

CAUSAL FACTORS OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST
FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS

BY

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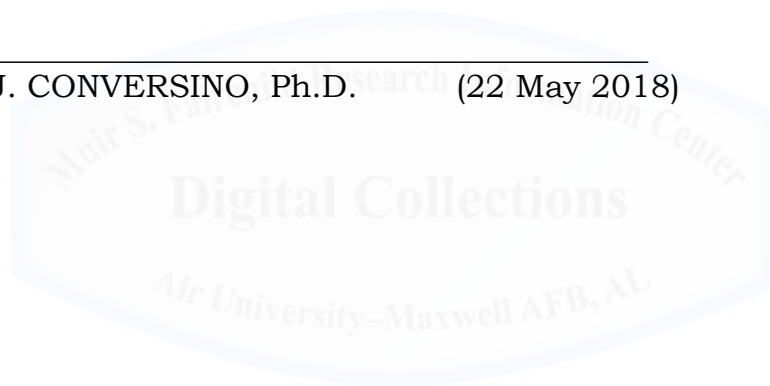
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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets the masters-level standard of research, argumentation, and expression.

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to build a more complete perspective on the reasons for Russian aggression in its geopolitical region. The author distinguishes three main contributing factors to the aggression: *Russia's cultural propensities* (Russian Idea), the *worsening relations with the West*, and the *rise of Russian nationalism*. To gain an insight into the Russian cultural propensities, the study turns to the works of the distinguished Russian philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries: Nicolai Berdyaev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. They emphasize such fixtures of Russian Mind as messianism, universalism, the juxtaposition of Western and Russian values, and the tradition of suffering in the hands of Western powers. Russia's cultural propensities are that of a superpower, an independent player, a leader – not a follower. However, when Russia lost its superpower status after the Cold War, the attempts of converting it to the follower of the liberal hegemony resulted in a backlash of the resurgent nationalism. Nationalism, boosted by the state propaganda machine, introduced irrational components into Russia's foreign and domestic policies and justified a consolidated image of an enemy in the face of the US. The ensuing tacit approval of authoritarianism under the conditions of a perceived war, domestic opposition vilification as the agent of the enemy, the outward aggression in an attempt to save Russians and allies are the consequences of the nationalistic narrative born of Russia's failure to enforce its status on the world stage after the collapse of the Soviet Union. To avoid further aggression and the worsening of the US-Russia relations, the offshore balancing strategy is the most appropriate US response.

*From what I have seen of our Russian Friends
and Allies during the war,
I am convinced there is nothing which
they admire more than strength,
and nothing for which they have less respect than weakness
—Winston Churchill, 1946*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

*The Cold War is back –
with a vengeance but with a difference.
The mechanisms and the safeguards to
manage the risks of escalation that existed in the past,
no longer seem to be present.*
—United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, 2018

Few countries consider themselves fortunate to be Russia's neighbors. Not unlike other European countries, Russia's leaders have historically endeavored to expand territory and enlarge its regional sphere of influence. Nevertheless, Russia's rampant expansionism was made especially repugnant by its authoritarian and repressive domestic regime. By the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Russia had subjugated a number of its neighbors which became Soviet Republics, nominally sovereign but de facto ruled from Moscow.¹ The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) continued its quest for enlargement while on the march to Berlin at the end of the Second World War. Forced by Moscow to reject the Marshall Plan, the countries of the Warsaw Pact would politically and economically lag behind Western states long after the dissolution of the USSR.² After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the parade of sovereignties, many of its former citizens became independent, some of them for the first time in generations. However, unlike other European countries of the twenty-first century, Russia seems to be returning to its imperial territorial ambitions. Besides the slowly burning conflicts in the Russian North Caucasuses, Russia invaded,

1. "Russian Revolution of 1917," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 5 March 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1917.

2. The Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty established by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. See North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Declassified History: What was the Warsaw Pact," www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/declassified_138294.htm.

occupied, or annexed parts of its neighboring states of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Other countries, like Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, are heavily influenced, nominally independent while de-facto subjugated to Russia's interests.³



Figure 1: Graphical depiction of former Soviet states

Source: Eugene Chausovsky, "Eastern Europe: Finding Strength in Numbers," *Stratfor Worldview*, 30 December 2015, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/eastern-europe-finding-strength-numbers>.

This study analyzes the reasons behind Russia's territorial ambitions in its region, specifically contiguous countries on its Western border, and focuses on the following reasons behind Moscow's aggression:

- a. Russia's *cultural propensity toward universalism and messianism* (Russian Idea);
- b. On the defensive side: *worsening relations with the West*, especially

3. Nivedita Das Kundu, "Russia and the Former Soviet States: Dynamics of Relations," *Policy Perspectives* vol. 4, no. 1 (January - June 2007): 49-59; Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven: CT, Yale University Press, 2016), 172-212.

the United States (US), and Russia's desire to check North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion;⁴

- c. On the offensive side: the *rise of Russian nationalism* bolstered by Putin's propaganda campaign and inflated oil prices of 2004-2008.⁵

Selection of Variables

This thesis traces three main variables which contribute to Russia's aggression against its neighbors: *cultural propensities*, *worsening relations with the West*, and the *rise of Russian nationalism*. Even though these variables are distinct enough to be differentiated, they, nevertheless, do not occur in isolation. The US neglected to understand the importance of those very cultural distinctions while attempting to implement various reforms in post-Soviet Russia and thus failed to convert the former enemy into an ally. Conversely, Putin has been able to rally popular support by appealing to Russian cultural propensities and is continuously channeling them into the nationalistic narrative.

In this thesis, *cultural propensity toward universalism and messianism* unfolds through the eyes of Russian philosophers Nicolai Berdyaev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Their literary works explain the cultural component behind recurring East-West confrontations and Russia's inclination to assume a messianic role in the lives of other nations. According to Berdyaev, the messianic conception exalts Russia as a country that "would help to solve the problems of humanity and would accept a place in the service of

4. Founded in 1949, NATO's mission is to "safeguard the freedom and security of its member countries by political and military means." It consists of 28 member states and serves as a collective security organization for its members. See "Frequently Asked Questions," NATO, 7 March 2017, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/faq.htm#A1.

5. Bruce Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century*, revised edition (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2010), 354.

humanity.”⁶ The concept of universalism introduces Russia as the “all-man” with loyalty to and concern for others without regard to national or other allegiances: “The vocation of Russia is a world vocation. Russia is not shut up in itself and a self-sufficing world.”⁷

As opposed to the Western condemnation, such cultural perceptions render Russia’s interference with other states in a positive light. Since the turn of the century, Russian administrations routinely used many of the cultural features above, like foreignness of Western values and Russian universalism – the notion of the Russian World – to justify aggressive rhetoric, policies, and actions.⁸

Worsening relations with the West at various points since the collapse of the Soviet Union make it possible for Moscow to blame the US and its allies whenever Russia meets any opposition in its near abroad.⁹ The US’ failure to devise a coherent strategy towards the East after the collapse of the Soviet Union and disregard for Russia’s interests during the stages of NATO enlargement exacerbates Russia’s cultural and nationalistic propensities.¹⁰ A brief improvement in US-Russian relations during the Yeltsin presidency, solidified by numerous monetary credits, is now seen as the time of humiliation and betrayal of Russia’s national interests.¹¹ The “Clinton Doctrine,” on a quest to spread liberal

6. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 69.

7. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 69.

8. The Russian World “[justifies] its right to oversee the evolution of its neighbors ... reconnect with its pre-Soviet and Soviet past through reconciliation with Russian diasporas abroad ... and brand itself on the international scene and to advance its own voice in the world.” See Marlene Laruelle, ‘Russian World’: Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination,” *PONARS Eurasia*, 27 May 2015, www.ponarseurasia.org/article/“russian-world”-russia’s-soft-power-and-geopolitical-imagination.

9. The “near abroad” is the term Russia uses to refer to former Soviet republics. See Bruce Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 361.

10. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 668.

11. President Vladimir Putin, “Statement of the President: 2014 Annual Press Conference, Direct Line,” *Town Hall*, 17 April 2014.

hegemony, failed to take into account cultural peculiarities, assuming the country was naturally inclined toward the liberal camp.¹² As a result, the US was not able to foresee how its interference would be interpreted as an intrusion and even a security breach in the future. The lack of an informed US strategy for Russia would eventually lead to backlash and the rise of anti-Western sentiments. Putin's Kremlin harnessed these sentiments in their effort to build nationalist feeling at home, especially during the recession and deflated oil prices of 2008. Likewise, NATO encroachment in Russia's Near Abroad did little to alleviate the rising anti-Western attitudes while creating legitimate security concerns for the Russian government. These concerns legitimized many Russian acts of aggression, active or latent, in the eyes of Russian citizens.¹³

During the 2004-2008 period of increasing oil prices, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the above cultural propensities to ease the *rise of Russian nationalism* through government-sponsored propaganda.¹⁴ Nationalism would keep Putin in power and justify Russia's quest for former territorial possessions. Gaining power after the "wild nineties," Putin brought about a sense of order and stability.¹⁵ The ensuing nationalization of key industries, along with steady cash flow from the sales of oil and gas, helped transition from the extremes of wild capitalism to more evenly distributed relative prosperity.¹⁶ Capitalizing

12. President William J. Clinton, "A National Security Strategy for Engagement and Enlargement" (Washington DC: The White House, July 1994), 19; See also Douglas Brinkley, "Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine," *Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars* vol. 2 (Spring, 1997).

13. Lukasz Kulesa, Russia and the West: Russia's Recent Assertiveness, Western Response, and What the Future May Hold, *Harvard International Review* vol. 37, no. 4 (Summer 2016).

14. Kramer, "Rising Oil Prices Buoy Russia's Economy."

15. Thane Gustafson, *Capitalism Russian Style*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xi.

16. "Wild capitalism" includes aspects of crony, and patrimonial capitalism and informal or illegal business activity. See Lane Brumer, "Taming wild capitalism," *Discourse and Society*, vol. 13, issue. 2 (March 2002): 167-184.

on this positive dynamic, Putin began implementing changes to guarantee his permanent place at the helm. By nationalizing the leading media outlets, Putin created a powerful propaganda machine to cultivate Russian cultural propensities to messianism and, thus, encouraged the rise of nationalism.¹⁷ In its turn, a rising nationalism promoted Putin's continued rule as a strong leader destined to restore Russia to its former glory both in terms of prestige and territory. Therefore, by bolstering nationalism and concentrating power, along with its benefits, in the tight inner circle of loyalists, Putin enjoys a continuing political dominance.

Selection of Case Studies

The case studies of Ukraine and Belarus illustrate the above concepts and varying forms of aggression Russia uses against its neighbors. The Ukraine and Belarus examples were chosen due to these countries' special significance to Russia. Strategically, they serve as buffer zones against the West. Culturally, they are the closest to Russia out of all former Soviet republics. Armenia and Georgia were considered because they are somewhat culturally closer than other Soviet republics (minus Ukraine and Belarus) and have a predominately Christian Orthodox population. However, they were not selected because at the beginning of the Soviet era, these nations still lacked the tools of statehood to make Sovietization possible.¹⁸ Once a part of Russian

17. Jim Nichol, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 31 March 2014.

18. Communists' efforts to build nations within the USSR in some cases solidified national identification (Armenia, Georgia), while in others they pursued more Russifying policies (Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic peoples). For most of modern history, both Georgians and Armenians were under regional influences such as Ottoman Empire, Dynasties of Iran or Russian Empire thus making them nations without a formal state at the time of the formation of the Soviet Union. As such, Soviet authorities delayed the project of Russification in Georgia and Armenia. See Ronald Suny, "The Empire that Dared Not Speak Its Name: Making Nations in the Soviet State," *Current History*, vol. 116, issue. 792 (2017): 251-257. "Sovietization is best described as "a form of modernization which includes such processes as industrialization,

Empire, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became Soviet republics after the Second World War. Most of their citizens remained hostile towards Moscow, which led to over 10 percent of their entire adult population being executed, deported, or sent to labor camps.¹⁹ Such policies only deepened the anti-Soviet sentiments in the Baltics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic Russians who moved to Latvia and Estonia after 1940 were not automatically granted citizenship. Lithuania did, however, grant citizenship to the Russian residents since they formed a much smaller minority and would be politically powerless. Finally, Muslim-majority counties like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have less cultural or strategic significance to Russia.

Belarus and Ukraine, on the other hand, came from the same Kievan Rus' cradle of civilization as Russia.²⁰ Kievan Rus' was the first East Slavic state, and represented the earliest beginnings of the Russian Empire and served as the ancestor of Belarus and Ukraine. The national languages originated from the same source, and majorities of their

urbanization, and the growth of state intervention in everyday life, from universal education to military service to the welfare state." Modernization requires the development of bureaucracy in the civilian, military, and economic spheres, and bureaucracy functions best in a common language. Thus, Sovietization most certainly did entail Russification. Going beyond mere language spreading, however, "Sovietization aimed to create an entirely new, non-ethnic identity: the new Soviet human being. This new and superior being would be progressive, educated, and scientific, and would, of course, speak Russian, either as a native tongue or as a second language." See Theodore R. Weeks, "Russification / Sovietization," *European History Online*, 3 December 2010, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/models-and-stereotypes/russification-sovietization>.

19. Asya Pereltsvaig, "Stalin's Ethnic Deportations—and the Gerrymandered Ethnic Map," *Languages of the World*, 8 October 2014, www.languagesoftheworld.info/russia-ukraine-and-the-caucasus/stalins-ethnic-deportations-gerrymandered-ethnic-map.html.

20. Kievan Rus' remained until the thirteenth century when the Mongols invaded the land and brought an end to the empire. See "Kievan Rus,' Historical State," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 4 March 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/Kievan-Rus.

populations share the Orthodox religion. Although since the times of Kievan Rus,' Belarus and Ukraine drifted away from Russia and formed their own identities either independently or within other socio-political formations, various Russian rulers strived to recreate Kievan Rus'.²¹ Through the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russia annexed Belarus and most of Ukraine by the end of the eighteenth century, long before the formation of the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders continued the Russification policies of Imperial Russia in its Western borderlands. In his article "The Empire that Dared Not Speak Its Name: Making Nations in the Soviet Union," Ronald Suny explains:

An irony or paradox of Communist imperialism was that its efforts to build nations within the empire in some cases solidified (Armenia, Georgia) or even forged national identification (Azerbaijan and the Central Asian peoples), while in others (most notably Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic peoples) it pursued more Russifying policies.²²

Although analyzing motivations for such selective Russification is not the purpose of this thesis, it seems likely the common origin, cultural closeness, which forms a unity of Eastern Slavs, played a role in Russia's desire to assimilate lands on its Western border. In addition, it transpires that the countries that faced the most intense Russification efforts tended to have highly developed national and ethnic identities.

As the result of Russification policies, or, as Moscow sees it, re-Russification of the *russkie* who had been Polish-Lithuanian for several centuries, the overwhelming majority of the Belarusian and Ukrainian population would adopt Russian as their first language.²³ During the

21. "Ukraine under direct imperial Russian rule," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 8 March 2018, www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/Ukraine-under-direct-imperial-Russian-rule#ref404469; See also "Belarus Government and society," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 2 March 2018, www.britannica.com/place/belarus/Government-and-society#ref409370.

22. Suny, "The Empire that Dared Not Speak Its Name."

23. *Russkie* is the classic adjective used to describe all messianic ideological trends developed in Russia, today the flagship of conservative values and the

Soviet era, these countries' linguistic malleability would attract many ethnic Russians who faced few challenges to the assimilation process. Thus, Belarus is comprised of approximately 10 percent of ethnic Russians, while Ukraine is between 8 and 18 percent.²⁴ Such a high number of Russians abroad allows Putin to reintroduce the notion of the Russian World. Ethnic Russians, along with a Russified local population constitutes a solid foundation for Moscow's strategy of territorial control in the Belt of Contention.²⁵



Russian World. Dostoyevsky's *russkie* speaks of a fraternal unity of mankind where Russia serves as a pioneer, expressed under the notion of "Russian universality." See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010), 306.

24. In 2017, 8 percent of Ukrainians identified as ethnic Russians. This number could be as high as 18 percent given Luhansk, Donetsk, and Crimea were excluded from the survey for security reasons. See *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017.

25. The author derived term Belt of Contention is used to describe former Soviet states on Russia's Western border – Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics.

Chapter 2

Variables

*You will not grasp her with your mind
or cover her with a common label,
For Russia is one of a kind—
Believe in her, if you are able.*
—F. I. Tyutchev, 1866

The Role of Culture (Russian Mind)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has remained continually at war to prevent the erosion of its borders and the loss of a sizable percentage of its natural resources. Most of these conflicts take place around Russia's southern border, such as the first and second wars in Chechnya and Dagestan and conflicts with Georgia over the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹ Even though these conflicts cannot be broadly generalized, the current war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea seems to resemble the pattern. Other countries, like Belarus, although not formally at war with Russia, nevertheless, live in its long shadow and must align their policies with Moscow's interests. Territorial integrity of the Russian World, a geopolitical concept that formalizes Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, became Moscow's primary concern. Some aspects of the Russian culture, such as East-West confrontation, the tradition of suffering (especially in the hands of the Western powers), messianism, and universalism, remain the principal motivation behind this behavior.

1. Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 97; Aschot Manutscharjan, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Russia's Intervention in Georgia," *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, August 2008, www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_15189-544-2-30.pdf.

As a famous poem by F. I. Tyutchev suggested, the Russian Idea resembles what sociologists and political scientists call nationalism.² Like faith, it is based on strong spiritual apprehension rather than intellectual understanding. That faith found its incarnation as a multifaceted philosophical concept deeply rooted in Russian history.

