

## AIMED FOR THE BETTER, ENDED UP WITH THE WORST: RUSSIA AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER<sup>1</sup>

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The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent intervention in Ukraine created a shockwave in the European security system. It suddenly became apparent that certain key rules of international conduct in Europe could no longer be taken for granted. Opponents of Vladimir Putin's Russia in the West, and especially in the Baltic states, immediately put the events in and around Ukraine in the context of previous developments, in particular the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Their conclusion was that the intervention was part of a long-term plan of imperial expansion, which is going to continue in the nearest future.

A year later, it is time for a more sober reflection on the driving forces and potential consequences of the Kremlin's action. This article highlights some of the central features of Moscow's policies, which, taken together, help understand why last year's outburst became possible and evaluate prospects for the future. My point of departure is the assumption that the intervention in Ukraine was not, and could not have been, planned in advance in every detail. Even though the Russian military probably had prepared (and continue to prepare) operation plans for various contingent opportunities, the sequence of events that led to the current crisis could have been foreseen by no-one. One of the reasons why this dynamic was, for all practical purposes, unpredictable

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was its relational character: it consisted in a highly complex interaction between a number of actors, none of whom had full control of the process and was able to fully foresee the outcome. Presenting the whole crisis as pre-designed in the Kremlin assigns too much strategic rationality to one actor and fails to account for the fact, acknowledged by a vast majority of experts, that the Russian leadership underestimated the costs of the intervention for Russia, in terms of Western sanctions, the domestic repercussions of the volatility of the situation in the Donbas and in other crucial respects.

A call not to overrate the Kremlin's strategic thinking must not, however, be taken to mean that the whole move was a reckless gambit. On the contrary, it looks perfectly rational from the point of view of Russian foreign policy thinking. This article therefore suggests to look at Russia's logic in its own terms, neither exoticising it as rooted in 'the enigmatic Russian soul' nor imposing a Western logic on what is essentially a semi-peripheral worldview. In what follows, I argue that the Russian intervention in Ukraine was an attempt at restoring international order, destabilised by the Western support of the orange revolution. To understand this somewhat paradoxical position, one must take into account Russia's semi-peripheral position in the international system and its subaltern imperial identity. Having briefly outlined this background in the first section of the article, I then proceed to analyse the internal logic of Russia's position on the issue as driven primarily by domestic considerations (among which ensuring sovereign autonomy and survival of the regime are paramount) and framed by a bipolar, Eurocentric and conspirological worldview. I demonstrate that Moscow did aim for the better in the sense of trying to offset the negative effects of what it saw as a unilateral attempt by the West to skew the global balance in its favour. However, to paraphrase former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, the outcome for Russia is not as usual: in effect, Russia ended up with the worst by undermining key international institutions on which its own status and agency depend in a crucial way.

## 1. Russia's post-imperial resentment

It is commonplace to argue that Russia is a semi-peripheral country (see e.g. Kagarlitsky 2008, Hopf 2013, Christensen 2013), but the full significance of this fact for its foreign policy is not sufficiently appreciated. In Ayşe Zarakol's work, the specificity of the international conduct of the latecomers to the Eurocentric international society has been examined through the prism of 'stigmatisation' (Zarakol 2011, see also Suzuki 2009, Zarakol 2014) and linked with ontological insecurity (Zarakol 2010, see also Mitzen 2006, Steele 2008). What the current crisis highlights, however, is the degree to which identity-related ontological insecurity is reinforced by the material and technological dependency on the global capitalist core, which in Russia's case makes overcoming stigmatisation a nearly impossible task (Morozov 2015, pp. 47–102). Even though stigma can be converted into anti-Western antagonism at the discursive level, its structural preconditions cannot be eliminated by a sovereign decision.

This structural background of Russian foreign policy has remained relatively unchanged since at least the nineteenth century, while the short-term dynamic in its relations with the West has produced repeated cycles of catching-up modernisation followed by nationalist reaction. The Bolshevik revolution undoubtedly broke the pattern in some important respects, but Soviet modernisation failed to put an end to dependent development and eventually brought into being an economy hooked on hydrocarbon exports (Kagarlitsky 2008). In addition, it made an ideological point out of traditional Russian anti-Westernism and promoted it through mass education and indoctrination on an unprecedented scale.

The post-Soviet Russia thus emerged as, and continues to be, a nation whose identity is deeply imprinted with a Eurocentric outlook and at the same time plagued by post-imperial resentment (Morozov 2015, pp. 103–111). Its ultimate goal is to enter international society as a great power, but it still perceives global norms and institutions as externally imposed on it by the hegemonic West. Stigmatisation, ontological insecurity and economic backwardness thus represent different

manifestations of the same phenomenon – subaltern imperialism, which prevents Russia from fully identifying itself with the West but at the same time leaves it with no other options than to catch up.

