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RUSSIAN DOCTRINE INHERITS SOVIET TRADITIONS OF COORDINATED USE OF DIFFERENT INSTRUMENTS

*Interview with Dr Oleksandr Lytvynenko,
Director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies*

How would you describe Russia's status and its grand strategy in current world politics?

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the hegemon of the Socialist bloc and the second global superpower, had become a shock for Russian elites. The Russian Federation went a long way to recover from that shock and learn a new role.

In the first half of the 1990s, Russia was willing to integrate with the West by adopting Western values and norms. That period coincided with the crisis in Russian economy and a huge need for Western economic assistance. The final rejection of those hopes and the desire to get rid of Western, mostly American, influence were marked by the appointment of Y. Primakov as the Russian minister of foreign affairs.

In 1998-2006, Russia attempted to create a foreign policy identity of its own, separated from the West and built upon succession to the USSR. Those attempts resulted in a period of efforts aimed at integration with the West but with a certain degree of autonomy in strategy and values. Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 marked a general understanding by Russian leadership that those attempts failed. The emotions of that speech are real.

Ever since, the goals of Russia's policy have remained steady and can be shortly described as enhancement of Russia's

security and position as one of the centres of the modern world.

Russia's perception is built upon the doctrine of multipolarity, which is based on a traditional view of the world as being divided into spheres of influence of great powers, which make joint decisions about the future.

Russia insists on preserving the architecture of the world order that arose after World War II. In other words, the Yalta-Potsdam system should be adapted to current realities, while Russia must be one of the great powers.

Implementation of Russia's grand strategy in the recent 15 years brought about mixed results. On the one hand, many international actors recognise Russia as a great power. The 2017 US National Security Strategy labels both Russia and China as US competitors, as well as indirectly recognises Russia as a great power.

On the other hand, Russia has ruined relations with the US and considerably worsened interaction with the EU and its member states. Russia's aggressive policy has de facto undermined the post-Soviet space and shaped anti-Russian positioning of Ukraine's foreign policy; it has also led to a growing repudiation of Russia in the world.

An important direction of Russia's grand strategy is securing control over the territory of the former USSR. That control is perceived as a prerequisite of Russia's security.

Russia's problem as an empire centre is that it cannot effectively manage the imperial space. During the 1990s and 2000s, Russia has been hesitating between a "pragmatic business" approach and attempts to buy the elites of the former Soviet republics. These hesitations only provoke rejection and thus reinforce resentment toward Russia. Generally speaking, Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space is rather irrational and can be evaluated as losing.

Is Russia a Rising or a Declining Power?

Russia is considered by its leadership as a successor to the Russian Empire and the USSR. In general, political, expert, media, and academic circles in many countries share this view. In this dimension, Russia is seen as an imperial state in decline. Such a perception is well grounded.



Russia has been hesitating between a "pragmatic business" approach and attempts to buy the elites of the former Soviet republics. These hesitations only provoke rejection and thus reinforce resentment toward Russia

One may just have a look at the map of Europe in 1989 and 2000. The comparison demonstrates a radical reduction of Russia's zone of influence. In 1989, the Soviet Army was stationed in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, while today Russian troops are occupying Crimea and certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, and are present in the Transnistrian region of Moldova, as well as in Belarus and Armenia.

Russia's military potential in 2020, first and foremost in land forces, is considerably

smaller than that of the Soviet Union in 1988. At the same time, Russia still keeps parity with the US in strategic nuclear weapons. After 2014, Russia has in a way re-established its power projection capabilities, however, on a limited scale.

Russia's share in the world's economy is also telling. In 1970, Soviet GDP accounted for over 9% of world economy, while in 1988 it was just about 7.5%. To put it more precisely, in 1988 the GDP of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was 2.91% of the world's GDP. By 2020, Russia's share declined to about 2%; however, in 2013, it was about 2.97%. All figures are in nominal dollars according to the World Bank data.

Technological lag between Russia and Western countries, as well as China and other countries of East Asia, has increased. At the same time, in the past decade, the Russian leadership has been putting considerable efforts into renewing the country's technological potential, no matter how controversial that process is.

A rather unexpected effect of the Western sanctions since 2014 is also worth mentioning. Along with damaging Russian economy, the sanctions enhanced replacement of imports and partial repatriation of elites, and consolidated Russian society against the West.

The fall of communism has not been compensated by the ideology of the "Russian World". It is not appealing enough, even in the core space of the former Russian Empire/Soviet Union. There is no point to even mention the potential of the "Russian World" to enrol supporters from other countries, like the United Kingdom, France, or the US.

In the late 2010s, Russia was attempting to re-establish its influence in traditional zones of the Soviet presence, namely in the Middle East, Balkans, Central America, territory

of the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. The results have been controversial. Compared to the influence and capabilities of the USSR in the 1980s, Russia's current positions are in a long-term decline.

