otvet na prigovor pilotam', 11 November 2011 at http://lenta.ru/news/2011/11/11/tajik/, accessed on 01.02.2015.

Levada Centre. 2014a. 'Oprosy obshchestvennogo mneniia: interes, doverie i strakhi', 18 August 2014 at http://www.levada.ru/18-08-2014/oprosy-obshchestvennogo-mneniya-interes-doverie-i-strakhi, accessed on 04.04.2015.

Levada Centre. 2014b. 'Otnoshenie rossiian k drugim stranam', 8 December 2014 at http://www.levada.ru/08-12-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam , accessed on 05.02.2015.

Levada Centre. 2014c. 'Rossiiane o kachestvakh ukraintsev i russkikh', 3 September 2014 at http://www.levada. http://www.levada.ru/03-09-2014/rossiyane-o-kachestvakh-ukraintsev-i-russkikh, accessed on 05.02.2015.

Levada Centre. 2014d. 'Rossiiane o sanktsiiakh, o vragach i ob uvazhenii k Rossii', 8 August 2014 at http://www.levada.ru/08-08-2014/rossiyane-o-sanktsiyakh-o-vragakh-i-ob-uvazhenii-k-rossii, accessed on 05.02.2015.

Levada, Yurii. 2005. 'Chelovek obyknovennyi v dvukh sostaianiiakh', *Obshchestvennoe mnenie*, No. 1, pp. 8–18.

Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 26 December 2014 at http://news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf, accessed on 04.02.2015.

NEWSru. 2013. 'Putin vpervye prokommentrioval besporiadki v Biriulevo, priznav v konflikte natsionalnuiu problemu', 22 October 2013 at http://newsru.com/russia/22oct2013/putinbir_print.html, accessed on 16.01.2016.

Norberg, Johan and Westerlund, Fredrik. 2015. *Tailoring Agression - Russia's Armed Force Toolbox in Ukraine in 2014*. Paper presented at the 46th Annual Convention of ASEEES. San Antonio, 20–23 November 2014.

Person, Gudrun. 2014. 'Russian Influence and Soft Power in the Baltic States: the View from Moscow' in Winnerstig, Mike, ed., *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States*, FOI Report (FOI-R--3990--SE, December 2014), pp. 17–29.

Persson, Gudrun and Vendil Pallin, Carolina. 2014. 'Setting the Scene – the view from Russia' in Granholm, Niklas, Malminen, Johannes and Persson, Gudrun, eds, *A Rude Awakening: Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*. FOI Report (FOI-R--3892--SE, June 2014), pp. 25–34.

President of Russia. 2014. 'Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 18 March 2014, at http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/20603, accessed on 05.02.2015.

RBK. 2013. 'V Biriulevo zaderzhany 348 nelegalnykh migrantov', 15 October 2013 at http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/20131015161733.shtml, accessed on 16.01.2015.

RIA Novosti. 2014. 'Vadim Lukov: razgovor ob otluchenii Rossii ot dvadtsatki ne stoial', 14 November 2014 at http://ria.ru/interview/20141114/1033181908.html, accessed on 16.02.2015.

Vendil Pallin, Carolina. 2015. 'The Basis for Institutions Among the Population in Russia' in Oxenstierna, Susanne, ed., *The Challenges for Russia's Politicized Economic System*. London: Routledge (forthcoming).