There is no space in this article to analyse the specific chain of events that has led to the Ukrainian crisis; this has been done by a number of other authors who greatly differ as to the allocation of responsibility and the policy prescriptions that follow (compare, for instance, Mearchimer 2014, Charap and Shapiro 2014). There is, however, a near consensus with regard to the fact that Russia's intervention in Ukraine was in response to what it perceived as the Western expansion and the failure to take Russia's legitimate interests into account. This suggests the need to interpret Russia's behaviour as a counter-hegemonic exercise driven by the same post-imperial resentment that was behind most of Putin's policies, especially after 2003. The remaining part of the article provides a summary of what we have learnt about Russia's logic since the outbreak of the crisis around Ukraine.

## **2. Regime security and sovereign autonomy**

To begin with, it is evident that Russian policies are driven first and foremost by domestic concerns which necessarily acquire an external dimension, and not vice versa. The Kremlin's primary goal is not expansion as such, but the preservation of sovereign autonomy in the face of the expansionist West. This overarching goal has several dimensions. The most direct one is protecting sovereignty – both of Russia as a sovereign state and as a fundamental principle of international order.

It is worth highlighting that Russia understands sovereignty primarily as non-intervention; this is behind its claims that the West violates international law by trying to impose its own norms and values on other countries and by promoting democratic change in the post-Soviet space. Historically speaking, sovereignty is associated with the right to wage just war: it was only during the second half of the twentieth century that non-intervention came to define the concept (Glanville 2013), and there are indications that the current trend in international law is back to the

original understanding. This trend certainly makes Russia fear that what the West really aims for is regime change in Russia. The current elite sees its entitlement to rule in doing everything to prevent Western subversion, which, if not resisted, would lead to the disappearance of Russia as an autonomous political and cultural entity. In his annual press-conference on 18 December 2014, President Putin visualised this anxiety almost to the point of the grotesque by using one of the national symbols and depicting Russia as ‘a bear protecting his taiga’:

[S]omeone will always try to chain him up. As soon as he’s chained they will tear out his teeth and claws. ... As soon as – God forbid – it happens and they no longer need the bear, the taiga will be taken over. ... And then, when all the teeth and claws are torn out, the bear will be of no use at all. Perhaps they’ll stuff it and that’s all. (Putin 2014)

Hence, a lot of effort is invested in the creation and preservation of the domestic political and cultural consensus, in the strengthening of the ‘spiritual bonds ... which have always, throughout our history, made us stronger and more powerful, which we have been always proud of’ (Putin 2012). The conservative turn, which has been so characteristic of Russia’s development since Putin’s return to the top in 2012, is thus part of the same semi-peripheral entanglement between domestic and international politics. It is important to point out that conservative nationalism is not really imposed from above: it has a lot of popular support and is promoted by influential intellectuals, who criticise Western moral relativism and declare that by rejecting an absolute differentiation between good and evil liberals ‘destroy morality itself’ (Lukin 2014).

The intervention in Ukraine, against this background, paradoxically comes out as a non-intervention, as a legitimate counter-measure whose sole aim was to protect Russia’s sovereign autonomy. As Putin (2014) stated in the same press-conference, ‘it is not about Crimea but about us protecting our independence, our sovereignty and our right to exist’. In this interpretation, it was the West which intervened in Ukraine by

encouraging (or even orchestrating) the Euromaidan revolution, while Russia's action was an act of legitimate resistance.

### **3. The Kremlin's worldview: bipolar, Eurocentric, conspiriological**

Another crucial element of the Russian worldview is that it still imagines the international system as bipolar, with Russia as one of the main poles. All official documents explicitly deny this by declaring that the bipolar world ended with the Cold War, while '[t]he ability of the West to dominate world economy and politics continues to diminish. The global power and development potential is now more dispersed and is shifting to the East' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

Yet the official recognition that today's world is multipolar does little to prevent Russia from grossly overestimating its own importance for Washington and the West in general. The idea that the West seeks to destroy Russia, currently widespread in the public mind (not least due to the televised propaganda) is the best reflection of this bipolar myth, in which Russia plays the role of an effective counterbalance to Western hegemony.

A connected, but probably more fundamental feature of the Russian outlook is its Eurocentrism. Russia has been thoroughly Europeanised in the course of its modern development, to the extent that the only language that the Russian society has for self-description and for comprehending the world 'out there' is the language of European modernity. The defence of 'traditional values' which, at first glance, is supposed to establish an independent platform, is in effect deeply rooted in the European intellectual tradition. It is German romantic philosophy that is the key reference point for the Russian conservatives, – appropriated and mediated, of course, by the Russian writers from the Slavophiles through Dostoyevsky and Ilyin to Solzhenitsyn.

The fact that even the nationalist discourse remains Eurocentric is illustrated, *inter alia*, by its negative nature. It is not really able to come up with any positive agenda and remains obsessed with punishing 'immoral' behaviour, while the qualification of a life style or a behavioural as

immoral implies connecting it with the West. Thus, avant-garde artists and LGBT activists are persecuted for the same reason as opposition leaders: they infiltrate the healthy national body and spread the moral decay emanating from the West. In a similar vein, Putin's 'pivoting to Asia' is first and foremost a Eurocentric move, whose primary meaning consists not in engaging with Asia, but in turning away from Europe.