On the other hand, if Russia is compared to the RSFSR and to itself in the past, but internally, one may say that the situation has not worsened significantly. In some regards, such as living standards, economic and political freedoms, it even improved significantly. Thus, it may be concluded that the current stance in Russia is defined by a number of mixed trends. That may mean that Russia finds itself in a period of post-imperial transformation.

Historical examples of Western European countries (1950-1980s) and Turkey (1920-1990s) illustrate that such a period is always difficult and controversial. It is marked by a recurrence of imperial policies. In two generations' lifetime, one may expect considerable changes in Russia, both toward liberalisation and strengthening of authoritarian regime.

The possibility of Russia's losing several regions should not be ruled out completely, although the Chechen experience proves such a possibility to be rather low. For a certain period, Russia will keep the potential for both self-protection and power projection. Periods of temporary weakening of Russia, or even catastrophic scenarios with unpredictable outcomes for the world and, most of all, neighbouring states, are not to be excluded either.

What is the main instrument of Russia's foreign policy?

The choice of foreign policy instruments is determined by Russia's strengths and weaknesses. Thus, its most important instruments are energy resources, in particular natural gas supplies, as well as the technological potential of Rosatom, though

to a considerably lesser extent. These instruments are mentioned in Russia's Energy Strategy until 2035. Strategic energy projects are telling, first of all natural gas flows.



The fall of communism has not been compensated by the ideology of the "Russian World".

It is not appealing enough, even in the core space of the former Russian Empire/Soviet Union. There is no point to even mention the potential of the "Russian World" to enrol supporters from other countries, like the United Kingdom, France, or the US.

According to the IMF estimates, Russian economy is currently placed 11th in the world by the GDP rate. At the same time, commodities dominate Russian export, while the technological level of the economy remains low. By the size of the economy, Russia is behind not only the US, the EU, and China but also Japan, India, Canada, and Brazil. Russia's huge resources are not only used inefficiently; they also limit incentives for intensive economic development. That significantly narrows Russia's capabilities and prioritises military instruments in the country's grand strategy.

Therefore, a considerable role is played by military force. Military reform in the late 2000s, launched after the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, largely increased the potential of Russian military forces. Large-scale rearmament started. The nuclear triad was modernised. Capabilities of ground forces and the air force are gradually increasing. Renovation of naval forces is underway. Military training has been intensified, and the doctrinal framework of using Russian military forces has been reformulated. Russia regained capabilities to project its

power outside own territory. Strengths and weaknesses of this instrument have been revealed during military operations against Ukraine (since 2014), in Syria, and in Libya.

Russia inherited foreign policy service and special service from the USSR, as well as the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Main Directorate of the General Staff (formerly the Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU). Educational and scientific infrastructure for foreign policy support created in the USSR has also been preserved, although in a smaller volume.



Activities of the special service, restarted in the 2000s, are currently aimed not only at gathering sensitive information but also at generating influence, inter alia through shaping lobby groups loyal to Russia, for instance through corrupting political and intellectual elites

Russia kept the USSR's seat on the UN Security Council. After 1991, Moscow has been attempting in one way or another to re-establish the system of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance/Warsaw Pact in the form of CIS/CSTO, as well as the Single Economic Space, Customs Union, and Eurasian Economic Union.

Activities of the special service, restarted in the 2000s, are currently aimed not only at gathering sensitive information but also at generating influence, inter alia through shaping lobby groups loyal to Russia, for instance through corrupting political and intellectual elites.

In the past 10-15 years, Russia has made large investments in modern informational instruments, both hard

and soft – in other words, informational-psychological, propaganda, and cyber instruments. The Soviet system of “inoveshaniye” has been reinstalled on a new technological level and includes the TV channel RT and news network *Sputnik*, information agency *RIA Novosti*, and alike. A system of satellite and internet broadcasting has been created.

Media under state control, first of all television, that are aimed at the Russian audience are also used to influence Russian-speaking groups abroad. A system of propaganda in social networks and cyber space in general is operational. It encompasses special service units as well as private structures.

Capabilities of Russia's technical intelligence service, created during the Soviet times, have been in the recent 30 years converted into a system of cyber war. Publications of recent years witness a special role of the Main Directorate of the General Staff in the process. No less important is the participation of private and even criminal structures in Russia's activities in cyber space. According to information in the media, Russian special services enrol hacker groups in their operations.

A broad use of partnerships between state and private structures in security and military areas has become an important innovation of the recent decades. Many tasks traditionally attributed to the special service and military are transferred to private structures. In particular, an active use of private military companies can be mentioned. The activity of PMC Wagner, broadly reported in the media, is an example. The company's units took part in military operations in eastern Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and other African states, as well as in Venezuela.

It is impossible to omit the role of Russian oligarchs in both financing and arranging important foreign policy initiatives. The

special role of the Russian businessman Malofeev in the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, as well as the role of Prigozhin in establishing structures for promoting Russia's propaganda in social networks, should be mentioned. Prigozhin is also linked to PMC Wagner.