To gain an insight into the variety of ideas and principles which constitute that philosophical concept, one must turn to Russian philosophers and authors such as Dostoyevsky, Berdyaev, and Solzhenitsyn.³ According to these philosophers, the most fundamental traits of the Russian mind are profound contradictions that exist due to a volatile clash between East and West, awakening and introspection through suffering, universalism, and messianism. The above principles and ideas continue to profoundly affect, if not define, contemporary Russian policy and behavior. Thus, Russia's history of volatile clashes with Western values and its tradition of suffering exerts a great influence

2. Anatoly Liberman, trans., *On the Heights of Creation: The Lyrics of Fedor Tyutchev*, (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1993), 197; For further discussion on nationalism see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edition (New York, NY: Verso, 2006) 85-114.

3. To illustrate the principles which constitute this philosophical concept, the following three philosophers were chosen: Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian military officer, novelist, and philosopher. His literary works explore the troubled political, social, and spiritual times in nineteenth century Russia, and engage with a variety of philosophical and religious themes; Berdyaev (1874-1948), a famous Russian political and religious philosopher, is best known for emphasizing the spiritual significance of freedom and the individual. A leading proponent of the Orthodox Church, he bridged the gap between religious thought in Russia and the West. Berdyaev departed from Marxism beliefs and was expelled from Russia for taking part in a conspiracy against the government and never returned. Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) was a Russian novelist and historian. He was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union and communism and was arrested and exiled for disparaging comments against Russia's conduct during the Second World War. Solzhenitsyn continued to write after his exile, one of his most famous works was on the Gulag (forced labor camp system), which raised global awareness of the wrongdoings that had taken place within the Soviet Union. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia in 2007 where he received the State Prize for humanitarian achievement from President Putin.

on its relationship with the European Union (EU) and NATO. Its universalism, which manifests itself in the propensity to empire building, is responsible for Russia's attempts to influence and even annex neighboring territories. Its messianic aspirations call for Russia to become Europe's new hegemon.⁴

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many were as surprised by the rapidly deteriorating Russia-West relationship as they were by the collapse of the Soviet Union the decade prior. After Moscow's abandonment of the communist ideology, there seemed to be no further obstacle to Russian-European integration. However, philosophers like Berdyaev note the East-West differences run deeper than communism. In his book *The Russian Idea*, Berdyaev often describes the Russian Idea through the juxtaposition of Russian and Western mentalities. He points out that even though Russians have deep ties to Europe, they are different and even antipodal to the peoples of the West.⁵ Berdyaev insists that Russians remain people of elemental forces, revelation, and inspiration with no affinity for the Western way of life where everything is more prescribed and formulated. He repeatedly stated that Russia was neither an aristocratic country in the Western sense nor did a Russian bourgeoisie exist.

The mutually contradictory properties of the Russian people may be set out thus: despotism, the hypertrophy of the State, and on the other hand anarchism and licence (sic): cruelty, a disposition to violence, and again kindness, humanity and gentleness: a belief in rites and ceremonies, but also a quest for truth: individualism, a heightened consciousness of personality, together with an impersonal collectivism: nationalism, laudation of self; and universalism, the ideal of the universal man: an eschatological messianic spirit of religion, and a devotion which finds its expression in externals: a search for God, and a militant godlessness:

4. Jeanne L. Wilson, "The Russian Pursuit of Regional Hegemony," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 2, issue. 1 (2017): 7-25.

5. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 2.

humility and arrogance: slavery and revolt. But never has Russia been bourgeois.⁶

Russians have a different ethical idea, a sense of family and community, and even a different essence of Christian faith than Westerners.⁷ The Western culture of Russia was superficial borrowing and imitation, and especially active Western sympathizers like Peter the Great were at risk to be described as an antichrist.⁸

East-West differences grew immeasurably deeper after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The bourgeoisie of the West became the class enemy, followed by two World Wars, the creation of NATO, and the Cold War. The divide between the East and West grew ever deeper as the twentieth century progressed, and many concluded communism was to blame.⁹

Berdyayev argues communism is uniquely fit to the Russian character. However, he explains communism is a symptom, a manifestation of the Russian Idea, not the source of the East-West confrontation.

Russian communism is a distortion of the Russian messianic idea; it proclaims light from the East which is destined to enlighten the bourgeois darkness of the West.... Communism is a Russian phenomenon in spite of its Marxist ideology. Communism is the Russian destiny; it is a moment in the inner destiny of the Russian people, and it must be lived through by the inward strength of the Russian people.¹⁰

Russia survived its communist era, but its relations with the West remained dubious. After a brief search for a new way of life through the

6. Berdyayev, *The Russian Idea*, 253.

7. Berdyayev, *The Russian Idea*, 253.

8. Berdyayev, *The Russian Idea*, 17.

9. Arthur Herman, *1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishes, 2017), 1-9; Michael Jabara Carley, *Silent Conflict: A hidden history of early Soviet-Western Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 6-10.

10. Berdyayev, *The Russian Idea*, 250.

1990s and early 2000s, Russia ran into a confrontation with the West over military actions in Georgia during the Rose Revolution in 2008.¹¹ Subsequently, adverse sentiments deepened during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine.

On the cultural level, in both confrontations, Russia did not anticipate its neighbors turning to the West on their own free will and accord. When Moscow encounters opposition, it automatically sees Western conspiracy, and it takes upon itself a mission to prevent the West from taking advantage of weaker Eastern European countries. Thus, popular Russian news agencies like the Russian Information Agency (RIA) and Russia Today (RT) routinely exhibit headlines like “The US Initiated War in Ukraine to Reach its Strategic Goals” or “Western amnesia on WWII as NATO replicates Nazi Germany.”¹²

East-West differences are seen as the root of Russia’s problems in its near abroad – post-Soviet space. Russia asserts authority by increasing military activities along NATO’s borders and routinely sending Tu-95MS ‘Bear’ bombers into US allies’ airspace in the Western Pacific.¹³ Tensions further escalated as a result of NATO messaging, such as the “Secretary General’s Annual Report: 2016,” which detailed profound and persistent differences with Russia similar to those in Berdyaev’s *The Russian Idea*.¹⁴

Another element of the Russian Idea – ascent through suffering – is at the root of Russia’s embrace of US and EU-imposed economic

11. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 97.

12. Finian Cunningham, “Western amnesia on WWII as NATO replicates Nazi Germany,” RT, 15 January 2017, www.rt.com/op-edge/373750-nato-poland-us-troops-russia-threat.

13. United States House of Representatives, *United States Pacific Command State of Readiness, Testimony by Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, III before the Armed Services Committee*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2015.

14. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Secretary General’s Annual Report: 2016*, 3 March 2017 (Brussels, Belgium: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2016), 20.

sanctions in its best spirit of martyrdom. In Dostoyevsky's view, man is not a reasonable being who strives after happiness, but an irrational creature who stands in need of suffering, and suffering is the only cause of the awakening of thought. Dostoyevsky himself also had an awakening in the labor camp.¹⁵ Solzhenitsyn, likewise, draws inspiration from his time in the labor camp system which resulted in his many philosophical and literary pieces. Berdyaev once again juxtaposed Russians and Westerners in the realm of suffering: "the Russian has a greater capacity for enduring suffering than the man of the West, and at the same time he is especially sensitive to suffering; he is more sympathetic than the Western man."¹⁶

The Russian military intervention in Ukraine prompted the EU and the US to apply sanctions against individuals, businesses, and officials in Russia. The sanctions caused the collapse of the ruble and the fiscal crisis that began in 2014 and continues to this day.¹⁷ By imposing sanctions, Western governments sought to create pressure on Russia directly and indirectly through the population backlash against Russian government involvement in Ukraine. However, President Putin's approval ratings soared to 89 percent in June 2015 regardless of the economic recession.¹⁸ In Russia's inherent mistrust towards the West, 66 percent

15. Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979), 311.

16. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 78.

17. Chris Matthews, "Russian ruble's fall: A classic 'currency collapse'," *Fortune*, 16 December 2014, www.fortune.com/2014/12/16/russian-ruble-currency-collapse/.

18. Putin's approval ratings are misleading due to wide-spread voter fraud, and those surveyed were too scared to speak truthfully. However, multiple Western polls have arrived at similar numbers. See Alberto Nardelli et al., "Vladimir Putin's approval rating at record levels," *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels; See also Michael Birnbaum, "How to understand Putin's jaw-droppingly high approval ratings," *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/how-to-understand-putins-jaw-droppingly-high-approval-ratings/2016/03/05/17f5d8f2-d5ba-11e5-a65b587e721fb231_story.html?utm_term=.2c8b37d6b330.

believe Western sanctions are meant to humiliate and weaken Russia, and only 5 percent think their goal is to end the war in Ukraine.¹⁹ Moreover, some 70 percent of Russians embrace their suffering through high inflation and economic recession and support the country in its current position on Ukraine, and only 20 percent say they would rather make concessions to avoid sanctions.²⁰



Figure 2: Russian Prime Minister on US Sanctions

Source: Russian Prime Minister Twitter Account, 2 August 2017.

In addition to the propensity of suffering at the hands of Western powers, the Russian tradition of universalism contributes to an understanding of Russian aggression abroad. In nineteenth century Russia, Dostoyevsky was the leading proponent of universalism. He despised bourgeois individualism and dreamt of an “authentic fraternal community” inspired by Orthodoxy and Russian folk tradition.²¹ He was not alone in this dream since Slavophiles, who opposed the influences of Western Europe in Russia, had a very similar notion of “free unity” or *sobornost*.²²

In his 2014 annual press conference, Putin addressed Russian universalism: “Russia, like a vacuum cleaner, sucked in various nations throughout history which created a very special genetic code through mixed marriages.... The individual of the Russian World is oriented

19. Nardelli et al., “Vladimir Putin's approval rating.”

20. Nardelli et al., “Vladimir Putin's approval rating.”

21. Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 313.

22. Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 313.

outside himself while the individual of the West is oriented into himself.”²³ Thus, Moscow has a long-standing intention to create a brotherhood of Slavic nations first, such as Ukraine and Belarus, under its leadership and then spread it to as many countries as possible. According to Putin, this unity of nations is in Russians' very blood and genes. As a result, when Ukraine decided to join the EU, which is universally considered a path towards NATO, Russia rejected to see this treacherous decision as legitimate.²⁴ Given Crimea's high percentage of Russians, it belonged to the geopolitical equivalent of Dostoyevsky's fraternal community which Putin called the Russian World and thus had to be reunited with the Russian Federation.²⁵ Besides the perceived cultural unity, Crimea is also a strategically important region that was once a part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic until Khrushchev transferred it to Ukraine in 1954.²⁶

The elements of the Russian Idea (Russian universalism, the tradition of suffering and mistrust of the West) are closely connected to the overarching idea of Russian messianism that manifested itself so clearly during the Soviet Union, and once again raises its head in today's Russia through its hegemonic aspirations. As described by Berdyaev, Russian messianism began with an eschatological interpretation of Christianity as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Right. In its turn, communism reinterpreted the messianic idea in non-religious and anti-religious form as the ideal of social right.²⁷ Dostoyevsky, likewise, believed the Russian people have a unique calling to solve the social

23. Vladimir Putin, “2014 Annual Press Conference, Direct Line,” *Town Hall*, 17 April 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dHS4RXDabQ.

24. Adapted from Dostoyevsky's fraternal community theme and Laruelle's description of the Russian World. See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010), 312.

25. Laruelle, “Russian World.”

26. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 3.

27. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 196.

problem “better than the West.”²⁸ For example, in *The Dream of the Ridiculous Man*, he focuses on the messianic idea of a final perfected condition of humanity, of an earthly paradise.²⁹ Solzhenitsyn also observed the propensity of Russian people to answer the call of all men and suggested directing Russia’s energy towards self-limitation and introspection instead.³⁰

Russian messianism found its new embodiment in the ideology of the Russian World in Solzhenitsyn’s 1974 essay “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations,” in which he discussed the expansionist politics of the Soviet Union. However, it remains applicable to Russia foreign policy today. The reason for such modern-day relevance is the evolution, not abolition, of Russian messianism from one political regime to another.

The Russian World is no longer communist, but remains expansionist: it is directed outward, not inward. Many of Solzhenitsyn’s passages describe the parochial “outwardness” of the Russian World.³¹ He addresses his fellow countrymen and writes, “Let us give up trying to restore order overseas, keep our grabbing imperial hands off neighbors who want to live their own lives in freedom” and turn our national and political zeal toward “comprehensive inward development.”³² At the same time, Solzhenitsyn insists Russia should pursue inward development, “What is the point of our painful efforts to erect villages on the moon when our Russian villages have become dilapidated and unfit for habitation?”³³ In other words, Solzhenitsyn calls to limit the Russian

28. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 124.

29. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010), 306.

30. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947-2005*, ed. Edward E. Ericson and Daniel J. Mahoney (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009), 527.

31. Solzhenitsyn, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 551.

32. Solzhenitsyn, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 552-554.

33. Solzhenitsyn, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 553.

World to Russia.³⁴ Therefore, his essay encapsulates the reasoning behind Putin's actions in the Ukrainian conflict by calling attention to the very nature of Russia's appetite for messianic expansion (annexation of Crimea), at the expense of the inner development in the face of economic downturn suffered by imposed sanctions and oil prices.

Observing Russia's current policy and behavior, it is clear Putin embraces the messianic idea.³⁵ Crimea may be only the beginning of the re-ignition of Russian messianism. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow sees it as its sacred duty, and a matter of national security, to assemble under its wing former Soviet republics bound by common history and identity. Many of the former Soviet republics were part of the Russian Empire before the rise of the Soviet Union, and many among their populations still speak Russian. Motivated by the concept of the Russian World, the annexation of Crimea became a logical step "in Russian foreign policy of protecting the rights of fellow Russians and Russian speakers abroad, especially in the territories of the former Soviet Union."³⁶ Russia's mission is to protect the rights of fellow Russians to remain Russian in the face of hostile Western encroachment.

The Russian Idea is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The main elements of the Russian Idea – its tradition of suffering, its universalism, and messianism – discussed in the works of Berdyaev, Dostoevsky, and Solzhenitsyn are the root causes of Russia's clash with the West. These principles and ideas can be seen today in

34. Originally, Solzhenitsyn criticized Soviet communist expansion and aggression. Even though his pronouncements on Ukraine do not defend Ukrainian territorial integrity, he nevertheless prioritizes Russia's inter-development over territorial expansion. See Rossiyskaya Gazeta, "Alexander Solzhenitsyn predicted current situation in Ukraine almost 50 years ago," *Russia Beyond*, 21 May 2014, https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/05/21/alexander_solzhenitsyn_predicted_current_situation_in_ukraine_almost_50_35395.

35. Vladimir Putin, Statement of the President: Presidential Address, Moscow, Russia, 1 March 2018.

36. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 95.

confrontational behavior towards its neighbors and NATO alike even in the face of economic sanctions.

The Role of the West

*One need not be an apologist for the regime in Moscow
or its behavior, or sympathetic to Russia's national interests,
to empathize with its resentment of this
revolutionary overturning of the balance of power....
Washington, and with its prodding other NATO governments,
succumbed to victory and kept kicking Russia while it was down.*
—Dr. Richard K. Betts, Columbia University

Highly emotional mutual antagonism between Russia and the West is evident and profound. The tremendous, if gradual, worsening of US-Russian relations prompted many academics and policy experts to question whether relations are moving toward another Cold War. The answers vary. Some argue present-day Russia is a mere shadow of the Soviet Union, a geopolitical pariah unable to compete with the US. For a Cold War to reignite, the competing powers should be equal in strength and fear each other. Historian and political analyst, Dmitri Trenin asserts “In contrast to the Cold War,” the new rivalry “lacks agreed, if unwritten, rules,” suffers “a gross asymmetry in power,” and is “utterly devoid of mutual respect.”³⁷

Others believe the US and Russia are moving towards a new Cold War. Robert Legvold, an expert on Soviet and Russian foreign policy, asserts that the recent deterioration of Russia-US relations deserves to be understood as a return to Cold War with great and lasting consequences.³⁸ In his book, *Return to Cold War*, he sees as the commonalities between the original cold war and the current

37. Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), i.

38. Robert Legvold, *Return to Cold War*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 1-8.

confrontation.³⁹ Whether it is a return to the Cold War or a new conflict with entirely new rules, it does not benefit the security of the US.

In discussing the role of the West in the current tensions, international relations theory provides a way to understand the divergent worldviews that often drive foreign policymaking. The US views the international system as being closer to John Ikenberry's *Liberal Leviathan*, characterized by globalization, liberal values, the democratic peace, and voluntary hierarchical relations, and led by the US.⁴⁰ Russia, on the other hand, struggles to resign its desire or self-perception and voluntarily take its place under US hegemony.



Figure 3: Russian President on NATO Expansion

Source: Russian President Twitter Account, 1 March 2018.

Therefore, Moscow found itself in a world where the US operates from a position of power, neglecting Russia's interests, isolating, and encircling it through NATO enlargement, and threatening its survival. While analyzing Russian aggression in its near abroad, a strategist should realize Russia's dissatisfaction with its position in the US-led hierarchy was a key factor in the revival of its revisionist, hegemonic ambitions and distrust of US-led international security institutions.⁴¹

39. Legvold, *Return to Cold War*, 1-8.

40. G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7-18.

41. Analogies can be drawn to that of a classic "Security Dilemma," whereas there is a tendency to view otherwise defensive preparations by an enemy as inherently offensive or detrimental to security and thus reacting in an escalatory fashion, resulting in an escalation spiral. See Robert Jervis,

Relations During President William Clinton Administration

Russia began voicing its objections to US policies shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From its liberal pedestal, the US, however, exhibited a selective vision when it came to Russia. In 1997, while defending NATO enlargement, then-President William Clinton dismissed concerns of isolating Russia as based on a mistaken belief “that territorial politics of the twentieth century will dominate the twenty-first century ... that NATO is inherently antagonistic to Russia’s interests and that Russia will have to try to exercise greater territorial domination in the next few years than it has in the last few.”⁴² Instead, he insisted, shared values will compel countries to cooperate. Splits in a potential cooperative relationship were, however, already clear by the mid-1990s.⁴³ Specifically, with Russia’s objections to the war in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) when President Yeltsin declared: “This [bombing] is the first sign of what could happen when NATO comes right up to the Russian Federation’s borders.... The flame of war could burst out across the whole of Europe.”⁴⁴ That same year, Yeltsin signed “Russia’s Political Strategy,” according to which Russia demanded sovereign former Soviet Republics “coordinate their international actions” with Moscow, particularly on issues relating to NATO and Western Europe.⁴⁵

Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 191.

42. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 23; See also President William J. Clinton, “Statement of the President: News Conference in Madrid,” *State Visit*, 5 April 2018. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54384.

43. NATO Secretary-General, Lord Ismay said the purpose of creating NATO was to keep the Americans in and Russians out. See Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 133.

44. John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs Journal*, 2014.

45. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Yeltsin vs. Clinton,” *The Washington Post*, 21 September 1995, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1995/09/21/yeltsin-vs-clinton/442ba04d-23c7-4d8b-9732-2dda43e1544b/?utm_term=.a81a756b7049.

While the West engaged in liberal rhetoric inspired by a few NATO-Russia agreements (Partnership for Peace, Founding Act on Mutual Relations) coupled with Yeltsin's attempts to implement a market-economy, a weakened Russia saw itself stripped of its great power status.⁴⁶ The US expected Russia to step into the ranks of subordinate states in the hierarchy topped by the American hegemonic power; Russian leadership expected to have some say in world affairs, especially in their historical sphere of influence.

Numerous other instances of Western behavior convinced Russia they were involved in power politics and could not expect to be on the same footing with the US. According to Putin, Moscow gave Washington unprecedented access to its secret nuclear facilities in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Without granting the same openness to Russian counterparts, the US used the information they gained in forming its opinion, albeit correctly in the post-Soviet context, that Russia was a second-class power. These feelings were compounded when Russia felt that the US ultimately ignored Moscow's interests during the Kosovo conflict. Regardless of Russian troops entering Pristina, a Russian sector failed to materialize, and Russian influence was lessened. US-Russian relations were essentially frozen after the 1999 NATO bombing campaign until 2001.

46. The "Partnership for Peace" was founded in 1994 to create trust between NATO and other states in Europe and the former Soviet Union. 21 states are members and relationships are strengthened between partners through military-to-military cooperation on training, exercises, disaster planning and response, science and environmental issues, professionalization, policy planning, and relations with civilian government. Furthermore, the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations" was an agreement with Russian on arrangements to deepen and widen the scope of NATO-Russian relations. See Vladimir Brovkin, *Discourse on NATO in Russia During the Kosovo War*, NATO-EAPC Research Fellowship Final Report, 1999.

47. Polina Nikolskaya and Andrew Osborn, "Putin dials up anti-U.S. rhetoric, keeps mum on re-election," *Reuters*, 19 October 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-usa-energy/putin-dials-up-anti-u-s-rhetoric-keeps-mum-on-re-election-idUSKBN1CO2CX.

Relations During President George W. Bush Administration

*I looked the man [Putin] in the eye.
And I found him to be very straightforward
and trustworthy....
I was able to get a sense of his soul.*
—George W. Bush, 2001

George W. Bush's administration was considered to be more realist in its relations with other great powers, including Russia. "In some ways," Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, "the approach to Russia shouldn't be terribly different than the very realistic approach we had to the old Soviet Union in the late '80s. We told them what bothered us. We told them where we could engage on things. We tried to convince them of the power of our values and our system. They argued back."⁴⁸

However, despite the realist rhetoric, Bush's administration employed decidedly non-realist methods of assessing Russia's intentions, whether it was looking into Putin's soul or ignoring various Russian red lines.⁴⁹ In essence, the Bush-era policy represented a continuation of the Clinton administration's approach but with Russia no longer as bogged down by inner post-Soviet dysfunctions. Thus, NATO expansion continued with open support for Ukrainian and Georgian membership, and plans for the deployment of missile defense facilities in Eastern Europe were finalized.⁵⁰ Moscow interpreted both as an attempt to gain some sort of a first-strike advantage. The merits of these initiatives aside, Russia's annoyance and the desire to sabotage these projects was very predictable. As a result, relations with Russia got worse throughout Bush's two terms, culminating in 2008 with the war in Georgia.⁵¹

48. Bruce Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century*, revised edition (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2010), 359.

49. *Russia and the West: Putin Takes Control*, National Geographic Channel video, 60 min, 2012, DVD.

50. *Russia and the West: Putin Takes Control*, National Geographic Channel.

51. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 362.

Some aspects of cooperation seemed to be promising at first but did not bring any significant results. Thus, after September 2001, US-Russia relations became mainly focused on counter-terrorism and the war in Afghanistan.⁵² Bush's strategy of "American Internationalism" called for the strengthening alliances to defeat global terrorism and to work to prevent attacks against the US and allies.⁵³ The US' desire to develop better relations with Russia was evident.⁵⁴ The latter nation was very familiar with the Afghan region and had significant influence in former Soviet Central Asian republics, whose territory and assistance were necessary.⁵⁵ Russia similarly had reasons to cooperate: Afghan terrorist camps trained Chechen rebels. Also, maintaining Russian influence in the Asian region through participation was a vital interest.

However, the Russian side clearly expected more in return than the US was willing to deliver. As relations warmed, Putin tested the waters during his visit to the NATO headquarters in Brussels by asking half-jokingly when Russia was going to receive an invitation to join NATO.⁵⁶ Once again, NATO did not honor Russia with any preferential treatment consistent with its status in the international arena, telling Putin to, in essence, get in line.⁵⁷

Even if Bush managed to avoid any violent crises with Moscow and seemingly made some meaningful progress, his administration's approach made Russia's cooperation on several crucial issues unlikely. Signs of progress between the two countries included a "Joint Declaration for Peace" which promoted better relations on

52. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 353.

53. President George W. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (Washington DC: The White House, September 2002), 1-12.

54. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 354-356.

55. Okeksandr Gladkyy, "American Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations with Russia and China after 11 September," *World Affairs*, vol. 166, no. 1 (Summer 2003), 3-23.

56. *Russia and the West: Putin Takes Control*, National Geographic Channel.

57. *Russia and the West: Putin Takes Control*, National Geographic Channel.

denuclearization, economy, trade, science, technology, and environmental protection.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the more significant disagreements included Russia's human rights abuses in Chechnya, nuclear assistance to Iran, opposition to the Iraq invasion in 2003, and Moscow's renewed relations with North Korea.⁵⁹

Relations During President Barack H. Obama's Administration

As the processes of democratization and liberalization slowed down in Putin's Russia, the West stopped emphasizing "shared values" and began trying to rectify the situation by providing support to pro-Western political figures and promoting democracy.⁶⁰ Russia's security concerns escalated in 2008 when Georgia and Ukraine were considered for prospective NATO and EU memberships.⁶¹ Emboldened by its rising economy and the revival of its defense sector, Russia was determined to answer what it saw as a direct threat to its security.⁶² Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 sent a clear message about where Moscow drew the line with NATO expansion.⁶³

Upon entering office, the Obama Administration realized the growing dissent and worrisome state of US-Russia relations and asserted

58. "Joint Declaration between the U.S. and Russian Federation," *Mindfully.org* (Moscow), 24 May 2002, www.mindfully.org/reformn/2002/joint-declaration-u.s.-russia24may02.htm.

59. Gladkyy, "American Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations with Russia."

60. Mearsheimer, "*Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault.*"

61. Steven Pifer, "Ukraine Overturns Its Non-bloc Status: What Next with NATO?," *Kyiv Post*, 26 December 2014, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/steven-pifer-ukraine-overturns-its-non-bloc-status-what-next-withnato-376208.html>.

62. Andrew E. Kramer, "Rising Oil Prices Buoy Russia's Economy, Despite Sanctions," *The New York Times*, 18 January 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/world/europe/russia-oil-economy.html.

63. Tensions between Russia and NATO rose to new heights after Allied leaders agreed at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia could become a NATO member, provided it meets all necessary requirements. Five-months later the world awoke to a Russo-Georgia war. See William Burns, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington D.C., 17 September 2008, <https://20012009.state.gov/p/us/rm/2008/109825.htm>.

it could prompt a “reset” with Russia’s new president, Dmitry Medvedev. Following the “reset,” the US and Russia cooperated in a number of areas, and substantive gains were achieved through the work of the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission that met regularly until the crisis in Ukraine. The most important cooperative efforts were made in strategic arms control (new 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), counternarcotics, Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization, sanctions on Iran and the Iran nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), and sanctions on North Korea.⁶⁴

Despite this progress, U.S.-Russian relations remained challenging in several respects. Even though Russia did not veto a United Nations Security Council resolution on Libya, Putin, now serving as Prime Minister, but was widely considered more influential than Medvedev, forcefully criticized the 2011 intervention. Comparing the resolution to a “medieval call to the crusades,”⁶⁵ Putin interpreted it as a “case study in Western intervention: stir up protests, give them rhetorical support and diplomatic cover, and, if that does not work, send in the fighter jets.”⁶⁶ Moscow cited the NATO action against Muammar Gaddafi in Libya as evidence that the Responsibility to Protect provisions in United Nations Security Council resolutions was manipulated by the US and others for purposes of regime change.

US-Russian relations further worsened with Russia’s disputed December 2011 parliamentary elections and Putin’s March 2012 return to the presidency. Two days after Russia's parliamentary election, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed “serious concern” and

64. Cory Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*, Congressional Research Service Report, 2017.

65. Eliza Relman, “The US intervention in Libya was a key turning point for Putin in his attitude toward the US,” *Business Insider*, 24 February 2017, www.businessinsider.com/putin-us-libya-intervention-hillary-clinton-2017-2.

66. Relman, “The US intervention in Libya was a key turning point.”

inferred that it had been “neither free nor fair.”⁶⁷ Putin accused Clinton of “ordering the opposition movement into action like some kind of revolutionary sleeper cell.”⁶⁸

Relations continued to decline in December 2012 when Congress passed and the President signed into law the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act.⁶⁹ This imposed sanctions on individuals involved in the detention, abuse, and/or death of a Russian lawyer and auditor who died in prison after uncovering massive tax fraud that implicated the government.⁷⁰ Russian reaction was intense, as the Kremlin saw sanctions as a direct assault on the legitimacy and integrity of the government and an “unwarranted intrusion into its internal affairs.” In response, the Russian government banned US adoptions of Russian children, enacted the “foreign agent” law, requested the closure of US foreign assistance programs, and refused to renew Nunn-Lugar program.⁷¹

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the annexation of Crimea, and its subsequent support of separatists in eastern Ukraine were the final nail in the coffin of the “reset.” The US suspended cooperation on trade, investment, and military-to-military engagement.⁷² In addition,

67. Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at the OSCE First Plenary Session,” *US Department of State*, 6 December 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/178315.htm>.

68. Simon Shuster, “Vladimir Putin's Bad Blood with Hillary Clinton,” *Time*, 25 July 2016, <http://time.com/4422723/putin-russia-hillary-clinton/>.

69. “The Magnitsky Sanctions,” *US Department of the Treasury*, 14 December 2012, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/pl112_208.pdf.

70. “The Magnitsky Sanctions,” *US Department of the Treasury*; See also “Russia ‘Outraged’ over Senate Passing Magnitsky Bill,” *Reuters*, 27 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-rights-idUSBRE85Q0EK20120627>.

71. In December 2012, Putin signed Russia’s “foreign agent” law requiring foreign-funded organizations that engage in activity seeking to affect policymaking to register and identify as foreign agents. See Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*.

72. United States House of Representatives, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Ukraine, Testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European*

Russia also was removed from the G8 and became a subject of international sanctions for its actions. In December 2016, Obama imposed additional sanctions for election-related malicious cyber activity.⁷³

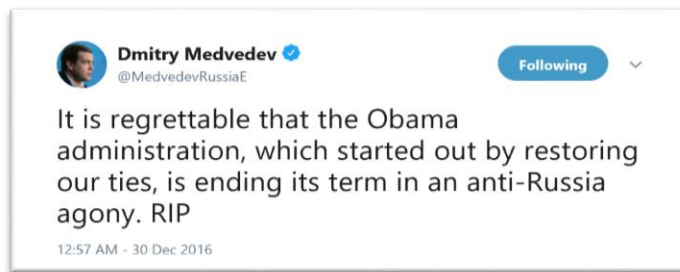


Figure 4: Russian Prime Minister on Worsening US-Russian Relations

Source: Russian Prime Minister Twitter Account, 30 December 2016.

Within the best intentions of liberalism, Obama continued to aim at making the entire Eurasian continent look like western Europe and so the US sought to promote democracy, increase economic interdependence among the countries of the region, and incorporate them into international institutions.⁷⁴ Due to US intervention, Moscow still had deep fears that NATO would move forward with its plans to bring Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance. In September 2013, Carl Gershman, the president of the National Endowment for Democracy, declared “Ukraine’s choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents.”⁷⁵ Ironically, such liberal focus on “democratic peace” along with sizable investments

and Eurasian Affairs Eric Rubin before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2014.

73. “Fact Sheet: Ukraine-Related Sanctions,” *The White House*, 17 March 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/17/fact-sheet-ukraine-related-sanctions>.

74. President Barack H. Obama, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington DC: The White House, May 2010), 9, 37.

75. Mearsheimer, “*Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.*”

the US made in Ukraine since 2013, prompted Putin to compare exporting democracy to the former Soviet doctrine of exporting the socialist revolution to the rest of the world.⁷⁶

The Rise of Nationalism and the Role of Vladimir Putin

*I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia.
It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma;
but perhaps there is a key.
That key is Russian nationalism.*
—Winston Churchill, 1 October 1939

During the period of increasing oil prices from 2004-2008, Russian President Putin used the aforementioned cultural propensities to ease the rise of Russian nationalism through government-sponsored propaganda.⁷⁷ Nationalism would keep Putin in power and justify Russia's quest for former territorial possessions. Gaining power after the "wild nineties," Putin brought about a sense of order and stability.⁷⁸ The ensuing nationalization moved away from the heavily corrupt and poorly executed market-based reforms attempted in the lead up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Crony capitalism currently drives Russia through an oligarch patronage system, controlled by Putin.⁷⁹ Capitalizing on this dynamic, Putin began implementing changes that would guarantee his

76. The US has committed \$1.3 billion to Ukraine since 2014. See President Barack Obama, "Statement of the President: US Assistance to Ukraine since February 2014." Washington, DC: Office of the Press Secretary, 2016; "Western partners became convinced of the justness ... declared themselves the victors of the Cold War ... and started openly interfering in the affairs of sovereign states and exporting democracy."; See also President Vladimir Putin, "Statement of the President: Will a New World Order Emerge from the Current Conflicts," Sochi, Russia, 19 October 2017.

77. Kramer, "Rising Oil Prices Buoy Russia's Economy."

78. Thane Gustafson, *Capitalism Russian Style*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xi, 1-13.

79. Jim Nichol, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 31 March 2014.

permanent place at the helm. By nationalizing the leading media outlets, Putin created a powerful propaganda machine that cultivated Russian cultural propensities to messianism and, thus, encouraged the rise of nationalism.⁸⁰ In its turn, a rising nationalism promoted Putin's continued rule as a strong leader destined to restore Russia to its former glory in both prestige and territory. Therefore, by bolstering nationalism and concentrating power, along with its benefits, in the tight inner circle of loyalists, Putin enjoys a continuing political dominance.

Given Russia's current pariah status with the West, the US and allies seek to understand whether the breakdown in relations is due to irreconcilable differences in Russian society or due to the unique goals of Putin.⁸¹ It seems Putin was the right person for the existing political climate at the time of his ascent. Once at the helm, he focused on bolstering the same societal currents that brought him to the power in the first place. It is possible to distinguish three main reasons for the rise of nationalism in Russia:

- humiliation: the culture of messianism and universalism coupled with perceived disillusionment and humiliation of the 1990s;
- propaganda: effective government-sponsored propaganda disseminated through media outlets and the Orthodox Church;
- energy nationalism: rising prices for energy resources leading to the relative rebounding of the economy and its military-industrial complex.

The 1990s: Redefining Russia

The USSR left behind a controversial legacy for its citizens and foreign countries alike. Through Stalin's industrialization and Great Purges, Khrushchev's Thaw, relative prosperity accompanied by the

80. Nichol, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues*.

81. Dr. Mark J. Conversino (Deputy Commandant, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Maxwell AFB, AL), in discussion with the author, 10 October 2017.

scarcity of consumer goods under Brezhnev, followed by Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost.⁸² Some countries (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, North Korea, China, Vietnam, Congo, Cuba) looked upon the USSR as an indispensable ally and others as a ruthless occupier, but not many looked down on it. In the bipolar world, the USSR was the only other country besides the US that exerted a decisive influence over the destiny of the world. This international grandeur, along with internal contradictions that eventually led to its implosion, embodies the very cultural tradition of messianism, universalism, imperialism, and suffering.⁸³ during

The USSR population was undoubtedly polarized. Regardless of some local independence movements (such as in Ukraine), in the referendum on the future of the Soviet Union on 17 March 1991, officially, 78 percent of the Russian population voted for preservation of

82. During the 1920s, Stalin gained absolute power through repression against opposition elements within the Communist Party. He managed to bring both the "party and the public to a state of complete submission." See "Revelations from the Russian Archives," *Library of Congress*, August 2016, www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/rep.html; Khrushchev's "Thaw" (the 1950s to 1960s) is a period when repression and censorship were relaxed, and those sent to the Gulag's were released. See Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 7; Through Brezhnev's era of relative prosperity (mid 1960s - 1980s), the growth in GNP was approximately 5 percent (versus 2 percent as seen today) and he promoted macro stability with some support to "political and economic freedom ... and greater tolerance of petty private enterprise and trade." Brezhnev's policies later resulted in a "decline in labour discipline and labour productivity.... [and] an over-centralization and bureaucratic approach." See James R. Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism," *Slavic Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Winter, 1985): 694-706; See also R. G. Gidadhubli, "Perestroika and Glasnost," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 22, no. 18 (May 1987): 784-787; Gorbachev's (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) resulted in an overhaul of the Communist Party, greater reliance on market forces, easing of social controls, greater freedom of the media and religious groups, and democratization. See "Perestroika and Glasnost," *History.com*, accessed 20 March 2018, www.history.com/topics/cold-war/perestroika-and-glasnost.