Finally, a very important aspect of the Russian worldview is that it is conspirological. Rooted in a belief that there is always some hidden truth behind politics, this position glorifies cynicism and refuses to acknowledge that human action can pursue political ends, as opposed to being driven by greed or vanity (Morozov 2015: 149–152). In this view, there is always some secret centre from which any political action is directed. Given the Eurocentric nature of Russian political thought and its tendency to see the world as bipolar, it is not surprising that this centre is nearly always located in the West. In other words, if the Euromaidan was not plotted in Moscow, it must have been plotted in Washington – the possibility that it could have been a genuine grassroots movement is simply not considered in any serious way.

#### **4. Restoring the balance, destroying institutions**

The Russian reaction to the Euromaidan revolution was to a large extent predetermined by these key elements of the global outlook, shared by the elites and the general public: the feeling of insecurity and prioritisation of sovereignty as non-intervention, bipolar view of the world, Eurocentrism and propensity to conspirological explanations. This combination explains why the events in Ukraine were seen as a very dangerous escalation on the part of the West, aimed at destroying the existing world order based on a bipolar equilibrium, pushing Russia into the corner, making it even less relevant and finally initiating a regime change.

Against this background, the annexation of Crimea and the following intervention can be seen as an attempt to fight back for the sake of making sure that international order does not collapse. It was based on a correct tactical estimation of Russia's power as being greater than the West tended to believe, in the sense that Russia was prepared to put

troops on the ground and otherwise raise stakes, with neither NATO nor the EU being ready to reciprocate. As a short-term tactic, it proved startlingly successful. Russia now needs to be taken into account in the European security context to a much greater extent than before.

However, in a more long-term perspective, Russia did not just get ‘the usual’; it ended up with the worst by destroying many key pillars of European security architecture. None of them has been formally dismantled (at least not yet), but undermining confidence has nearly the same effect, since trust matters more to institutions than the letter of international agreements. The field of indeterminacy created by the Russian action is much wider than its immediate consequences: thus, it is not really clear how much has been left of the legacy of Helsinki Final Act (centred around the principle of the inviolability of borders), the nuclear non-proliferation regime has been equally put into question by Putin trumping over the Budapest Memorandum, and so on.

One could argue, of course, that by intervening in Ukraine and thus undermining the foundations of the liberal international order (and thus of Western hegemony), Russia actually aims to uphold a more ancient international institution – the balance of power. In essence, the way the Kremlin and especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs always emphasises the importance of international institutions is framed by the idea of balancing against the West. Another element of international order that Russia strives to defend is the institution of sovereignty – once again, understood as non-intervention. It frames its conduct as aimed at breaking loose from the constraints imposed by the liberal international institutions, which in effect protect the interests of the Western countries and ensure their hegemonic position.

There is a clear parallel between the emphasis on sovereign autonomy in foreign policy and the functioning of the domestic ‘vertical of power’. In both cases, priority is given to ‘manual control’. Domestically, it implies direct intervention in the economy, governance based on the redistribution of the rent as well as on personal loyalty and selective punishment of the dissenters rather than on the rule of law. Internationally, there is a clear preference in favour of deals (often kept



away from public scrutiny) with the key players at the expense of the less powerful ones and to the detriment of the institutions guaranteeing stable rules of the game. The tendency to exploit international anarchy by scheming and intrigues was diagnosed by Sergei Prozorov (2011) as a key element of Russia's approach already after the Georgian war, but it took nearly eight years to fully reveal its potential.

## Conclusion

It might be tempting to declare that Putin has won the game by severely undermining international order and thus freeing his hands for further action. However, Russia is already facing a problem, which in time will become ever more severe. Sovereignty, taken alone or even in combination with the balance of power, is no more than a fiction: it cannot work in the absence of a wide array of enabling international and domestic institutions. Nowhere is this more visible than in the economic sphere: in fact, as Karen Dawisha and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova demonstrate in their recent study, Russian economic actors have compensated for the absence of properly developed market institutions by 'outsourcing' this job abroad. Money has been kept in foreign banks, disputes settled in London or Stockholm, and even children of the upper class Russians have been educated in Western universities.

Similarly, for Russia's claim to great power status or the role of the balancer against the West to make sense, there needs to exist a platform where such claim could be voiced and a more or less universally recognised set of norms differentiating the agents who can legitimately use this platform from usurpers or impostors. By placing itself outside of the order that it considers unjust, Russia in effect invalidates its own international agency, and thus undermines its own sovereign autonomy.

For such a radical step to pay back, Russia would have to be able to create an alternative international order under its own control. It is evident that its capabilities fall far short of that mark. The key difficulty does not lie on the level of material capabilities (military or economic), it has to do with the total Europeanisation of the Russian discursive space that was highlighted in the first section. Given the lack of an

independent language that would be indispensable for creating any new global order, the move beyond the hegemonic order means that Russia consigns itself to a voiceless position, that of an outsider who can be spoken about and spoken for, but can never speak independently.

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