An important feature of how Russian instruments of foreign policy are used is their coordination and cohesion. Russia's strategic operations in Syria, where efforts of expeditionary forces are supported with active foreign policy and informational activity, are highly illustrative. That includes the establishment of Astana format, intensive mediation efforts in Syria, as well as contacts with major external actors, such as the US and Western coalition, Israel, Iran, and Turkey.

The Russian doctrine inherits Soviet traditions of coordinated use of different instruments for the same goal. On the other hand, this doctrine takes into account modern American approaches identified with the smart power concept. Sometimes such activity is called 'hybrid warfare'.

At the same time, that is a model. In practice, Russia's actions may be marked by lack of coordination and controversy.

What are three main threats from Russia to Ukraine's security?

Russia's biggest threat to Ukraine is the ongoing aggression. The temporary occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol as well as large-scale military, political, economic, and information support of militants in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, de-facto occupied by Russians, are key manifestations of that aggression.

These actions not only violate state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine; they also provoke instability, limit opportunities for Ukraine's development, and create a negative perception. Along with that, Russia reserves control over escalation and may resume military actions in Donbas up to a full-force attack against Ukraine.

Another threat, even more dangerous strategically, is Russia's attempt to secure Ukraine's continued residing in the grey zone of security between Russia and the EU/NATO. Confrontation with Russia, triggered by the Russian aggression, turns Ukraine into a dead end and Europe's backyard. In this way, Russia limits opportunities for Ukraine's progress and enhances dangerous trends in Ukrainian society. Authoritarian radical movements are among them. Support of Russian-speaking population helps turn issues of culture and language into a weapon of radicalisation of internal conflicts in Ukraine.

One more threat is the ongoing economic war against Ukraine, which destroys transit capabilities and blocks Ukraine's access to markets.

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RUSSIA'S STRATEGY TOWARD POST-SOVIET STATES AS IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW DOCTRINE OF LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY (PUTIN DOCTRINE)

Dr Ihor Lossovskiy

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Principles and practical implications of Russia's current policy toward the post-Soviet states are presented in this paper. On the basis of Russia's domestic legal and regulatory documents, as well as public statements of the leadership, it was concluded that the Kremlin has laid out a new foreign policy strategy and a corresponding foreign policy doctrine – “the new doctrine of limited sovereignty” (the “Putin Doctrine”), the main element of which is the concept of “limited sovereignty”. During the Cold War, that was also a major component of the “Brezhnev Doctrine” – the USSR's foreign policy doctrine regarding the states of “People's Democracies”. The main provisions and characteristics of the doctrine are provided.

Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, attempts to annex Crimea and military intervention in Donbas, unprecedented pressure on Ukraine, as well as an open confrontation with the West testify to Russia's implementation of its planned strategy toward the countries of the post-Soviet space. It was laid out in a number of speeches by President Vladimir Putin in 2014 and later detailed in the fundamental policy and security documents of the Russian Federation.

After the first year of Russian aggression against Ukraine, I conducted a detailed political and security analysis of Russia's new aggressive foreign policy, primarily with regard to neighbouring countries in the post-Soviet space. This gave rise to the talk of a “reincarnation” of the foreign policy of “limited sovereignty” (the “Brezhnev Doctrine”), which was actively applied by the Soviet Union from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s toward the so-called “People's Democracies” – the states of Central and Eastern Europe as well as some other countries, satellites of the USSR^{1,2}. Further

1 I. Lossovskiy, *Зовнішньополітична стратегія Путіна як нова доктрина обмеженого суверенітету (Putin's Foreign Policy Strategy as a New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty)*, “Міжнародні відносини Серія «Політичні науки», no. 5, 2015 [http://journals.iir.kiev.ua/index.php/pol_n/article/view/2514].

2 I. Lossovskiy, *Зовнішньополітична стратегія Росії щодо України як реалізація «Нової доктрини обмеженого суверенітету» («Доктрини Путіна»)* (Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy for Ukraine as an Implementation of the “New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty” (“Putin's Doctrine”)), “Зовнішні справи”, 2015, no. 5, pp. 12-15; no. 6, pp. 12-15.

research confirmed the validity of the conclusions³.

A content analysis of the statements of the Russian president and programme documents of the Russian Federation, and Russia's current foreign policy and military activity at least since 2014 give grounds to assert the continued application of modern foreign policy doctrine of the Russian Federation. A fundamental part of it is the aggressive strategy of foreign and security policy against Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries that "dared" to show independence, especially in foreign policy, from Moscow and its ideas about the contemporary international order on the former "one-sixth of the Earth's land surface".