83. An example of an internal contradiction includes the USSR's push to industrialize at any cost which resulted in frequent shortages of food and consumer goods.

the Union across the participating republics.⁸⁴ This statistic has remained virtually unchanged. According to the Pew Research Center, 69 percent (78 percent of people over 35 years old and 50 percent under 35 years old) of the Russian population believes the dissolution of the USSR was a mistake.⁸⁵ Granted, the majority of these responders are older individuals who, perhaps, have had difficulties adjusting to new circumstances. However, if the older population lacks objectivity, it can also be claimed that the younger population lacks experience. Russian President Putin, in his turn, has called the breakup of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century.⁸⁶

The vast majority of former Soviet citizens in Russia consider the 1990s the most difficult time in their lives. The decade of uncertainty, great inflation, oligarchs, and gangsters.⁸⁷ The 1990s were politically disastrous as the country seemed to lose the Cold War and its influence in the international arena. US financial assistance and economic strategies proved to be a failure. Moreover, US-Russia cooperation during the 1990s is currently viewed as the source of Russia’s humiliation: Russia opened itself up naively to the West, which immediately took advantage of it. As Putin commented in October of 2017, “The biggest mistake our country made was that we put too much trust in you [West], and your mistake was that you saw this trust as

84. *Referendum in the Soviet Union: A Compendium of Reports on the March 17, 1991 Referendum on the Future of the USSR*, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Report, 1991.

85. David Masci, “In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union and positive feelings about Stalin,” *Pew Research Center*, 29 June 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/.

86. Masci, “In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union.”

87. Dmitry Gorenburg and H.H. Gaffney, “Great Promise Unfulfilled How Russia lost its way after independence,” *Center for Strategic Studies*, February 2006, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/ruseur_wp_026.pdf.

weakness and abused it.”⁸⁸ Whether the West, indeed, took advantage of Russia during the 1990s is not as clear-cut. The most important is that the vast majority of Russians share Putin’s perception.⁸⁹

Humiliated or not, that Moscow has lost its former influence was demonstrated during the Balkans conflict. In particular, the war over Kosovo crystalized the unfolding attitudes over Russia better than any other event since 1991. The war made it painfully clear that Russia was no longer a Great Power, and the West imposed its policies across Europe and other countries despite Moscow’s objections.⁹⁰ Some may suggest the US was restrained until Russia officially signaled it would not support Milosevic which meant Russia still mattered in the world affairs. However, it was not Russia’s decision to give up Milosevic that was interpreted as humiliation; it is the way NATO handled Russia’s participation in the conflict thereafter.

In Russia’s view, NATO interpreted the Kosovo diplomatic agreements in its favor, ousting Moscow completely by refusing to grant Russia a military zone of its own. General Leonid Ivashov, one of the key figures in the Kosovo negotiations concluded: “They lied to us. They treated us as a fifth-rate power.”⁹¹ Determined to maintain the foothold in Kosovo, Russian leadership devised a plan where a small contingent of Russian soldiers from Bosnia would seize the Pristina airport, and military aircraft would bring a much more sizable force to be reckoned

88. Leonid Bershidsky, “Putin spins a tale of Russian humiliation,” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 October 2017, www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-putin-russia-humiliation-bershidsky-1023-20171020-story.html.

89. *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017.

90. Jentleson explains, “even as Russia was being weighed down with economic and other problems, many analysts felt that its sheer size, resource endowments (especially oil and natural gas), geography, and history ensured that it again would be a great power.” See Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 359-361.

91. Brovkin, *Discourse on NATO in Russia During the Kosovo War*.

with. In accordance with the plan, troops seized the airport, but the mission was aborted from above due to Russian domestic politics.⁹² An abandoned Russian battalion in the airport without water, food or political support would become a symbol of Yeltsin's regime having betrayed Russian national interests by obediently fulfilling NATO demands for the money of the IMF.⁹³ Thus, regardless of its messianic mindset, Russia became weak and ignored. This cultural grandeur, coupled with actual political impotence, contributed to the rise of nationalism.

Russian media, mostly free and fair in post-Soviet Russia, was completely and totally one-sided in its coverage of Kosovo events.⁹⁴ Common people condemned NATO bombing, and nationalistic arguments gained popularity. Alexander Dugin, one of the staunchest Russian nationalist writers, portrayed Serbia as a hero nation worthy of emulation. Unlike Russia of the 1990s, Serbia was a country that, despite the overwhelming might of the West, chose to defiantly stand up for its Orthodoxy, Identity, and Integrity.⁹⁵ For figures like Dugin, fighting the West for Serbia was Russia's destiny; fighting the West for Serbia was its way to salvation out of the slavery to which the Yeltsin administration was leading the country.⁹⁶ This narrative fell on the

92. For analysis of domestic politics contributing to the Kosovo crisis see Brovkin, *Discourse on NATO in Russia During the Kosovo War*.

93. Brovkin, *Discourse on NATO in Russia During the Kosovo War*.

94. During Operation Allied Force, Russian news coverage was “almost indistinguishable from Serbian — which helped inflame Russian public opinion in ways that the governing elites probably soon regretted.” See Paul E. Gallis, *Kosovo: Lessons Learned from Operation Allied Force*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1999; For further analysis on freedom of the press in Russia with reports from 2002-2017, see also *Russia Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House Report. Washington, DC: Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/Russia>.

95. United States Senate, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on the Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security*, A Minority Staff Report before the Foreign Relations Committee, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., 2018.

96. Charles Clover, “The Unlikely Origins of Russia’s Manifest Destiny,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2016, www.foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/geopolitics-russia-

fertile cultural ground. Supporting an underdog Slav Orthodox brother against an injustice coming from the hostile West is in the best tradition of Dostoyevsky's universalism and Berdayev's messianism.⁹⁷ The rhetoric described here was considered extreme in the 1990s but is now routinely stated in Moscow.



Figure 5: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Kosovo Intervention
Source: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Twitter Account, 24 March 2018.

Government-sponsored propaganda during Putin's presidency

Following the failure of economic reform and Yeltsin's pivot to the West, the political climate became ripe for the emergence of the national leader who would reflect the country's nationalistic tendencies in the making. Vladimir Putin replaced Yeltsin on the eve of the New Year 2000, before Yeltsin's presidential term was finished, and won the subsequent election with an overwhelming majority of the votes. When Putin came to power, he accomplished two things that would guarantee his permanent place at the helm: nationalization of the media, and support of the Russian Orthodox Church.

mackinder-eurasia-heartland-dugin-ukraine-eurasianism-manifest-destiny-putin/.

97. Incidentally, the Czar Nicholas II took Russia to war in 1914 in part for the defense of Serbia.

Nationalization of the Russian Media

Channel One Russia (known as Russian Public Television between 1995 and 2002) is the first among Russia's country-wide channels. It has more than 250 million viewers worldwide.⁹⁸ Government-owned, Channel One is among the most effective tools of the Russian state propaganda machine. For example, the political commentary show, *Vremya Pokazhet* (Time Will Show), takes about 4.5 hours of Channel One's prime air time. On the show, politicians, government officials, and various celebrities discuss the latest domestic and foreign news, as perceived by the Kremlin.⁹⁹ The choice of attendees is carefully geared to reflect the government favored anti-American views and the hosts are far from impartial. To lend legitimacy to the program, a few representatives of "alternative" pro-Western views are invited as well. Nevertheless, their segments appear staged, rather than an organic debate: they voice unpopular views just to be attacked and ridiculed by the majority of the "experts." Viewers' Twitter comments expressed praise for Moscow and hatred towards the US and its European "vassals."¹⁰⁰

In *Vremya Pokazhet*, no matter where the discussion starts, it often concludes that the US is responsible for every wrong-doing against Russia. Any anti-Russian sentiment is assumed to be the result of American propaganda, every uprising in the former Soviet republics such as "Color Revolutions" are initiated and funded by Americans, every foreign policy fiasco is the result of the US bullying the international

98. "News and Events," *International Media Distribution*, accessed 8 March 2018, www.imediadistribution.com/Networks/cid/Details/NetworkIndex/7.

99. "Although Russian state-controlled TV and other media have long broadcast significant amounts of anti-American and anti-Western propaganda, the intensity of such propaganda increased after Putin's reelection to his third presidential term in 2012." See Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 97.

100. *Vremya Pokazhet* participants have called citizens of certain European countries "vassals" since they are in their view not free to do what they want but given privileges in return for allegiance.

community to hurt, contain, and isolate Russia.¹⁰¹ Thus, Ukrainians involved in the armed conflict against Russia in Donetsk and Lugansk, in reality, would love to subjugate themselves to the Russian government—if only the American propaganda did not brainwash them. Western European nations would be happy to lift sanctions against Russia—if only they were not threatened by the US. The peace in the world would be possible—if only the US would not strive to start wars around the world to boost its global hegemony. To put it simply, Russian citizens believe they know their enemy – the US.¹⁰²

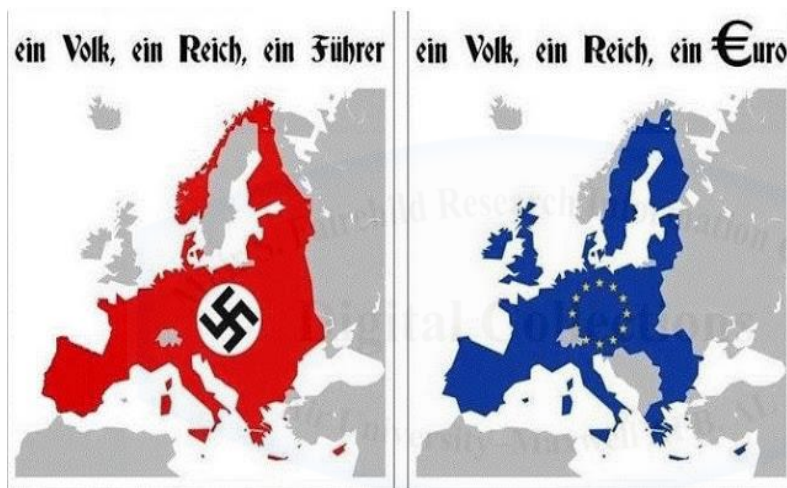


Figure 6: Russian anti-Western Propaganda.

Source: Marlene Laruelle, “Russian World,” PONARS Eurasia, 27 May 2015, www.ponars-eurasia.org/article/“russian-world”-russia’s-soft-power-and-geopolitical-imagination.

101. A Color Revolution focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving security interests at low costs. It has been used to describe the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the Color Revolution*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014; See also Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 361.

102. In December 2017, 45 percent of Russians said the US was their number one enemy – a three-fold increase from three decades earlier. See Враги России, *Levada Center*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/02/02/enemies/>.

This confrontation with the West and the US, in particular, is an underlying reason for many Russian domestic and foreign policies. Ascending to power through nationalistic sentiments awoken by the “humiliation” of the 1990s, Putin proceeded to develop a nationalistic outlook through media outlets. Blaming a foreign enemy for Russia’s problems, internal and external, is central to the nationalistic propaganda campaign. The more effectively Putin can convince his common compatriots Russia is in a great patriotic struggle with the West, the easier it will be for him to maintain power. While feeling threatened, the Russians are more likely to throw their support behind a “strong” authoritarian leader than a Yeltsin-like liberal who is associated with the tumultuous 90s.¹⁰³ For example, in Russia, 58 percent of adults see Stalin’s historical role in either a “very” or “mostly” positive light, compared with just 22 percent who feel the same way about Gorbachev.¹⁰⁴ Even though the roots of this cultural phenomenon are quite complicated, one may speculate that it has something to do with Stalin winning The Great Patriotic War against Germany. Moreover, to demonize the domestic opposition as agents of the enemy, the Kremlin adopted the term “fifth column” to discredit detractors as unpatriotic.¹⁰⁵

In light of rising nationalism and demonizing the US, it is only natural for Putin’s administration to get involved in securing a buffer zone and building alliances. During his tenure, Putin experienced many

103. Gustafson, *Capitalism Russian Style*, xi.

104. Masci, “In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union.”

105. The “fifth column” is a group of sympathizers or supporters of an enemy who undermine a nation’s unity from within. The term is credited to Emilio Mola Vidal, a Nationalist general during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). As four of his army columns maneuvered during Siege of Madrid, the general referred to his militant supporters whom were forward within the city as his “fifth column.” See “Fifth Column,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 4 March 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/fifth-column.

“Color Revolutions” assumed to be sponsored by the US.¹⁰⁶ His primary goal is to avoid one in Russia and, at least, the neighboring countries. The closer the enemy sponsored coup, the higher the risk is for Putin’s survival. Therefore, Putin is actively involved in keeping his proxies at the helm in his immediate neighborhood – former Soviet Republics – and especially the ones on its Western border. Annexation of Crimea and support of Donbas and Lugansk separatists stems from the attempt to salvage as much territory of strategic importance as possible after Ukraine’s former pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich lost power and the pro-Western government stepped in.

Relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church

Another unlikely outlet in Moscow’s propaganda machine is the Russian Orthodox Church (the Church).¹⁰⁷ The Church’s power continued uncontested until the overthrow of the tsars in the early 20th century when it became a prime target for the new revolutionaries. When Vladimir Lenin came to power, he told his comrades, “the more representatives of the reactionary clergy we shoot, the better.”¹⁰⁸ After 1917, the Soviet Union saw the most significant persecution of Christians since the time of Diocletian: 200,000 clerics killed and 41,000

106. In the 2003 Georgia “Rose Revolution,” Putin supported the incumbent and pro-Russian President Eduard Shevardnadze over the pro-Western candidate Mikheil Saakashvili. Saakashvili benefited from “fair foreign elections” monetary contributions from democratic institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the US’ Agency for International Development. Additionally, he was benefited from NGOs such as Open Society Institute who funded student activists. In the 2004 Ukrainian “Orange Revolution,” Putin supported a highly-unpopular Viktor Yankukovich over Victor Yushchenko, a pro-western candidate and eventual winner. Yankukovich would eventually succeed Yushchenko in 2010, but the western influence in eastern geopolitical affairs was demonstrably evident. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 361.

107. Josh Hersch, “Orthodox Influence,” Vice News, episode. 313, 26 March 2018.

108. Alexander N. Yakovlev, *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 160.

churches destroyed.¹⁰⁹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Church reemerged and had sought to play an essential role as it did before the revolution.¹¹⁰ Moscow has given the Church more support than they anticipated, but now the Kremlin expects something in return – unwavering loyalty.¹¹¹ As a result, the Church’s official teaching, summarized in its Social Doctrine, emphasizes patriotism, close church-state relations, and social conservatism. Not accidentally, these are the very same qualities promoted by Putin’s administration in the attempt to juxtapose Russian conservatism to Western liberalism.¹¹²

Moscow’s emphasis on conservative values can be traced as far back as Putin’s famous Munich Speech of 2007 where he announced that Russia would not participate in the unipolar world order led by the US and oppose it at any opportunity.¹¹³ Putin made it clear to the international community that Russia intends to protect the conservative values in the world, i.e., the primacy of the states’ sovereignty over the existing US-dominated supranational institutions. When it comes to the domestic audience, the Kremlin needed an ally in promoting political conservatism, and the Church turned out to be a natural choice.

The Church has always been a source of cultural and social conservatism. Adding a political dimension proved only natural. According to Moscow’s celebrated Priest Vsevolod Chaplin, “the very idea of separation of church and state is alien to Orthodox civilization. It is a

109. Peter Pomerantsev, “Putin’s God Squad: The Orthodox Church and the Russian Politics,” *Newsweek*, 10 September 2012, www.newsweek.com/putins-god-squad-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics-64649.

110. Andrey Pertsev, “President and Patriarch: What Putin Wants from the Orthodox Church,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 19 December 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75058>.

111. Pertsev, “President and Patriarch.”

112. President Vladimir Putin, “Statement of the President: Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Moscow, Russia, 1 March 2018.

113. President Vladimir Putin, “Statement of the President: Security Policy,” *Munich Conference*, 2007.

peculiarity of the West.”¹¹⁴

As of 2018, 70 percent of the population identified as Christian Orthodox, up from 30 percent at the end of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁵ Identifying with the Church means gaining additional leverage over the hearts and minds of the majority of the population. Cooperation is in the Church's (generally referring to the Orthodox Church) interest since it continues gaining in power and popularity with the support of the Kremlin: under Putin, thousands of churches have been built or restored at a rate of 3 churches per day.¹¹⁶ In addition, some of the Church's supported views become laws, like the “slapping law” where the police need to observe systematic domestic violence for at least a year to intervene.¹¹⁷

As a result, the Russian Orthodox leadership spreads a message of love and support towards the government. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, said in 2012 that “liberalism will lead to legal collapse and then the Apocalypse.” On another occasion, he called Putin’s rule “a miracle.”¹¹⁸ However, Kirill is not alone in his support for Russian foreign policy. Orthodox majority countries in Central and Eastern Europe favor a strong role for Russia in geopolitics and religion to balance the influence of the West: 85 percent in Russia, 76 percent in Belarus, and 83 percent in Armenia.¹¹⁹ These numbers point to a civilizational connection between the Church and the

114. Hersh, “Orthodox Influence.”

115. Hersh, “Orthodox Influence.”

116. Hersh, “Orthodox Influence.”

117. Ivan Nechepurenko, “Russia Moves to Soften Domestic Violence Law,” *The New York Times*, 25 January 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/world/europe/russia-domestic-violence.html.

118. Pomerantsev, “Putin’s God Squad.”

119. Jeff Diamant, “Orthodox Christians in Central and Eastern Europe favor strong role for Russia in geopolitics, religion,” Pew Research Center, 11 May 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/11/orthodox-christians-in-central-and-eastern-europe-favor-strong-role-for-russia-in-geopolitics-religion/>.