Definitions and Criteria of Aggression

Russia's regional activity is fully consistent with the definition of international, political, and military aggression according to international law^{4,5}. Under the initiative of the USSR, the UN worked for a long time to prepare a resolution of the General Assembly to define the concept of "aggression". This document was adopted on 14 December 1974⁶. Article 1 of the resolution states: "Aggression is the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State".

Article 3 further defines what constitutes an act of aggression:

(a) *The invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State, or any military occupation, resulting from such invasion or attack, or any annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State or part thereof;*
(b) *Bombardment by the armed forces of a State against the territory of another State or the use of any weapons by a State against the territory of another State;*
(c) *The blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another State;*
(d) *An attack by the armed forces of a State on the land, sea or air forces of another State;*
(e) *The use of armed forces of one State which are within the territory of another State with the agreement of the receiving State, in contravention of the conditions provided for in the agreement [...];*
(g) *The sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries, which carry out acts of armed force against another State.*

Russia's actions in Georgia in August 2008, its military presence in Ukraine since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (February 2014), and intervention in Donbas fully meet the definition and criteria as aggression. Russia, respectively, is an aggressor state.

That definition of aggression was adopted by the UN General Assembly Resolution,

3 I. Lossovskiy, *Зовнішньополітична стратегія Росії щодо країн пострадянського простору як реалізація нової доктрини обмеженого суверенітету (Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy for the Post-Soviet Space as an Implementation of a New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty)*, "Стратегічна Панорама", no. 2, 2018, pp. 19-30.

4 I. Lossovskiy, *До 20-ї річниці будапештських "гарантій": Агресія Росії проти України як фактор ерозії міжнародно-правових режимів нерозповсюдження (For the 20th Anniversary of the Budapest "Guarantees": Russia's Aggression against Ukraine as a Factor in the Erosion of International Legal Non-Proliferation Regimes)*, "Зовнішні справи", 2014, no. 11, pp. 6-11.

5 I. Lossovskiy, *Міжнародно-правовий статус Будапештського Меморандуму (International Legal Status of the Budapest Memorandum)*, Київ: УАЗП 2015.

6 *UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) of 14 December 1974* [www.un.org/en/documents/decl_conv/conventions/aggression.shtml].

not by a multilateral international treaty. The previous definition, provided in an earlier international legal document – the London Convention, adopted on 03-05 July 1933 under the auspices of the League of Nations by 12 states⁷, including the USSR, which initiated and authored the draft text of the document – is deprived of this “disadvantage”: The London Convention is an international treaty that imposes specific international legal obligations on its signatories, and the text contains five criteria of aggression. It is envisaged that

the State which is the first to commit any of the following actions will be recognized as an aggressor in an international conflict:

- *declaration of war on another State;*
- *invasion the territory of another State by its Armed Forces, with or without declaring war;*
- *attack by its land, naval or air forces, with or without a declaration of war, on the territory, vessels or aircraft of another state;*
- *naval blockade of the coasts or ports of another State;*
- *provision of support to armed bands formed in its territory which have invaded the territory of another State, or refusal notwithstanding the request of the invaded State to take, in its own territory, all the measures in its power to deprive those bands of all assistance or protection.*

At the same time, “no political, military, economic or other consideration may serve as an excuse or justification for the aggression”.

The 1933 convention has no expiration date and is in force today for the signatory states

and their successors, including the Russian Federation. An important feature of this document is that it had a specific practical legal application in December 1939, when the League of Nations, identifying on its basis an act of aggression of the USSR against Finland (Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-1940, the so-called “Winter War”), excluded the Soviet Union from the organisation. Thus, the 1933 convention is not only a document of international legal theory but also a valid international treaty, the application of which had significant legal consequences.

Russia’s military and political actions against Ukraine over the past seven years have been often called a hybrid war by international experts and politicians⁸. Manifestations of a hybrid war are fundamentally different from those of a classical war, the basic principles of which were formulated by the prominent Prussian military theorist and classic of military art C. von Clausewitz in 1832⁹. These classical principles were used by the authors of both the London Convention of 1933 and the UN General Assembly Resolution of 1974. However, even taking into account the factors of hybrid warfare, actions of the Russian Federation fully meet the criteria of aggression.

Changes in the World Order, Real Sovereignty of States, and the “Brezhnev Doctrine”

Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine undermines the remnants of the Westphalia international system that emerged in 1648 as a result of the Thirty Years’ War. Key principles of the Westphalia world order, in force until recently, include the priority of “nation-states”, “national interests”, and “national/state sovereignty”; balance of

7 *Convention for the Definition of Aggression* [http://heninen.net/sopimus/1933_e.htm].

8 V. Gorbunin (ed.), *Світова гібридна війна: Український фронт (World Hybrid War: Ukrainian Front)*, Національний Інститут Стратегічних Досліджень, Харків: «Фоліо» 2017.

9 C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, Oxford, USA: Oxford University Press 2008.


forces and coalitions; and implementation of international treaties.

The Yalta-Potsdam system, established after World War II, became another modification of the Westphalia world order. It enabled the formation of a bipolar world, which revived the concept of “limited sovereignty” of states under the control of “great powers”. Only two superpowers – the USA and the USSR – had full or real sovereignty¹⁰ in such a system. “Limited sovereignty” was given to their satellites – countries belonging to the two hostile blocs. As these countries were not completely independent in their foreign and domestic policies, they acted in accordance with the national interests and guidelines of the two superpowers. Restriction of sovereignty within the Western bloc was much milder than within the Eastern bloc.

Ideology of the Communist bloc has been called the “Brezhnev Doctrine” by political scientists and politicians in the West. The main provisions of this doctrine were formulated in the article “Sovereignty and International Responsibilities of Socialist Countries”, published more than 50 years ago, on 26 September 1968, in the newspaper *Pravda*¹¹ immediately after the defeat of the “Prague Spring”. A new, adjusted vector of the USSR’s foreign policy was developed. The Soviet leadership assumed the authority to interfere in the affairs of Socialist countries that deviated from the pro-Soviet course. The main point was that each Communist Party was responsible not only for its own people but also for all Socialist countries. Sovereignty of an individual country could not contradict

the interests of global Socialism and the world’s revolutionary movement.

The new trend observed is the gradual formation of a new world order – a “new multipolar system”, better called a “unipolar multicentre system”. A fundamental feature of such a world order is full real sovereignty for the only state in the world – the United States. A number of states, although actively involved in the activities of a wide network of international organisations, seek to gain real sovereignty (China, India, Russia, Brazil, Iran, as well as the EU). Most other countries that participate in a wide network of international organisations voluntarily relinquish part of their sovereignty.



Today’s policy of the Russian Federation toward Ukraine and other countries of the post-Soviet space is aggressive and, by analogy with the doctrine of “limited sovereignty” (the “Brezhnev Doctrine”), implements a “new doctrine of limited sovereignty”

Russia’s aggression is in no way in line with Russia’s real economic and other capabilities. Russia, by brandishing conventional weapons and threatening with nuclear weapons, is trying to intimidate its neighbours, positioning itself as a large regional power, and is trying to regain the status of a separate “pole” or at least a “centre of power” in global politics.

10 A. Kokoshin, *Реальный суверенитет в современной мирополитической системе (Real Sovereignty in Modern World Political System)*, Москва: Изд. «Европа» 2006.

11 D. Okunev, *Социализм в опасности: как появилась «доктрина Брежнева» (Socialism in Danger: How “Brezhnev’s Doctrine” Came about)*, “Gazeta.ru”, 26 September 2018 [https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2018/09/26_a_11997739.shtml].

New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty: The “Putin Doctrine”

Today’s policy of the Russian Federation toward Ukraine and other countries of the post-Soviet space is aggressive and, by analogy with the doctrine of “limited sovereignty” (the “Brezhnev Doctrine”), implements a “new doctrine of limited sovereignty”, which was actively developed during 2014 against the background of the annexation of Crimea and military aggression in Donbas. According to official data alone, the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas claimed about 14,000 lives, and more than 30,000 people were maimed and wounded.¹² Information about the number of casualties among the Russian military and mercenaries is classified, as in May 2015 Vladimir Putin signed a decree that classified information revealing the losses of the Russian Armed Forces “in peacetime during special operations”. Previously, according to the Law of the Russian Federation “On State Secrets”, only information about losses during war was protected.

Elements of the concept of “limited sovereignty” were contained in the “Monroe Doctrine” developed by Secretary of State and future US President J. Adams in 1823, which became the basis of the then US expansion in the Western hemisphere. The “Monroe Doctrine” was designed to legitimise the ways of Washington’s direct and indirect interference in Latin America under the pretext of helping to resolve internal conflicts. Guided by the “Monroe Doctrine”,

the United States made considerable efforts to subdue the continent to its interests, and the declarative protection of the region from potential aggression by European powers contributed to the consolidation of American hegemony.

The nearly 200-year history of the “Monroe Doctrine” ended in November 2013, when attending a summit of the Organization of American States, Secretary of State John Kerry said the United States was officially rejecting it.¹³

The main ideas and basic elements of the so-called “Putin Doctrine” were formulated in public speeches of its instigator – the Russian president, in particular in the address to both chambers of the Federal Assembly of the country in connection with the “Offer of State Council of the Republic of Crimea on the accession of the republic to the Russian Federation” (so-called “Crimea Statement” made on 18 March 2014); the “Valdai speech” of 24 October 2014; the appeal to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 04 December 2014. On 26 December 2014, a new Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation¹⁴ was adopted, which listed among Russia’s main external dangers “establishing regimes in neighbouring states whose policies threaten Russia’s interests”.¹⁵ With this document, the Russian Federation sought to “legitimise” the probable future expansion at the expense of its neighbours. Thus, among the main tasks of the Russian Armed Forces in peacetime, there is the “protection

12 У ООН повідомили про кількість жертв бойових дій на Донбасі (*The UN Reported the Number of Casualties of Hostilities in Donbas*), “Radio Svoboda”, 03 September 2020 [<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-oon-zhertvy-viyny-na-donbasi/30818348.html>].