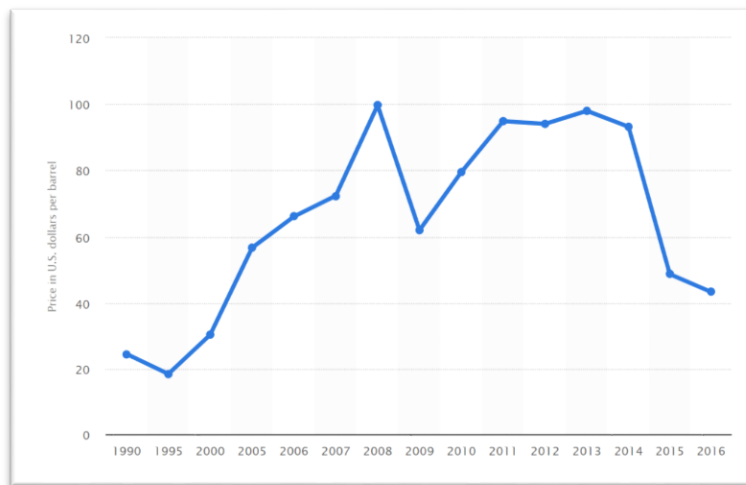
authoritarian state.

Rising Prices for Energy Resources Led to the Relative Rebounding of the Economy, and its Military-Industrial Complex.

After the humiliation of the Soviet Union's collapse and the instability of the 1990s, a nationalist niche grew alongside surging oil profits. The past decade brought two periods of surging oil prices: the first that started in 2002 and ended in 2008 with the financial crisis; and another that began three years later 2011. In the decade and a half since Putin first became Prime Minister in 1999, his government has strengthened its control over oil and gas and increased its role in the financial sector. The rise of nationalization diminished any existing incentives for investment and swept away the resources needed for private investment. In general, people of resource-rich countries are enthusiastic about nationalization, but in return, they expect special benefits from their respective governments. Prominent examples are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. In the early years of Putin's presidency, Russian citizens were enthusiastic about the future. The oil revenues increased consumption and stimulated growth since the profits were distributed through market channels. However, the second oil price boom from 2009-2011 did not result in long-term increased economic performance. The economy stagnated in 2012 despite high oil and gas costs per barrel.¹²⁰

120. Despite oil selling above \$100 (US per barrel), Russia's Gross Domestic Product grew by only 1.4 percent in 2013. The IMF attributed Russia's flattened growth to a non-oil budget deficit of 10 percent and a lack of economic diversification. See "Russia's Stagnated Growth Raises Pressure on New Growth Model," *Reuters*, 3 December 2013, www.reuters.com/article/russia-economy-forecast-idUSL5N0J11QG20131203.

Table 1: World Oil Prices: 1990-2016



Source: “Average annual WTI crude oil spot price from 1990 to 2016,” Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/209561/average-annual-spot-price-of-wti-crude-oil/>.

This method is sometimes called “resource nationalism.”¹²¹ A variation of such existed in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, for example, or in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. Kirill Rogov, a political analyst at Moscow’s Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy, explains resource nationalism inevitably involves a confrontation with the West as the regime seals itself off.¹²² Politicians will then naturally assert themselves as “regional leaders and engineer conflicts with neighboring countries that help patriotic mobilization.”¹²³

Confrontations abroad are a source of legitimacy at home. They offer an excuse for repression, and they draw people into a nationalist narrative—the rally effect. The declared goals of the conflict are irrelevant; what matters is the perpetuation of conflict itself. Viewed this way, hopeless fights seem rational, despite the cost.

The consolidation of authoritarian rule, which seems to be Putin’s

121. Kirill Rogov, “The oil price will set the test for Putin’s resource nationalism,” *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014, www.ft.com/content/481cbf0c-771d-11e4-8273-00144feabdc0.

122. Rogov, “The oil price will set the test.”

123. Rogov, “The oil price will set the test.”

plan, depends on his ability to muster popular support. As the 2018 elections illustrate, popular support is a source of power for Putin.¹²⁴ After a period of decline, his approval rating is said to have jumped to as high as 80 percent in 2017, adjusted to no lower than 70 percent after taking into account the reluctance of respondents to voice unpopular opinions.¹²⁵ Putin will continue to channel the patriotic spirits of the Russian people and that likely means intensifying his conflict with the West.



124. Putin received 76 percent of the vote in the 2018 election. See President Vladimir Putin, "Statement of the President: Presidential Address to Russia Citizens," Moscow, Russia, 1 March 2018.

125. Julie Ray and Neli Esipova, "Russians Happier With Putin Than With Country's Direction," *Gallup*, 8 December 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/223382/russians-happier-putin-country-direction.aspx>.

Chapter 3

Ukraine Case Study

The Problem

Ukraine has consistently occupied the Western media headlines since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea – seemingly a point of no return in relations between Russia and the West and a catalyst for Putin's rising approval ratings inside Russia. Russian messianism, nationalism, distrust of the West, as well as the national security incentives, have created an explosive mix in Ukraine. Moscow's objectives in Ukraine are to expel what the Kremlin viewed as an anti-constitutional government not representative of the majority of the Ukrainian population.

According to Moscow, current nationalistic and even fascist Ukrainian leadership is a threat to its population, especially its sizeable Russian speaking segment. The annexation of Crimea, seen as inherently Russian territory, earned almost universal approval in Russia and succeeded in boosting patriotic and nationalistic fervor.¹ Besides the annexation of Crimea, the ensuing wars in the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk remain Moscow's last efforts to keep a foothold in Ukraine.² The ensuing sanctions, well within the tradition of suffering in the hands of Western powers, only strengthened the antipathy towards the West.³

Background

The current level of hostility makes it challenging to imagine

1. Vincent L. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service Report, 2017.

2. Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 87.

3. Впaрї Poccї, *Levada Center*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/02/02/enemies/>.

Ukraine and Russia, along with Belarus, share strong cultural bonds. After the decline and disintegration of Kievan Rus' at the end of the eleventh century and a short period of existence as independent principalities, Ukrainian lands became a part of Poland in the West, The Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the North and East, and Genghisids Empire in the South and remained such for the next four centuries.⁴

Meanwhile, Muscovite Russians regained influence in the region as early as the fifteenth century and embarked on the mission of reclaiming former Kievan Rus' lands. Prolonged Muscovite-Lithuanian Wars forced The Grand Duchy of Lithuania to ally with the Kingdom of Poland, forming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and reuniting most of the Ukrainian lands.⁵ Nevertheless, the united forces of Russia, Prussia, and Austria defeated the Commonwealth in a series of wars and partitioned it between themselves at the end of the eighteenth century.⁶ As a result, Ukraine was split between Russia and Austria and remained such until German occupation during the First World War. After the Bolshevik Revolution, it was once again reunited and incorporated into the Soviet Union.⁷

During the period of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was the most important of the fourteen non-Russian Soviet states. Together with Russia and Belarus, it constituted the Slavic trio, which awakened memories of Kievan Rus'.⁸ Ukraine was also the second most populous Soviet republic and a shield for the USSR's western edge.⁹ Furthermore,

4. "Ukraine," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 8 March 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine>.

5. "Ukraine," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

6. Viktor Jakunin, "Interactive Map of Belarusian History," *Project Letapis*, accessed 5 March 2018, <http://map.letapis.by/en/>.

7. "Ukraine under direct imperial Russian rule," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 8 March 2018, www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/Ukraine-under-direct-imperial-Russian-rule#ref404469.

8. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

9. Comparable to France in size and to Italy in population, it contained some 50 million people. See Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

it functioned as a critical passageway to Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe.¹⁰ Its east was filled with industries, mines, and was a significant producer of armaments.¹¹ Due to its fertile soil, Ukraine was known as the breadbasket of the Soviet Union.¹²

Incidentally, the deepest scar Ukraine bears from the Soviet period is the Holodomor – a man-made famine of 1932-1933 that killed between 3 and 10 million people by varying estimates, the majority of which were ethnic Ukrainians.¹³ Opinions vary on the cause of the Holodomor, from outright denial to the unintended consequences of industrialization and collectivization, to Stalin's deliberate attempts to attack Ukrainian nationalism.¹⁴ In 2006, Ukraine and 15 other countries recognized the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people carried out by the Soviet government.¹⁵

At the end of the 1980s, the challenges that resulted from Gorbachev's reforms gave rise to mass demonstrations throughout the Baltic republics.¹⁶ After the protests spread to Ukraine in 1988 the Soviet Union's days were numbered.¹⁷ The demonstrations started in Lviv and rapidly swept eastward to Kyiv, the capital, and other parts of central Ukraine. The Donbass region remained relatively quiet in comparison during the early rise of independence, largely due to the

10. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

11. "World Fact Book: Ukraine," Central Intelligence Agency, Accessed 7 May 18, https://www.cia.gov/Library/publications/the-worldfactbook/geos/print_up.html.

12. Greg Myre, "Ukraine: From Breadbasket to Basket Case," National Public Radio, 4 March 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2013/12/20/255825377/ukraine-from-breadbasket-to-basket-case>.

13. Viktor Yushchenko, "State of the Union, The Holodomor," 26 November 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119602928167703318>.

14. "Russian lawmakers reject Ukraine's view on Stalin-era famine," *Russian News & Information Agency*, 4 February 2008, <https://sptnkne.ws/gHfg>.

15. "International Recognition of the Holodomor," *Holodomor Education*, 28 November 2006, <http://www.holodomoreducation.org/news.php/news/4>

16. Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

17. "World Fact Book: Ukraine," *Central Intelligence Agency*.

communist party's conservative elements which exercised more control.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by early 1989 "most of Ukraine was awash in political agitation."¹⁹ Later that summer, communist regimes fell in rapid succession across Eastern Europe, and, in contrast to Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, lethal force was not used to crush the revolts.²⁰

Gorbachev made one final effort in March 1991 to save the USSR in his call for a referendum, but it generated mixed results.²¹ In Ukraine, 70 percent of voters approved his proposal for a revamped federation, while 80 percent supported Ukraine's autonomy, which meant that Ukrainian laws would supersede the Kremlin's.²² The Soviet Union eventually succumbed, and Ukrainian independence became a reality in December 1991.²³

The "Gorbachev phenomenon," as Moshe Levin contends, "exemplified the law of unintended consequences and vindicated the wisdom of Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that revolutions arise not when stagnation persists but when change commences."²⁴ The percentage of Ukrainians living in poverty rose from 15 percent in 1989 to 50 percent by 1992.²⁵ An economic revival in Ukraine may have shored up support for the Soviet system before its dissolution; however,

18. Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

19. Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

20. Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

21. *Referendum in the Soviet Union: A Compendium of Reports on the March 17, 1991 Referendum on the Future of the USSR*, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Report, 1991.

22. Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 20.

23. According to Gorbachev in 1991 shortly before the impending dissolution, he stated "without Ukraine there could be no Soviet Union." See Menon Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

24. Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: An Historical Interpretation*, Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancient Regime and the French Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2008).

25. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 16.

reform proved tenuous. Disruption of supply networks made seeds and machinery scarce and too expensive for Ukrainian agriculturalists.²⁶ Furthermore, Ukraine's coal, steel, and heavy industries slumped given their dependence on demand from other parts of the Soviet Union, particularly in the Russian heartland, which also fought to preserve production and employment.²⁷

Ultimately, Ukrainian's liberation was won by "intrepid individuals, mass demonstrations, numerous and variegated civic organizations, patriotically inclined local communists, and intellectuals animated by wide-ranging discussions of once-banned topics."²⁸ Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost' created consternation among conservatives and incited feuds between the friends and foes of change. The dramatic debates in the media revealing the Soviet leaders' numerous failings, blunders, and cruelties were rapidly denuding the system's legitimacy and its capacity to control events.

The events of the moment clearly influenced the Ukrainian quest for independence. Sharp fluctuations in the public opinion polls existed between 1991 and 1993 between those that supported statehood and those who did not.²⁹ Respective to Ukrainian-Russian relations, the fluctuations in public opinion towards Moscow as seen in the early 1990's, indeed, bears truth to today.

26. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 16.

27. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 17.

28. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

29. In the December 1991 referendum, 90 percent of Ukrainians voted for independence. Three years later that number had dropped to 56 percent. See Martin Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 197-198.

Analysis and Evaluation

Role of Culture (Russian Mind)

In Ukraine, Russian messianism manifested itself in Moscow's attempts to protect Ukraine from the Western influences on the outside. Russian universalism is evident in promoting common Slavic identity along with Christian Orthodox brotherhood as an intrinsic value Russia is destined to persevere. The tradition of suffering in the hands of Western powers is consistent with the narrative of Ukrainian population being deceived into submission to the West.

Throughout the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow made an emphasis on the Russian and Ukrainian cultural proximity, along with shared history and religion.³⁰ Besides the term Russian World, popularized by the current Russian administration in the last decade, the Kremlin revived the phrase Malorossiia.³¹ Malorossiia stands for "Little Russia," and was the name used for Ukraine after its inclusion into the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century.³² The Collegium of Little Russia, the main governing body on the territory of Ukraine under Russian rule, had the task of liquidating any remnants of Ukrainian autonomy.³³ Regardless of the derogatory connotation of the term Malorossiia, denoting Ukrainians with little or no Ukrainian national consciousness, it was adopted by Russian media to emphasize the cultural and historical unity of two states. The term was also adopted for self-identification by the separatists of Donetsk and Luhansk.³⁴ Putin

30. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 14.

31. Adam Taylor, "Ukrainian separatists claim to have created a new country: Malorossiia, or Little Russia," *Washington Post*, 19 July 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/ukrainian-separatists-claim-to-have-created-a-new-country-malorossiia-or-little-russia/.

32. Taylor, "Ukrainian separatists claim to have created a new country."

33. Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and its People*, second ed. (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 287.

34. "Malorossiia is a Russian Idea," *Warsaw Institute Foundation*, 19 July 2017, <https://warsawinstitute.org/malorossiia-is-a-russian-idea/>.

used Crimea's Russian identity to justify Russia's annexation of the peninsula. Crimea was part of Russia for centuries before it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954.³⁵

Consequently, Crimea's cultural links to Russia are stronger than to Ukraine. Similar arguments apply to the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine which are home to a significant percentage of Russians or Russian speaking population.³⁶ Russian leadership claims they are motivated not only by the shared identity with the Russians living in Ukraine but also by their resolve to prevent a genocide against the Russian population, which they consider inevitable under the deeply nationalistic Ukrainian government.³⁷

This argument, however, is unconvincing given Russia's past actions in the region. Russia used the same cultural pretext in its 2008 invasion of Georgia (also ruled by the pro-Western government at the time) when the Russia-friendly population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia resisted their full incorporation into Georgia.³⁸ In reality, there was no severe threat of genocide or no new threat to the Russian population. Likewise, there exists no evidence the Ukrainian conflict would involve genocide against the Russian population. If Russia felt such deep cultural ties to Crimea, why did it not try to negotiate its return to Russia before Ukraine decided to align itself with the West? The case of identity with the Russian people in Ukraine does not offer a significant reason for the extreme behavior that Russia adopted against its neighbor. Given Russian communities were under no real threat, Russia took advantage of the US and NATO's failure to get involved and Ukraine's weakness to

35. "Crimea," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 18 April 2018, www.britannica.com/place/Crimea.

36. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

37. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 98.

38. William Burns, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington D.C., 17 September 2008, <https://20012009.state.gov/p/us/rm/2008/109825.htm>.

salvage at least part of its buffer zone against the perceived encroaching threat from the West.

However, this Russian version of Responsibility to Protect is widely explored by the Russian government-sponsored media.³⁹ Some of the examples include demonizing Ukraine's attempts to abolish Russian as the language of instruction in Ukrainian schools and end the dependence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on its Russian counterpart. During Soviet times, the majority of the schools in Ukraine had Russian as a language of instruction, and the situation did not change considerably after Ukraine declared its independence.⁴⁰ Ukrainian legislatures have aimed at correcting this linguistic environment by making Ukrainian a mandatory language of instruction for all Ukrainian secondary schools.⁴¹ As a result, Moscow called for collective action in international organizations to block what it perceives as “an attempt to achieve the full ‘Ukrainian-isation’ of the country’s education sphere.”⁴²

Likewise, the Ukrainian legislative branch proposed laws to transfer the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow to the Kiev Patriarchy due to fear of being used as a propaganda outlet for Kremlin.⁴³ Russian sponsored propaganda declared the proposals an

39. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty derived Responsibility to Protect to justify intervention of a sovereign state if it was determined that the state had “failed to protect people within its borders. See “Letter dated 26 July 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary General,” *United Nations*, 26 July 2002, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/57/303.

40. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 98.

41. Daniel McLaughlin, “Hungary and Russia lead criticism of Ukraine's new education law,” *The Irish Times*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/hungary-and-russia-lead-criticism-of-ukraine-s-new-education-law-1.3218650>.

42. McLaughlin, “Hungary and Russia lead criticism of Ukraine's new education law.”

43. Natalia Zinets, “Ukraine moves to split church from Russia as elections approach,” 19 April 2018, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-church/ukraine-moves-to-split-church-from-russia-as-elections-approach-idUSKBN1HQ1ZA>.

attack on the freedom of religion and appealed to the believers in Ukraine to defend Russian confessional leadership.⁴⁴ In addition, Ukraine's prohibition of any Soviet symbolic is seeing as a denial of Russian-Ukrainian common history and identity.

Lastly, Ukrainian lands remained under heavy Russian influence for centuries. When Ukraine decided to ally itself with the West, Moscow appealed to Russianness as a part of the very Ukrainian identity. Attempts to eradicate Russianness on the territory of Ukraine are viewed as the result of Western propaganda and an attempt to drive an artificial wedge between two mutually permeated Russian-Ukrainian cultures.

Role of the West

The US' liberal approach is a key factor in the current Ukrainian crisis; realism, however, provides a logical explanation for Russia's actions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been striving to survive as a great European power and, later, preserve its non-conformist identity in the age of democratic peace. Maintaining a buffer zone between Russia and NATO in the form of former Soviet Republics like Ukraine, no doubt, is a rational strategy for survival.