13 *Remarks on U.S. Policy in the Western Hemisphere*, US Department of State, 18 November 2013 [<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217680.htm>].

14 *Order of the President of the Russian Federation on Military Doctrine*, 05 February 2010 [<http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102135800>].

15 *Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В.Путинным 30 ноября 2016 г.) (Concept of the Foreign Policy of Russian Federation)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF, 01 December 2016 [http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248].

of Russian citizens outside the country from armed attack on them". Therefore, even in distant countries, Russian-speaking citizens have the right for military protection by the Russian Federation.

According to S. Karaganov, one of the main ideologists of contemporary Russian foreign policy and Putin's personal adviser, "The main mistake of the country's foreign policy in the past was the lack of any clear policy towards the post-Soviet space. The only thing Russia did was subsidizing and buying/corrupting of elites, which proved ineffective. As the conflict in Ukraine has shown, it is impossible to get rid of the global crisis in this way".¹⁶



Statements about the need to abandon the arms race disappeared from the text of the 2016 concept. Instead, there is a rather aggressive statement for such a policy document that Russia will not tolerate any pressure from the United States and will respond to any unfriendly actions

To properly understand the evolution of modern Russia's foreign policy, it is important to analyse its concept document¹⁷, approved by President Putin in late 2016, as well as the previous editions of 2008 and 2013. In 2016, Russian ideologues for the first time conceptually divided the world into Asia-Pacific, Euro-Atlantic, and Eurasian regions. The latter region is considered a zone of exclusive interests of Russia. That version of the concept introduced the

provision of "soft power" as an integral part of modern international politics to solve foreign policy problems in addition to traditional diplomatic and "energy" methods. Considerable attention was paid to the issue of a "clash of civilisations". The 2016 text of the concept does not mention Russia explicitly as an integral, organic part of the European civilisation, but there are serious accusations against the geopolitical expansion of the EU and NATO.

Statements about the need to abandon the arms race disappeared from the text of the 2016 concept. Instead, there is a rather aggressive statement for such a policy document that Russia will not tolerate any pressure from the United States and will respond to any unfriendly actions.

Speaking at the annual meeting of Russian ambassadors to foreign countries, held in Moscow on 19 July 2018, Putin strongly stressed the inadmissibility NATO military infrastructure approaching Russia's borders, the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in the alliance's orbit, the irresponsibility of such "aggressive steps" of the alliance, which pose a threat to Russia, as well as the inevitability of Russian retaliation. Thus, it was emphasised that Ukraine and Georgia continue to be seen in "orbit" of Russia's national interests. Putin was openly threatening that if the West continues its policy of deterring Russia, local military conflicts could escalate into a single global catastrophe.

On 25 July 2018, the US State Department released Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's declaration on Crimea, unequivocally condemning Russia's policy of intervention in Ukraine and attempts to annex Crimea,

¹⁶ *Стратегия для России. Российская внешняя политика: конец 2010-х — начало 2020-х годов (A Strategy for Russia: Russian Foreign Policy at the end of 2010s-beginning of 2020s)*, Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, May 2016 [http://svop.ru/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8B_23%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%8F_sm.pdf]

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, n.15.

which undermine the foundations of the international world order and fundamental principles of international relations, in respect of which Russia had made clear commitments to strict compliance. In the declaration, the American side reaffirms its consistent policy of non-recognition of the Kremlin's claims to sovereignty over territories seized by force in violation of international law. At the same time, the politically similar declaration of Sumner Welles ("Welles Declaration") of 23 July 1940 on the non-recognition by the United States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's inclusion in the Soviet Union was mentioned. In fact, today's aggressive policy of the Russian Federation toward its neighbours is compared to a similar "neighbourly" policy of the USSR.

Thus, starting in 2014, the official normative and legislative level in Russia actually enshrines the legitimisation of the deepening and continuation of the war in eastern Ukraine, as well as possible further Russian expansion into adjacent territories in the future.

There are at least five internal factors that are the basis of the current political regime in Russia and the internal basis of Putin's foreign policy "doctrine", namely: the consolidation of the authoritarian regime within the country, which significantly limits the place and role of political opposition; large-scale corruption at all levels, including at the highest level; the use of the country's vast energy and other natural resources both to maintain domestic political and economic stability and as a "weapon"¹⁸ to guarantee foreign policy influence; a powerful comprehensive propaganda machine that actively uses hybrid methods of information warfare (bluff, misinformation, manipulation), which have internal and

external directions; and the concept of the legitimacy of the use of Russian military force abroad "to protect Russian speakers".

The fundamental components of the "Putin Doctrine" were not officially proclaimed by the Russian leadership, as, at one time, the "Brezhnev Doctrine" was not proclaimed in the USSR. However, what is used in practical international activities, especially in the post-Soviet space, can be outlined as follows:

- Russia does not see the collective West as a credible partner because, despite warnings in Putin's famous Munich speech in 2007, the US, NATO, and the EU continue to ignore Russia's vital, historical and regional interests in the post-Soviet space, spreading its influence and "dragging" the countries of the region into their structures, pursuing a policy of "containment of Russia";
- Russia does not see itself as part of the Euro-Atlantic community; it is a country of "sovereign", "controlled" democracy, with about 80% of the population supporting Putin's aggressive policy toward Ukraine, foreign policy of "land acquisition", anti-Americanism, and confrontation with the West. It is emphasised that Russia has its own identity and belongs to a separate civilisation that professes its own system of values. The ideology of the "third way", the "third type of civilisation", and the revival of the notorious concept "Moscow – the Third Rome"¹⁹ is gaining popularity again;
- In the current conditions of disintegration/weakening of the unipolar world order, when a new multipolar ("multicentric") world is just being formed, "uncontrolled chaos" and "lack of rules of the game" are available and highly desirable for Russia, which significantly expands the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in the world for the Kremlin. Hence Russia's

18 V. Panyushkin et al., *Газпром: Новое русское оружие (Gazprom: New Russian Weapon)*, Москва: «OZON.RU» 2008.


19 V. Surkov, *Одиночество полукровки (Loneliness of a Half-Breed)*, "Россия в глобальной политике", 2018, no. 4.

efforts to carry out hybrid interference in internal affairs, electoral processes, and referendums, both in the countries of its traditional “sphere of influence” and in the West (USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, etc.). The main tasks of such intervention are: imbalance and destruction of the international integration structures of the West (primarily the EU and NATO); erosion and destruction of a world order based on international law, universal values, and obligations; destruction of Euro-Atlantic unity; imposing on the broad masses of the European community and graduate students a sense of frustration and doubt about the viability of liberal democratic values;

- The system of international treaties and international law in general for Russia is not a system of rules/coordinates of international relations; it is rather a “restaurant menu” from which to choose what is beneficial to Russia at a particular historical moment²⁰. The role of international organisations is significantly reduced, as cooperation with them for strong states loses its meaning as soon as it begins to interfere with their national interests. Russia operates on the principle, “For us – all that is beneficial to us, and for our opponents – international law”.

The concept of “national/state sovereignty” is relative for most states. Real sovereignty²¹ is an attribute of exceptionally strong states. Others in one way or another cede part of their sovereignty to either stronger partners/allies or international security organisations. The post-Soviet countries are effectively deprived of the right to real sovereignty, as they are endowed

only with “limited sovereignty” that does not contradict Russia’s vital interests. Such “conceptual arguments” justify the “legitimacy” of Russia’s ongoing aggression in Ukraine and the attempted annexation of Crimea, the 2008 intervention in Georgia, Russia’s interference in political processes in Belarus in August-November 2020, and, at the same time, its non-provision of help during the 30 years in the case of a sustainable settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.



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The new world and European order that Putin is trying to impose extends Russia’s influence throughout the Baltics (except Germany), not just the post-Soviet space. An important factor here remains the plan to complete the construction of the Nord Stream-2 pipeline, which will require the expansion of Russia’s naval presence in the Baltic Sea under the pretext of the need for its military protection. In the same way the illegal construction of the Crimean Bridge across the Kerch Strait and the active bandit extraction of oil and gas using stolen drilling rigs in Ukraine on the Black Sea from oil and gas fields that were also brutally stolen from Ukraine “required” a significant increase in military-marine presence of Russia and closure for navigation of large areas in the

20 I. Lossovskiy, *International Law as a Restaurant Menu for Putin*, “Unlimited Democracy: Analytics” [<https://www.unlimiteddemocracy.com/>].

21 *Ibid.*, n.10.

Black Sea, under the contrived pretext of protecting the “Russian” infrastructure.

Since the abovementioned “new doctrine of limited sovereignty” (the “Putin Doctrine”) refers to the basic categories of the Westphalia international system, it can be considered that related to the growth of these new “centres of power”, this doctrine is an attempt to further modify the Westphalia world order.



***subversive activities,
military infiltration, media
propaganda, cyber-attacks,
information manipulation, and
speculation about the “problems of
the Russian-speaking population***

Despite the fact that the Baltic states are full members of NATO, Russia continues to exert provocative pressure on them, which shows that Russia is testing the strength of the alliance’s unity and does not give up hope of spreading the “Putin Doctrine” to the Baltic countries. According to a number of analysts, the next target of Russian aggression may be the Baltic states, which can happen by a campaign to destabilise these countries – subversive activities, military infiltration, media propaganda, cyber-attacks, information manipulation, and speculation about the “problems of the Russian-speaking population.