The current conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the acute disconnect between the US and Russia that prevents constructive dialogue. The US builds policies on liberal values, Russia's worldview is profoundly realist, although it often strives to explain its actions with cultural categories. In Moscow's view, international institutions of the liberal Western world such as the United Nations remain far from being objective, often pushing the agenda of the powerful states like the US.⁴⁵ Russian leaders often invoke similarities between the Kosovo and Crimea cases: in the

44. Zinets, "Ukraine moves to split church from Russia."

45. President Vladimir Putin, "Statement of the President: Creative Destruction: Will a New World Order Emerge from the Current Conflicts?" Sochi, Russia, 2017.

US' view, succession of Kosovo is considered legal, whereas the Russian backed succession of Crimea is considered illegal under the similar circumstances. If Kosovo had a right to separate from Serbia based on its ethnic makeup, why would Crimea not be afforded the same opportunity? Once lawfully independent Crimea had a right to decide its future, so it chose to join Russia.⁴⁶

Russia's actions are both offensive and defensive. It is defensive in the Contention Belt. At the same time, it has offensive revisionist aspirations due to its culture (specifically propensity for imperialism), perceived unfairness of post-Cold War world order, and the rise of nationalism boosted by the state propaganda. The Contention Belt is essential to seeing Russia's offensive and defensive motivations: inherently aggressive and expansionist, trying to enlarge its territory, or defensively, trying to boost its security by maintaining buffer states between itself and NATO members.⁴⁷

Russia's actions in Ukraine did not go entirely unpunished by the West: a number of states, led by the US and EU, implemented three rounds of limited sanctions against Russia, and Russia responded symmetrically. Russia suspended its free-trade deal with Ukraine and banned imports of Ukrainian food.⁴⁸ While inconvenient, it is difficult to assess if these sanctions had much impact on Moscow.⁴⁹ The sanctions were imposed at the same time the price per barrel of oil, a major export and source of revenue for the Russian government, dropped

46. "Five referendums that the West has not taken issue with," *Russia Today*, 14 March 2014, www.rt.com/news/referendums-ukraine-west-relations-782/.

47. The answer depends on which international relations theory best explains the situation. The offensive realist position would argue Russia is defensive, i.e., allow Russia to exert control in the Contention Belt, they will never otherwise move past it. Others would argue such breaking of the international law sets a dangerous precedent. See Mearsheimer, "*Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault*."

48. Umbach, "The energy dimensions."

49. Cory Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*, Congressional Research Service Report, 2017.

significantly.⁵⁰ Some economists have argued that the “twin shocks of sanctions and low oil prices have adversely affected Russia’s economy.”⁵¹ In late 2014, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov assessed the “annual cost of sanctions to its economy at \$40 billion (2 percent of Gross Domestic Product), compared to \$90 billion-\$100 billion (4-5 percent) lost due to lower oil prices.”⁵²

Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated in May of 2017 that the sanctions would remain in place “until Moscow reverses the actions that triggered them.”⁵³ However, harsher sanctions likely remain off the table due to the internal disagreements among the EU members (mainly Germany and Italy) and their fear of considerable economic damage to themselves.⁵⁴ The EU as a whole remains Russia’s largest trading partner. In 2016, 47 percent of Russia’s merchandise exports went to EU member states. As recently as December of 2016, Italy voted against extending the sanctions, and a month later, the Chairman of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Sebastian Kurz, proposed lifting sanctions against Russia in exchange for “any positive

50. Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*.

51. “IMF Staff Concludes Visit to Russian Federation,” 29 November 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/11/29/PR16529-Russian-Federation-IMF-Staff-Concludes-Visit>.

52. *Sanctions over Ukraine: Impact on Russia*, European Parliamentary Research Service Report, 2016.

53. Rex W. Tillerson, “Remarks Following Meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” U.S. Department of State, February 16, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/02/267671.htm>; See also Ambassador Nikki Haley, “Remarks at a U.N. Security Council Briefing on Ukraine,” U.S. Mission to the United Nations, February 2, 2017, <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7668>.

54. From December 2013 to June 2015 the total export loss is 60 billion USD. The EU countries bear 76 percent of all trade loss. See Matthieu Crozet and Julian Hinz, *Collateral Damage: The impact of the Russia sanctions on sanctioning countries’ exports*, Centre d’Études Prospectives et Information’s Internationals Report, Paris, France, 2016; See also “European Union and the Russian Federation, The,” *European Union Diplomatic Service*, 21 November 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation_en.

development” in the Ukrainian crisis.⁵⁵

Table 2: EU Trade with Russia in US Dollars

EU Trade with Russia (Billions of U.S. Dollars)						
Country	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2013
Austria	1.1	0.9	2.3	5.1	5.6	N/A
Belgium	2.7	2.4	6	13.6	18	22.3
Czech Republic	2.7	2.5	3.7	13.1	14	14.6
Denmark	1.1	0.8	1.8	3.6	2.9	4.4
Estonia	1.2	1	1.9	3.8	5.6	5.3
Finland	4.5	3.2	12	26	21	21
France	5.9	6	13	30.5	27.1	24.2
Germany	14.5	15.8	30	84	105	88.1
Hungary	2.8	3	4.3	14	11.6	12
Italy	N/A	5	14.3	29	36.4	41
Netherlands	3.3	3.9	11.4	28.7	36.4	N/A
Poland	4.2	5.4	9.2	29.5	29	36.1
Slovakia	N/A	2.2	3.1	10.4	11	11.6
Spain	2	2.8	5.7	15.3	14.1	14.7
Sweden	1.2	1.1	4	11.2	12.2	10.5
United Kingdom	3.3	4	9.7	20	24	18.7

Source: “EU Trade with Russia (Billions of U.S. Dollars),” Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DatasetCode=HS1988#>.

Nevertheless, Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer maintain the fear of a new Cold War based on Russian actions in Ukraine is not well grounded.⁵⁶ After a brief recession, Russia’s Gross Domestic Product is on its way up, indicating its closer dependence on oil prices than sanctions.⁵⁷ In their opinion, NATO is not likely to interfere on behalf of a non-member, such as Ukraine.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is likely that NATO’s most influential European nations will eventually make peace with Russia and keep their distance to stop the sanctions’ boomerang effect,

55. “The Ukraine Crisis Timeline,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2017, <http://ukraine.csis.org/>.

56. Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 114.

57. Amidst weakening external headwinds, the Russian economy showed encouraging signs of overcoming the recession that began in 2014. See Apurva Sanghi et al., *From Recession to Recovery: Russia Economic Report*, World Bank Group Report, 2017.

58. The prospects of Ukraine becoming a member with its current preexisting condition are close to zero. See Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 144.

and Russia will assuredly reciprocate. After all, economic and diplomatic isolation is not in Russia's best interest.

While the extent of the US involvement in Ukraine is not entirely clear, Washington has admitted to "brokering a deal to transition power in Ukraine."⁵⁹ Since 2014, the US has provided Ukrainian forces with military training, weapons, and financial aid. According to a senior member of the State Department in 2017, the US will continue to provide aid under the pretext of "enhanced defensive capabilities."⁶⁰

Role of Vladimir Putin and the Rise of Nationalism

Geographically positioned between Russia and Poland, Ukraine was certainly influenced by Russia but nonetheless did develop some of its own unique national identity. Generally speaking, support to the West resonates most strongly in central and western Ukraine, while support for Russia predominates in the south and east.⁶¹ Ethnic Russians mainly concentrated in Southern and Eastern Ukraine and make up approximately 17 percent of Ukraine's population.⁶² They have largely been suspicious of Ukrainian nationalism and have supported close ties with Russia. These ties are well demonstrated by a report in 2008 that Putin told President Bush that "Ukraine was not a state: while the western part of the country may belong to Eastern Europe, eastern Ukraine was Russia's."⁶³

59. President Barrack H. Obama, interview by Fareed Zakaria, CNN, 1 February 2015.

60. "US says it will provide Ukraine with 'defensive' aid," 22 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-ukraine-arms/u-s-says-it-will-provide-ukraine-with-defensive-aid-idUSKBN1EH00X>

61. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 114.

62. "World Fact Book: Ukraine," *Central Intelligence Agency*.

63. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.



Figure 7: Ethnic Majorities in Ukraine

Source: Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 23.

Such a patchwork of cultures, however, along with a sizable influx of Russians during the Soviet period created a complex and often polarized ethnic makeup. This cultural mix had created an environment where Ukraine oscillated between pro-Western and pro-Russian leaders.

As an example, Victor Yanukovych's predecessor, Victor Yushchenko, was an avid pro-Western president. Before Yushchenko, Leonid Kuchma was considered to be a pro-Moscow president.⁶⁴ Perhaps the most significant influencers in Ukraine's politics since realizing its independence in 1991 have come from the politically well-connected businessmen, or "oligarchs," who regularly influence the government for their security and profit.⁶⁵ They have never been fully reconciled to Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union and feel that the country belongs in Russia's political and economic orbit.

In November 2013, after prolonged negotiations, Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych rejected a major economic deal with the EU

64. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 28.

65. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

in favor of a \$15 billion Russian counteroffer.⁶⁶ The rebuffed Association Agreement included a free trade pact with the EU that would have aligned Ukraine more closely with Europe, at least in the areas of economics and trade. Yanukovych seemed to have yielded to pressure from Putin, which opposed the Association Agreement and instead opted for closer economic links to Moscow.⁶⁷ Since a sizable portion of the population favored integration with the EU, this decision culminated in massive and violent protests in Kiev, Lviv, Kharkiv, Cherkasy, Ternopil, and other areas across central and western Ukraine.⁶⁸ When government security forces took violent action against the demonstrators, public reaction shifted from protesting against Yanukovych and Putin, to broadly the “government’s lack of respect for the basic human dignity of Ukraine’s citizens.”⁶⁹

In February 2014, Yanukovych's government embarked on its most violent crackdown, resulting in more than 100 persons killed—the regime essentially “sealed its own demise.”⁷⁰ The death toll likely caused the support for the Ukrainian Rada (parliament) to evaporate. Accordingly, in late February 2014, the regime collapsed, and Yanukovych fled to Russia.⁷¹

The Kremlin reacted with great hostility toward the events in Kyiv, referring to them as an illegal coup. Putin was said to have put immense pressure on the acting government to discourage alignment with the West. Then on 1 March 2014, just eight days after Yanukovych fled, Russia's parliament approved Putin's request to use force in Ukraine to

66. John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs Journal*, 2014.

67. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

68. Nadia Diuk, “Euromaidan: Ukraine’s Self-Organizing Revolution,” *World Affairs*, March 2014, www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/euromaidan-ukraine’s-self-organizing-revolution.

69. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

70. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

71. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

protect Russian interests.⁷² Putin quickly ordered Russian forces to seize control in Crimea – a region of vital strategic importance and home to an over 60 percent ethnic Russian population.⁷³ Soon thereafter, Russia annexed Crimea and began deploying “little green men” and other military support to Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, pushing the country towards civil war.⁷⁴

On 16 March 2014, Crimean authorities held a referendum in support of the annexation by Russia. The referendum was reportedly approved by 96 percent of those voting, with a turnout of 83 percent.⁷⁵ Ukraine, the US, the EU, and others denounced the referendum as illegal and claimed it was not held in a free or fair manner. Putin signed a treaty with Crimean leaders on 18 March 2014, officially incorporating Crimea into Russia.

At the same time, pro-Russian armed rebels, aided by Moscow, began to seize government facilities and territory in the eastern regions of the country referred to as the Donbas.⁷⁶ These actions quickly evolved into a full-scale conflict requiring Ukraine to commit its military forces against the separatists.

For Putin, the annexation of Crimea under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians has also given rise to substantial economic and security-related gains. From a security perspective, Moscow has secured access to Sevastopol (home base to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet), which provides the Russian Navy with critical access to the Black Sea, and allows the positioning of high-end anti-aircraft missile systems on

72. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

73. Vincent L. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017; See Frank Umbach, “The energy dimensions of Russia’s annexation of Crimea,” *European Centre for Energy and Resource Security*, 2015.

74. “Ukraine crisis: Timeline,” *BBC*, 13 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

75. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

76. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, xi.

Crimea.⁷⁷ Tremendous economic related benefits have been gained through greater access to major land-based gas lines and the vast offshore energy resources that exist off the coast of Crimea, which is assessed at 4-13 trillion cubic meters of natural gas.⁷⁸ Overall, Russia is estimated to have received 4 percent of Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product through the annexation.⁷⁹

Putin's disinformation and propaganda activities have been on the rise in Ukraine. For instance, the EU's East Stratcom Task Force, which analyzes fake news and other disinformation, showed a parallel between the rise of disinformation targeting Ukraine in the information space and military activity on the ground.⁸⁰ As the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk escalated in December 2016, so did the discrediting of Ukraine in pro-Kremlin media. Ukrainian forces were accused of hitting a civilian car with a tank and of violating Russian airspace over Crimea.⁸¹

Finally, as previously discussed, Putin has leveraged religious ties and consistently put forth a narrative on the strong religious connections between Russia and Ukraine through the Eastern Orthodox Church.⁸² This religious historical sense was witnessed in the innate Russian popular support for the 2014 annexation of Crimea.⁸³

Conclusion

In the case of Ukraine, great power competition for survival through achievement of hegemony manifested itself in Putin's revisionist

77. "The S-400, effective at a range of 400 kilometers, is designed to destroy cruise and medium-range missiles and aircraft and can also be used against ground targets. This missile system poses a significant threat to the Ukrainian air force, which would be needed for the Ukraine government's defense of the city of Mariupol." See Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

78. Umbach, "The energy dimensions of Russia's annexation of Crimea."

79. Umbach, "The energy dimensions of Russia's annexation of Crimea."

80. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

81. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

82. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

83. Morelli, *Ukraine: Current Issues and US Policy*.

ambitions. Moscow seemed to anticipate the likelihood of the US and EU to condemn Russia for breaking the international law and to punish Russia economically, but that the West would not go to war over Ukraine. Cost-benefit analysis still prevails: the US, EU, and NATO do not consider Ukraine to be a vital strategic interest.⁸⁴

In the world of great power politics, however, tremendous uncertainty has contributed to an east-west spiral:

Statesmen see hostility as indicating that the other is out to get them and believe that the best, if not the only way to cope with is threat is with negative sanctions” which drives similar responses from the other side, thus spiraling into worse situations.⁸⁵

Putin's fears are further heightened by the West's desire to influence Russia's near abroad and have contributed to Moscow's willingness to maintain a Belt of Contention buffer zone even through the employment of offensive military capabilities.⁸⁶ The primacy of the external environment over states' internal characteristics manifests itself in the refusal of the international community to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity through military action, failure of economic sanctions, and division of EU members over the necessity of the sanctions.

While the cultural approach explains some dimensions of the current Ukrainian crisis, the realist perspective, over again, provides a

84. Paul Belkin, *NATO: Response to the Crisis in Ukraine and Security Concerns in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 31 July 2014.

85. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

86. While explaining the war in Ukraine, it behooves a strategist to consider Mearsheimer's offensive realism due to the problem's natural alignment to the theory's fundamental assumptions: great power competition for survival through achievement of hegemony and the primacy of the external environment over states' internal characteristics. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 30-32.

better explanation for Russia's actions. The anarchy of the international system explains Russia's partition of sovereign Ukraine with only minor consequences for the aggressor. Regardless of the West's aid, Ukraine does not receive enough support to oppose Russia effectively. As with Georgia in 2008, Ukraine expected help from the democratic world but learned every state is on its own in the anarchic system.



Chapter 4

Belarus Case Study

The Problem

When the “Treaty on the Union between Belarus and Russia” was signed in 1997, the possibilities for cooperation seemed endless.¹ However, ten years later while addressing the lack of progress towards unionization, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated:

the Russian leadership is demanding that we join the Russian Federation.... I don't want to bury the sovereignty and independence of [Belarus].... From all the consultation and discussions, I have understood that we have different approaches and understandings of the building of a union-state.²

While Belarus saw the Union State being “built on the principles of equality,” Russia saw it as a legal vehicle of absorbing Belarus territorially.³ Ten years later, in 2017, the relationship between these countries has deteriorated. Russia uses oil and gas to coerce Belarus, reducing the price for good behavior and raising prices to punish for perceived transgressions.⁴ After decades of supporting the Belarusian leader’s authoritarian regime, state-controlled Russian media has

1. “Press Briefing by the Foreign Minister of Belarus, New York, NY: *United Nations Press*, 2 October 1997, www.un.org/press/en/1997/19971002.belarus.html.

2. Zhenis Kembayev, *Legal Aspects of the Regional Integration Processes in the Post-Soviet Area* (Heidelberg Germany: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg Press, 2009), 119.

3. Kembayev, *Legal Aspects of the Regional Integration*.

4. Vladimir Soldatkin and Andrei Makhovsky, “Russia reminds wayward ally Belarus of its economic muscle,” *Reuters*, 7 July 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus/russia-reminds-wayward-ally-belarus-of-its-economic-muscle-idUSKCN0ZN0E3.

broadcasted some highly critical documentaries, exposing Lukashenko for having political opponents murdered and elections rigged.⁵

Russia's restrictions on Belarusian food imports, its refusal to soften Belarus' debt obligations, and its push to host a Russian air base on the territory of Belarus all indicate a potential future Russian intervention. Since Russia had already possessed and assimilated the entire territory of Belarus from 1795 until the collapse of the Soviet Union, such actions would not be unprecedented.⁶ Thus, in accordance with the Russian Idea of imperialism and messianism, Russia will continue to weaken (economically, politically, and militarily) and possibly attempt to annex its Western neighbor Belarus, which belonged to Russia for centuries and whose population has become substantially Russified.

Background

Despite the animosity between Russians and Belarusians, both along with Ukrainians, come from the same Kievan Rus' tradition. After the decline and disintegration of Kievan Rus' at the end of the eleventh century and a short period of existence as independent principalities, Belarusian lands became a part of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania (The Duchy) at the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁷ Inclusion into The Duchy resulted in an economic, political, and ethnocultural unification of Belarusian territories. Even though The Duchy remained a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-confessional state, ethnic Belarusians or Litvins (as they identified themselves in the past) populated most of The Duchy's territory, and Ruthenian (Old Belarusian)

5. Michael Schwartz, "Russian TV documentary slams Belarus leader," *Seattle Times*, 31 July 2010, www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/russian-tv-documentary-slams-belarus-leader/.

6. David R. Marples et al., "History of Belarus," 13 May 2016, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/place/Belarus.

7. Jakunin, "Interactive Map of Belarusian History."

became the official language for state and academic purposes.⁸ In other words, incorporation into The Duchy led to the formation of the Belarusian national identity and a division between Belarussians and Russians.⁹

As in the case of Ukraine, Russians began reclaiming the Eastern European region as early as the fifteenth century.¹⁰ Belarus remained in the heart of The Duchy and subsequent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which conducted a series of defensive wars against the Russian state.¹¹ After the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia, and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century the entire territory of modern Belarus became a part of Russia.¹² Over the next two centuries, Russia conducted a harsh Russification policy on the territory of Belarus: the Russian government prohibited the use of Belarusian language in public schools, banned Belarusian publications, introduced Cyrillic into any printed Belarusian source, and permitted no documents in Belarusian until 1905.¹³ Such cultural pressure resulted in a number of revolts which the Russian government turned into bloodbaths, such as 1863 Kastus' Kalinowski uprising.¹⁴

Belarus, as the Belarusian People's Republic, first declared independence under German occupation in 1918. Less than a year later, Poland and the newly established Soviet Union partitioned the Belarusian People's Republic as a result of the Polish-Soviet War.¹⁵

8. Jakunin, "Interactive Map of Belarusian History."

9. Marples et al., "History of Belarus."

10. Jakunin, "Interactive Map of Belarusian History."

11. Marples et al., "History of Belarus."

12. Jakunin, "Interactive Map of Belarusian History."

13. Patricia Levy and Michael Spilling, *Cultures of the World: Belarus* (Tarrytown, NY: Michelle Bisson, 1998), 90.

14. Levy, *Cultures of the World: Belarus*.

15. "Treaty of Riga," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 5 March 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Riga.

Polish and Soviet Belarusian territories would be reunited again under the Soviet rule after the German-Soviet occupation of Poland at the beginning of the Second World War, which subsequently wiped out a third of the Belarusian population.¹⁶ Furthermore, most of the industry, including whole production plants had been moved to either Russia or Germany.

During the rule of the Soviet Union, principally from the mid-1950s through the early 1980s, Moscow conducted the policy of Sovietization on the territory of Belarus, according to which the official use of the Belarusian language and other cultural aspects were strictly limited.¹⁷ As Khrushchev put it in 1959: “The sooner we all start speaking Russian, the faster we shall build communism.”¹⁸

Following Gorbachev's initiation of more moderate policies in the mid-1980s, Belarus (the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic at the time) remained relatively more reserved than other Soviet states.¹⁹ However, as a result of continued economic and political deterioration of the state, steady growth in the number of national separatists would soon peak. In 1988, as part of the nationalist revival driven by Gorbachev, the Belarussian Popular Front of approximately ten-thousand citizens quickly formed and promoted their non-communist history and separate language.²⁰ The movement soon began voicing political demands, and in the wake of the failed coup against Gorbachev, the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic changed its name to the

16. Jeremy Bender, “The Astounding Devastation of World War II,” *Business Insider*, 29 May 2014, www.businessinsider.com/percentage-of-countries-who-died-during-wwii-2014-5.

17. Theodore R. Weeks, “Russification / Sovietization,” *European History Online*, 3 December 2010, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/models-and-stereotypes/russification-sovietization>.

18. L. Todd Wood, “Menacing Russia, cowering Belarus — trouble in the Union State,” *The Washington Times*, 16 February 2017, www.washington-times.com/news/2017/feb/16/russia-belarus-mean-trouble-in-the-union-state/.

19. Marples et al., “History of Belarus.”

20. Marples et al., “History of Belarus.”

Republic of Belarus.²¹

Belarus ultimately gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and elected its first and, it seems, eternal president in 1994.²² After his first two terms, Lukashenko held a referendum that eliminated presidential term limits. Even though the referendum did not comply with international standards, Lukashenko ran and won (with the assumed help of voter fraud) in every subsequent election.²³ Regardless of periodic protests accompanied by violence and Lukashenko's human rights violations, until recently the Belarusian population mostly accepted Lukashenko's authoritarian rule.²⁴ Since 2017, however, anti-government protests and rallies became a common occurrence. Despite long-standing repression that has typically pacified the political opposition, the Belarusian population is mobilizing and growing more explosive.²⁵

The main issue that made usually torpid Belarusians pick up anti-government banners and spill into the streets is the plummeting salaries and rapidly increasing poverty. The government previously failed to see the need to modernize major state-owned industries such as metallurgy and mechanical engineering, including tractors and agricultural, cars, machine-tool constructing and the tool industry, instrument making, radio engineering, electrotechnical, electronic production. As a result, these sectors were quickly outmatched on the global market. Complete or partial closings of many plants and factories caused widespread unemployment or underemployment.

21. Marples et al., "History of Belarus."

22. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

23. Wood, "Menacing Russia, cowering Belarus."

24. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

25. Alessandra Prentice, "Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax after Record Protests," *Reuters*, 9 March 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-lukashenko-tax-idUSKBN16G1L1.

Belarus's economy is among the most unreformed in Europe, according to many economic analysts.²⁶ The 2008-2014 period has been especially hard on the citizens of Belarus. Most notably in 2011 and 2013, they suffered an economic crisis due to "rapidly dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and loss of oil revenues." As a result, the government allowed the Belarusian ruble to float freely to stabilize the country's external economic position, but internally this caused a devaluation of the currency by more than 50 percent.²⁷

Analysis and Evaluation

Role of Culture (Russian Mind)

Lukashenko's leadership has in the last decade become detrimental to Moscow's interests.²⁸ His perceived transgressions do not fit into the Russian messianic idea of the Russian World where all Slavic nations and their historical allies (united by Russia) confront Western encroachment and US hegemony. Belarus, with its historical ties to Russia going as far back as Kievan Rus' and most of its population Russified, should be a loyal partner and one of the cornerstones of the Russian World.

Regardless of the existence of a Belarusian language, an overwhelming 96 percent of the population speaks either Russian or "trasianka," which is a mixture of Russian and Belarusian.²⁹ The reason for such loss of national language, and therefore national identity, was succinctly expressed by Russian General Mikhail Muravyov after an 1830 anti-Russian uprising and subsequent closing of the Vilnius

26. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

27. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

28. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

29. "Population classified by knowledge of the Belarusian and Russian languages by region and Minsk City," *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed 3 March 2017, www.belstat.gov.

University (Vilnius was a part of Belarus at the time): “What Russian rifles did not succeed in doing, will be finished off by Russian schools.”³⁰ Public courses have been managed by independent Belarusian academics for decades, but the language has been frowned upon at the state level.³¹ Currently, there exists no Belarusian language university and language lessons in schools are declining. Each year, nearly 85 percent of books published in Belarus are in Russian.³²

Active promoters of Belarusian culture have recently started a national campaign called “Budzma” which organizes language and cultural events across Belarus. While the initiative is well-intentioned, “The state apparatus is still very strong and could smash these initiatives at any moment.”³³ Since Lukashenko’s regime marginalized the Belarusian language even further as an attribute of his political opposition, Belarusian citizens adopted the Russian language and culture as their own.³⁴

Due to its cultural and especially linguistic proximity and the strategic importance as a buffer zone against NATO, Belarus is likely to become a target of rising Russian nationalism in its quest to rebuild the Russian World. So far, Russian involvement has been indirect. However, given Russia’s imperialistic self-expression, it is highly likely Moscow will interfere directly in Belarus to some extent. Moscow seems to operate according to an unwritten rule: once a part of Russia, always a part of Russia. Putin himself openly admits the fusion between Russia and its

30. Jeffrey Gedmin, “High Anxiety in the Baltics: Putin’s Nervous Neighbors,” *The Weekly Standard*, 5 October 2015, www.weeklystandard.com/high-anxiety-in-the-baltics/article/1035834.

31. Katerina Barushka, “After decades of Russian dominance, Belarus begins to reclaim its language,” *The Guardian Weekly*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/28/-sp-russian-belarus-reclaims-language-belarusian>

32. Barushka, “After decades of Russian dominance.”

33. Barushka, “After decades of Russian dominance.”

34. Barushka, “After decades of Russian dominance.”

Western neighbor along the Soviet model was “possible and very desirable.”³⁵

Belarusian political scientist Vladimir Mazkevich asserts, “the Kremlin has never given up its aim to annex Belarus and to expand Russia again.”³⁶ These aspirations are not only of the former *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* officer missing the great Soviet past. Russian political scientist Michail Vinogradov explains a certain amount of nostalgia exists among the Belarussian population for the Russian imperial past. Putin, in line with these yearnings, has reawakened expectations that Russia could expand its borders.³⁷

Putin’s skyrocketing ratings after the annexation of Crimea and his confrontation with the West remain the testimony of that nostalgia. Even Russia’s economic difficulties due to the imposed sanctions did not diminish his popularity in Russia.³⁸ Pro-government propaganda on state-owned media undoubtedly helped solidify public opinion. However, one should admit a rising Russia (leadership and common people alike) yearns once again for the vastness of its empire and greatness of its influence as well as for the special messianic purpose that would prevent it from being just another follower of the West. It would never step over its pride for economic benefits.

35. Markian Ostaptschuk and Viacheslav Yurin, “Belarus rejects Putin's call for unification with Russia,” *Deutsche Welle Akademie*, 8 April 2011, www.dw.com/en/belarus-rejects-putins-call-for-unification-with-russia/a-15295158.

36. Ostaptschuk and Yurin, “Belarus rejects Putin's call.”

37. Ostaptschuk and Yurin, “Belarus rejects Putin's call.”

38. Michael Birnbaum, “How to understand Putin’s jaw-droppingly high approval ratings,” *Washington Post*, 6 March 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/how-to-understand-putins-jaw-droppingly-high-approval-ratings/2016/03/05/17f5d8f2-d5ba-11e5-a65b587e721fb231_story.html?utm_term=.2c8b37d6b330.

Role of the West

As identified in the previous chapter on Ukraine, the very appearance of warming relations between Belarus and the West has forced Russia to exert political and economic pressure to maintain its geopolitical goals.³⁹ Culture aside, from a purely pragmatic point of view, Belarus has a great strategic significance as a buffer zone between the West and Russia. In Moscow's view, Belarusian leadership is not protecting Russian interests in that respect either.⁴⁰

As a result of slowly warming relations between Belarus and the West and to retaliate against Moscow's pressures, Lukashenko implemented a visa-free entrance and five-day stay (the length of stay is too short to attract tourists) for citizens of 80-countries, including the US and the EU.⁴¹ In the face of Moscow's retaliatory sanctions, Russia is worried forbidden goods may enter the country through Belarus in the absence of secure borders. What is even more important, any foreign visitor can enter Russia through Belarus without the knowledge of authorities.⁴² In response to the Belarusian visa-free entrance policy, instead of building the Union State, Russia is building borders with Belarus.

One of the most significant Russian military exercises aimed at countering NATO, Zapad, took place in Belarus in September 2017.⁴³ Zapad is a recurring exercise scheduled every four years and takes place across western Russia, including Kaliningrad, as well as in Belarus. Since 2008, Russia has used its strategic and large-scale exercises to

39. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

40. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

41. Dzianis Melyantsou, "Belarus-EU Relations: Normalization 2.0," in *Belarusian Foreign Policy 360*, ed. Andis Kudors (Riga, Latvia: University of Latvia Press, 2017), 55.

42. Melyantsou, "Belarus-EU Relations: Normalization 2.0," 55.

43. Andrius Sytas, "Baltic states seek more NATO help ahead of Russian exercise." *Reuters*, 9 February 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-baltic-nato-russia-idUSKBN15O2HZ.

refine its military capabilities, undermine regional stability and peace, and – twice, first in Georgia and then Ukraine – to mask impending aggression.⁴⁴

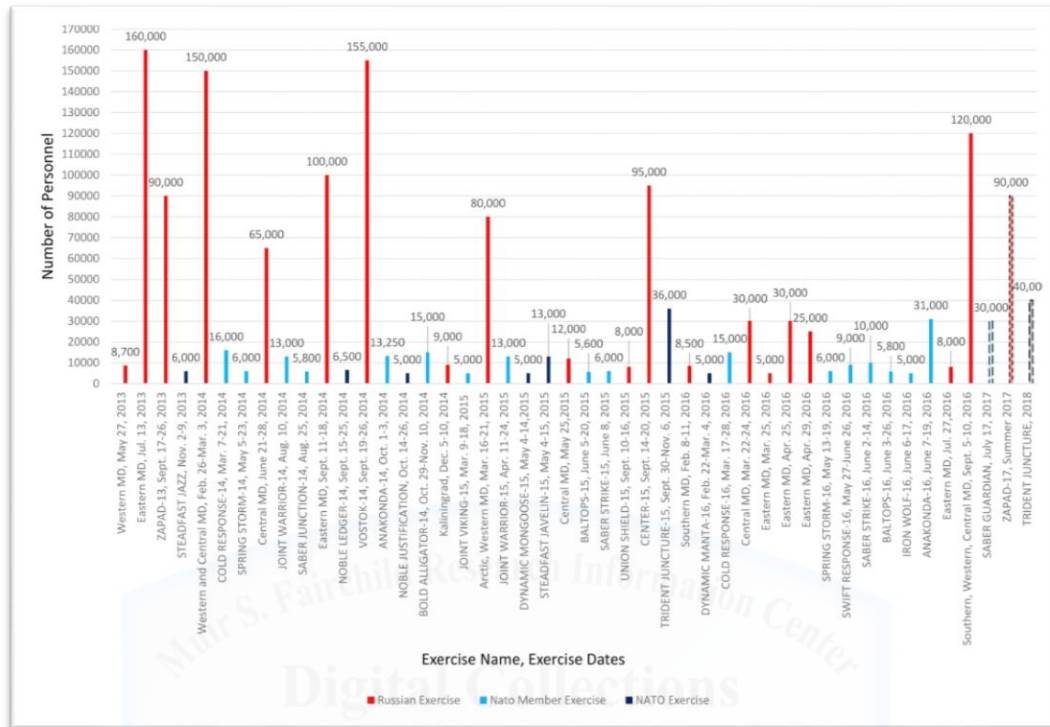


Figure 8: NATO and Russia's Strategic Exercises.

Source: Arseni Sivitski, "Why does joint Russian-Belarusian military exercise Zapad-2017 cause concern?" RaamOprusland, <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/militair-beleid/691-why-does-joint-russian-belarusian-military-exercise-zapad-2017-cause-concern>.

Zapad 2017 was the latest iteration of such exercises. It is estimated that some 70,000-100,000 troops, 70 aircraft, 680 pieces of military equipment, including 250 tanks, and 200 rocket and artillery systems participated, which is a far more significant number than Zapad 2013.⁴⁵ The reported number of participating forces in Belarus

44. "Zapad 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security," *NATO Review*, 14 December 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/Also-in-2017/zapad-2017-and-euro-atlantic-security-military-exercise-strategic-russia/EN/index.htm>

45. Cory Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*, Congressional Research Service Report, 2017.

coincidentally fell just short of the 13,000-troop threshold to require a mandated invitation of foreign observers under the Vienna Document.⁴⁶

As the ten-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Georgia approaches, the origins of Russia's revived programme of annual strategic exercises in that aggression should be recalled. This anniversary should also cause reflection on Russia's use of a snap exercise to mask troop movements at the start of the Ukraine crisis, and the way that Russia's strategic exercises enabled power projection into Syria. Russian forces continue to operate in both Ukraine and Syria, proving wrong the many foreign analysts who predicted after the Syrian intervention that Russia would be unable to sustain simultaneous operations. Russia has not only managed to sustain both operations, but to continue its extensive exercise programme.⁴⁷

After the exercise concluded, a contingent of Russian military forces stayed in Belarus to counter the increased NATO presence in Russia's near abroad. However, the current presence of Russian forces in Belarus would likely influence the situation in the event of a coup initiated by the impoverished Belarusian population.⁴⁸ In the most likely turn of events, if a coup takes place, the Russian military could seize power in Belarus to prevent a pro-Western candidate from the opposition replacing Lukashenko. The Belarusian political opposition's anti-Russian sentiments would likely justify in the Kremlin's view, as in the case of Ukraine, the military intervention to protect the Russian or pro-Russian population.

If Belarus decided to pursue joining the EU, it could find itself quickly becoming a part of Russian territory. Russia's cultural arguments would work well in Belarus – a state that was once part of Russia for centuries and became culturally close and often ethnically

46. "Zapad 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security," *NATO Review*.

47. "Zapad 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security," *NATO Review*.

48. Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, "Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 47, no. 5 (October 2003).

indistinguishable. Once again, the West is not likely to start a war with Russia over Belarus, as was the case with Ukraine.⁴⁹

Role of Vladimir Putin and the rise of nationalism

In what appears to be an attempt to oust Lukashenko and replace him with a leader more loyal to Moscow, Putin applies political, economic, and even military pressure on Belarus. In the political realm, discrediting Lukashenko in the Russian media, consumed widely by Belarusians, is designed to reduce his popularity and public support.⁵⁰ Besides condemning news reports and articles, Russian state-owned media produced a series of documentaries about the Belarusian leader that portrays him as an insane tyrant fond of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.⁵¹ In the movies, he orders political murders, persecutes and eliminates political opposition, falsifies elections, all while keeping his country in the Soviet time warp.⁵²

Assessing the basis of these accusations is beyond the purpose of this thesis, but many legitimate sources confirm at least some of them, such as election tampering.⁵³ However, Russia's agenda runs deeper than truth-seeking – it targets Lukashenko at his home base, mobilizing the Belarusian population against him.

In addition, economic pressure is applied with the same goal – making the impoverished and desperate Belarusian population rise against Lukashenko. Since the fallout between Putin and Lukashenko,

49. Menon and Rumor, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 141.

50. Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*.

51. 26 percent of Belarusians view Stalin favorably as opposed to 58 percent in Russia. See David Masci, "In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union and positive feelings about Stalin," *Pew Research Center*, 29 June 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/; See also Schwirtz, "Russian TV documentary."

52. Schwirtz, "Russian TV documentary."

53. Wood, "Menacing Russia, cowering Belarus."

Belarusian oil refineries, the country's main source of revenue, are not working at full capacity. They are stranded by Russia's refusal to sell enough crude oil at a low enough price until Belarus pays off its \$425 million debt.⁵⁴ Russia has hiked crude oil and gas prices and reduced the amount of crude oil to be processed and resold by Belarusian refineries for profit.⁵⁵ The lack of oil to refine and resell has caused profit losses for the already damaged Belarusian economy. Even though Russia promised to raise the quota if Belarus pays off its significant debt, Moscow knows Belarus cannot afford it.⁵⁶ Alongside refusing Belarusian food imports, this deals a massive blow to the Belarusian economy. Russia, the main consumer of Belarusian agricultural products, severely restricted food imports from Belarus due to counter-sanctions against the West.⁵⁷ The Belarusian population, desperate for a better life, has begun to revolt against the existing government.⁵⁸

With Russia turning its back on Lukashenko, the Belarusian president struggles to cover the holes in the country's budget by implementing new taxes and cutting social benefits. In the year 2017, examples include reducing pensions of employed retirees and implementing the "parasite tax," applied to those who are neither formally employed nor registered as officially unemployed.⁵⁹ Living standards dropped for many Belarusians, who depend on imports, which are now more expensive.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the average monthly salary has fallen from an all-time high of \$630 in mid-2014 to \$380 as of the start

54. Vadzim Smok, "Does Belarus Stand a Chance in a New Oil War with Russia?" *Belarus Digest*, 13 January 2017.

55. Soldatkin, "Russia reminds wayward ally."

56. Vadzim Smok, "Does Belarus Stand a Chance."

57. *Russia Bans Transit of Embargoed Goods through Belarus*, USDA Foreign Agricultural Service Report. Washington, DC: USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, 2014.

58. Prentice, "Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax."

59. Prentice, "Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax."

60. Prentice, "Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax."

of 2017—resulting in increased popular unrest and dissatisfaction for the economic policies.⁶¹

Before 2010, Russia buttressed the Belarusian economy, but the relationship is growing progressively bitter. Belarus fell from Russia's good graces when it betrayed Moscow on many fronts: it fought against complete integration within the Union State, refused to host a Russian air base, opposed the annexation of Ukraine, did not recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and refused to implement sanctions against the West in the spirit of the brotherhood with Russia.⁶² Moreover, just when Russia needed the alliance in its recent confrontation with the West, Belarus and the West warmed relations. In 2016, the EU lifted sanctions imposed on Belarus since 2010 and sent a delegation of economic officials to Minsk to discuss increasing financial and economic cooperation.⁶³

Belarus still has many bilateral agreements with Russia in the security and economic spheres. However, Minsk also has established economic ties to Europe and Lukashenko periodically criticizes Russia for what he sees as unfair bilateral trading practices and strong-arm diplomacy.⁶⁴ Now that Russia itself is suffering the consequences of the Western-imposed sanctions, the “oil in exchange for kisses” model for Russia-Belarus relations does not work anymore.⁶⁵

Moscow wants to see actions, not promises. The chances for reconciliation between Lukashenko and Moscow appears slim. Russia

61. Prentice, “Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax.”

62. Sabra Ayres, “In Belarus a Rising Fear: Will we be the next Ukraine,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 2017, www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-belarus-russia-relations-20170308-story.html.

63. “Belarus Warms Ties with the West,” *Stratfor Worldview*, 6 April 2016, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/belarus-warms-ties-west>.

64. Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*.

65. Sabra Ayres, “In Belarus a Rising Fear: Will we be the next Ukraine,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 2017, www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-belarus-russia-relations-20170308-story.html.

has already applied political and economic pressure and destabilized domestic politics in Belarus. At the same time, the West is warming up to Belarus, but too slowly. Western nations are also dissatisfied with Lukashenko's leadership, human rights violations, election rigging, and a government-controlled economy.⁶⁶ Lukashenko is in a difficult situation for political survival. Russia wants to replace him with a reliable pro-Russian candidate who will be more cooperative and receptive to the Russian Idea. The West would prefer a more progressive pro-Western candidate who would take Belarus on the path to economic, political, and social reforms. Since neither Russia nor the West buttresses Lukashenko, it is probable his regime will eventually succumb to domestic pressure, as protests have intensified over time.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Russian messianic and imperialistic aspirations appear to be zeroing in on Belarus. With its historical and cultural ties to Russia and isolation from the West, Belarus is perceived as a cornerstone of the Russian World – a strategically important region in Russia's confrontation with the West. Until recently, Russia has buttressed the Belarusian economy (and its leadership) with cheap oil and gas in return for Belarus' loyalty. However, due to the recent lack of control over the Belarusian president, Russia is employing political, economic, and military pressure to push the Belarusian population to a coup.⁶⁸ With Lukashenko possibly ousted and in the absence of any credible pro-Russian candidate to replace him, Russia may perhaps employ its

66. Steven Woehrel, *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 12 February 2013.

67. Alessandra Prentice, "Belarus Suspends 'Parasite' Tax after Record Protests," *Reuters*, 9 March 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-lukashenko-tax-idUSKBN16G1L1.

68. Soldatkin, "Russia reminds wayward ally."

military, which would be present in the country due to a large-scale military exercise, to seize and hold power.

As it did in Ukraine, Russia can explain its actions by its sacred messianic duty to protect Russians and Russia sympathizers in Belarus against the pro-Western nationalist political opposition. Due to the prominent level of Russification in the country, the annexation to Russia may be within reach. The consequences of Russian activity in Belarus will undoubtedly further deteriorate relations with the West and test NATO's resolve in containing Russia's militarization of the region.



Chapter 5

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

*We have taken on ourselves a responsibility for the
fate of Eastern Europe incommensurable
with our present level of spiritual development
and our ability to understand European needs and wants.*
—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1947

This thesis identifies three causal factors for Russian aggression against countries that were previously part of the former Soviet Union:

- a. Russia's *cultural propensity toward universalism and messianism* (Russian Idea);
- b. On the defensive side: *worsening relations with the West*, especially the US, and Russia's desire to check NATO expansion;
- c. On the offensive side: the *rise of Russian nationalism* bolstered by Putin's propaganda campaign and inflated oil prices of 2004-2008.

As the previous analysis illustrates, these variables are distinct enough to be differentiated but are intertwined and sometimes difficult to distinguish. Russia's cultural propensities for messianism, universalism, opposition to the West, and suffering make Russians particularly vulnerable to nationalistic propaganda under the conditions of crisis. The rise of nationalism exacerbates the existing Russia-West differences and introduces mutual distrust and irrational elements of fear and hatred.

The role of the West in Russian aggression lies in its failure to foretell the consequences of its policies. In international relations from time to time, the opportunity arises to either turn an enemy into a partner or an even more embittered rival. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the US had a formidable opportunity to turn Russia into its ally, but cooperative initiatives such as the "Joint

Declaration for Peace,” and the “Russian Reset” have fallen short of lasting gains. The opportunity was missed in the 1990s and 2000s due to a poor understanding of the Russian culture and how Russians perceive its place among nations. By treating Russia as disenfranchised, defeated, and weak, the US provided an opportunistic Vladimir Putin the very material to reawaken nationalistic sentiments in the country.

Whether the current Russian regime is deeply nationalistic, as it presents itself to its citizens, or leaders simply pursue their interests under the guise of nationalism, is less important. The lesson learned is the nationalistic message resonates with the Russian population and caused widespread support for the existing hostility between the US and Russia. This escalation of mutual aggravation is not beneficial for the US. Moreover, the rise of nationalism in Russia will not be easy to counter, as it has been cultivated for decades and will likely take as long to reverse. Putin’s government will continue to invest in nationalistic propaganda, given its dominance over the most popular national media outlets, including those in Eastern Europe. Drawing less of a profit from the sale of Russia’s energy resources may curb nationalistic moods, thus continued sanctions should be considered. The problem, however, is that the sanctions affect European allies as much as they do Russia.

When it comes to the consequences of Russian aggression in its immediate neighborhood, a particular pattern exists. Given its history of wars in Chechnya and Georgia, Russia is often satisfied with establishing spheres of influence in nominally independent but de facto Russian territories. The Ukrainian case study demonstrates the high probability of Russia maintaining a frozen conflict and a similar sphere of influence in eastern Ukraine. Regardless of the September 2014 ceasefire agreement, low-intensity fighting is taking place and will likely continue into the future. Such a frozen conflict will provide Russia with a significant source of leverage for intervening in Ukrainian domestic affairs. Unofficially, Russia is likely to create a protectorate on the

territory of eastern Ukraine, explaining it by the perceived likelihood of anti-Russian ethnic cleansing. Even though a direct Russian military invasion cannot be excluded, Russia will most likely try to avoid the associated political and economic crises through messaging and propaganda rather than military action.

The Belarus case study demonstrates that based on close cultural ties and Russia's concerns over warming relations between Belarus and the West, conceivably, Russia would prefer to use soft power and establish a pro-Russian regime in Belarus that would show progress toward the Union State and possibly join as a Western province. If the current Belarusian president chooses not to accommodate, Moscow will likely create favorable conditions for his replacement. In the face of Lukashenko's departure if current conditions persist, Russia must confront a big problem: after a prolonged period of Lukashenko's elimination of political competition, there is no prominent or credible pro-Russian candidate to be found in Belarus.

The majority of Belarusian political opposition is oriented toward Belarussian nationalism rather than Russian nationalism with plans of moving the country toward the renaissance of the Belarusian language, culture, and the heritage of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. If Russia fails to find a reliable candidate to assist in consolidating power, military intervention becomes more likely. With a more widespread physical presence in the country, Moscow could eventually stage a Crimea-style referendum on the voluntary annexation of Belarus to the Russian Federation. Given the current level of Russification in Belarus, along with the promise of economic recovery that would come with virtually free oil and gas, Russia can control the narrative and institute political change.

The findings from the case study analysis of these three variables indicate that it is likely Russia will perpetuate the frozen conflict in Ukraine and continue to leverage its power in Belarus indefinitely. It

would be most beneficial for these two countries to find a middle ground between Russia and the EU where they do not violate Russia's interests but, nonetheless, find a meaningful way to engage with the West.

Policy Implications

Of late, countless members of Congress and other policymakers have paid particular attention to Russia's increasingly forceful foreign policy. Russian actions in the near abroad, intervention in Syria, and interference in political processes in Europe and the US are sources of great concern for US national security.¹ Whether or not Russia seeks a renewed competition with the West similar to the Cold War remains unclear, but relations have rapidly deteriorated in recent years.

Many scholars and policymakers welcome improved US-Russian relations. Former US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter noted in 2016 that "Russia is simply too big, too powerful and potentially too dangerous to be ignored or fully isolated."² In the past, the West failed to take into account Russia's cultural propensities. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was expected to take its place in the liberal-based international system, led by the US. This led to the unintended consequences of a rise in Russian nationalism and heightened animosity between the countries. Although the US will likely continue to outperform Russia economically and militarily, the US risks getting involved in a downward spiral of containing Russia at all costs.

Political scientist John Mearsheimer insists that the events following the Cold War do in fact offer a valuable lesson. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he observes, the European region no longer

1. Cory Welt, *Russia: Background and US Interests*, Congressional Research Service Report, 2017.

2. Ash Carter, "A Strong and Balanced Approach to Russia," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 58, no. 6 (December 2016), 61.

had a dominating power – a potential hegemon.³ The US should have reduced its military presence in the region and cultivated amicable relations with Russia. Pursuing this strategy would provide benefits to the US by turning European security to the Europeans. Instead, the US invested in NATO expansion, which overlooked Russian security interests and helped to ignite the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. What is more critical, according to Mearsheimer, is that it drove Moscow and China closer risking the creation of their strategic alliance.⁴

In 2018, predictions of the China-Russia strategic partnership are unfolding ever more certain. In his most recent visit in April 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said relations between two countries were at “the best level in history.” Both China and Russia assert the viability of an alternative world order, which can stand up to the United States. The two countries support one another’s interests at the United Nations. For example, China voiced few objections to Putin's annexation of Crimea, they work closely on the North Korean proliferation crisis, and China has not been critical of Russia's role in Syria. China also sides with Russia on allegations of Russian involvement in the Skripal poisoning in the UK.⁵ In a joint statement, Russian and Chinese leaders agree that “negative factors affecting global stability are increasing around the world; cold war mentality and hegemony still exist,” and they are determined to oppose it.⁶

Taking these experiences into account, the US should reinvent the Russia strategy while considering past mistakes. Russia speaks the language of strength, so one should not pacify Russia on areas of vital

3. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2016.

4. Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing.”

5. Ben Westcott, “China says relations with Russia at best level in history,” *CNN*, 6 April 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/04/06/asia/russia-china-relations-us-intl/index.html.

6. Westcott, “China says relations with Russia at best level in history.”

strategic interests, but the US should consider unique strategies under the current geopolitical context. Based on President Donald Trump's prevailing "America First Foreign Policy," the US has the opportunity to adopt a policy of offshore balancing against Russia. The essence of the idea is to stay offshore (away from other continents) as long as possible while recognizing that it is sometimes necessary to come onshore. It does not "imply intervention will never be necessary," rather that it will be occasional and limited to specific scenarios.⁷

Although Washington could provide assistance to allies and pledge to support them if they were in danger of being conquered, it should refrain from deploying large numbers of U.S. forces abroad. It may occasionally make sense to keep certain assets overseas, such as small military contingents, intelligence-gathering facilities, or prepositioned equipment, but in general, Washington should pass the buck to regional powers, as they have a far greater interest in preventing any state from dominating them. If those powers cannot contain a potential hegemon on their own, however, the United States must help get the job done, deploying enough firepower to the region to shift the balance in its favor.⁸

According to Mearsheimer and Walt, an offshore balancer is a "distant hegemon acting to deal with a threatening state in a different region."⁹ The US could encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary.¹⁰ By pursuing

7. Emma Ashford argues the 1990 Iraq invasion of Kuwait is a good example of where offshore balancing could have worked well. The US should have returned to its role as an offshore balancer and significantly reduced its presence in the Middle East. See Emma Ashford, "Unbalanced Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 2018), 127-148.

8. Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing."

9. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014), 42; See also Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing."

10. This lack of capability is mainly the result of a decrease in defense investment by the members of NATO since the end of the Cold War and a lack of political will to use military capability when and where it is needed. NATO's

such a strategy, the US would be able to cede ambitious efforts to remake other societies and converge on preserving US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and better able to counter multiple potential challengers across the globe.¹¹

Consequently, the US should consider downsizing its military presence in Europe and force Western European countries to counterbalance Russia, stepping in only when absolutely necessary.¹² At its height in 1953, the US had approximately 450,000 troops in Europe operating across 1,200 sites.¹³ During the early 1990s, both in response to a perceived reduction in the threat from Russia and as part of the asserted peace dividend following the end of the Cold War, US troop numbers in Europe dropped considerably. However, as “indispensable nation,” the US remained in charge of NATO, expanding it without any clear provocation from the Russian side.¹⁴ As of 2017, approximately 65,000 US troops were permanently based in Europe across 34 major bases, and 350 installations.¹⁵ Furthermore, the US spent over \$3.7 billion on security expenditures to support the European Reassurance Initiative in Fiscal Year 2017.¹⁶

Shifting to offshore balancing, coupled with a rejection of attempts to shape regional states’ domestic politics, would allow the US to take a

founding document, specifically Article 3, states that members, at a minimum, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack. Only a handful of NATO members are meeting this commitment. In 2015, five of 28 NATO member states (Estonia, Greece, Poland, the US, and the U.K.) spent the required 2 percent of GDP on defense. See “2017 Index of US Military Strength,” *Heritage.Org*.

11. Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing.”

12. “2017 Index of US Military Strength,” *Heritage.Org*.

13. “2017 Index of US Military Strength,” *Heritage.Org*.

14. Walter Isaacson, “Madeleine’s War,” *Time Magazine*, 17 May 1999, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054293,00.html>

15. General Philip Breedlove, Commander, U.S. Forces Europe, statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, February 25, 2015, p. 3, <http://www.eucom.mil/mission/background/posture-statement> (accessed March 19, 2015)

16. “2017 Index of US Military Strength,” *Heritage.Org*.

more consistent approach to regional politics. This strategy would alleviate US policymakers' need to "pick a side" in regional disputes and drive European states to take on a more significant role.¹⁷ After all, they are the most interested parties to Russia containment.

In a way that seemed inconceivable to Western Europeans before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, it is now clear that NATO's Eastern European members face legitimate security concerns: For those NATO members that lived under the iron fist of the Warsaw Pact or that were absorbed into the Soviet Union after World War II, Russia's bellicose behavior is seen as a threat to their existence.¹⁸

In addition, this hands-off unless necessary approach is more likely to minimize inflammatory rhetoric of an implicit war waged by the US against Russia. This strategy does not imply the US should disengage diplomatically or economically from Europe. Indeed, US policymakers may well find that our diplomatic influence on difficult issues improves when it is less entangled.¹⁹ Since Moscow views western European countries as being bullied by the US into opposing Russia, more progress can be made through a peaceful process if the US steps back. An international system where the dominant hegemon takes a secondary role would require a strong European presence to counter-balance. By maintaining the regional balance of power in Europe whereby the most powerful state outside of the US—for now, Russia—remains too worried about its neighbors to roam into the Western Hemisphere.

17. Ashford, "Unbalanced Rethinking America's Commitment."

18. "2017 Index of US Military Strength," *Heritage.Org*.

19. Ashford, "Unbalanced Rethinking America's Commitment."

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