According to Adrian Bradshaw²², the former deputy supreme commander of NATO’s Joint Forces in Europe, the alliance must be prepared for a full-fledged Russian attack

on member states: “Russia can believe that the large number of regular troops it can concentrate in the short term what we saw during the capture of Crimea can be used in the future not only to intimidate and deter, but also to seize Alliance territory. NATO must adapt to the methods of hybrid warfare used by Russia in Ukraine”. He compared Russia’s behaviour to the escalating dominance of the Soviet Union, saying that Russia could resort to further escalation of the conflict to avoid the return of already occupied territory. The alliance’s military leadership should take into account the following: Russia is acting contrary to international rules and norms; in recent years, the Russian Federation has significantly increased funding for the defence industry, including nuclear weapons; the Russian regime actively and destructively uses disinformation campaigns.

Other post-Soviet countries with significant Russian-speaking populations, including Belarus and Kazakhstan, may be the next target of Russian external aggression to “protect” the “Russian world”. Back in the autumn of 2014, Putin tried to test the reaction of the leadership of these countries but received a rather sharp response from their leaders, who emphasised the independence and sovereignty of these states in relations with Russia²³. Russia is actively interfering in the political process in Belarus today, against the backdrop of unprecedented protests following the undemocratic and unfair presidential election on 09 August 2020.

Putin’s threat is far greater than the threat posed by the Islamic State, as victory over the latter will depend only on the amount of resources allocated to it. Russia has a nuclear arsenal, and its strategy is to continue the

22 *У НАТО порадили підготуватися до “масштабної атаки Росії” на Європу (NATO Has Advised to Prepare for a “Large-scale Russian Attack” on Europe)*, “Korrespondent”, 21 February 2015 [<https://ua.korrespondent.net/world/3482347-u-nato-poradyly-pidhotuvatysia-do-masshtabnoi-ataky-rosii-na-yevropu>].

23 I. Lossovskiy, *Росія – «держжава-ізгой» (Russia Is a Rogue State)*, “День”, 2015 [<https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/svitovi-dyskusiyi/rosiya-derzhava-izgoi>].

imperial expansionist policy in the post-Soviet space through military force and powerful propaganda, as well as attempts to destroy the international security system by undermining unity within NATO and the EU, for instance through outright bribery of the elites of individual countries or financial support of radical and marginal European parties.

For 20 years now, the actual form of government in Russia has been a personal dictatorship. Symptomatic in this regard are the statements of the former deputy head of the Putin administration V. Volodin, now the chairperson of the State Duma, who noted that as long as there is Putin, there is Russia; in case there is no Putin, there is no Russia²⁴. Russia's system of government is unstable, so it requires constant personal intervention by Vladimir Putin, whose authority is markedly and steadily declining. It could fall at any time, which the West feels is not in its interest today because it fears for the possible fate of Russia's nuclear arsenal. However, today's situation may well be reminiscent of the late Soviet era, when a year, or even six months, before its collapse, few in the West expected the imminent beginning of such revolutionary, rapid, and turbulent political changes on one-sixth part of the Earth's land surface. It should be mentioned here that the problem of the danger of the proliferation of Soviet nuclear weapons was then solved fairly quickly – in just three years²⁵.

Conclusions

It can be argued that Russia's aggressive international military and political activity, especially against Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, and other manifestations of Russia's domestic and foreign policy in at least the last six and a half years testify to the conformity of its actions to the criteria defined in this article for the implementation of the "new doctrine of limited sovereignty" – the "Putin doctrine".

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24 Володин: "Есть Путин — есть Россия, нет Путина — нет России" (Volodin: "If There Is Putin, There Is Russia; No Putin – No Russia"), "МК.ру", 23 October 2014 [<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/23/volodin-est-putin-est-rossiya-net-putina-net-rossii.html>].

25 Ibid., n.5.

VICTIMISATION OF THE “CRIMEAN SYNDROME”

Dr Sergii Glebov

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When justifying the seizure of Crimea, the Russian president pretended to be a victim of the Western policy and manipulatively argued that the only way to confront NATO's illusory penetration into the Ukrainian peninsula was to “facilitate” its “reunification” with Russia. The obsession to tear Crimea away from Ukraine appeared to be one of the stark examples of an expressly frustrated policy by Vladimir Putin, who enjoyed his aggressive “victory” by displaying at the same time his passion for artificially constructed self-victimisation. The article argues that an ongoing hybrid aggression (hybrid aggression) against Ukraine is irrational and destructive for both Ukraine and Russia but vitally needed for Putin's regime survival.

Back in 2000, the US journalist of the *Philadelphia Enquirer* Trudy Rubin became the first to ask globally the often repeated question, “Who is Mr. Putin?” The question was levied at a panel of top Russian officials attending the World Economic Forum, the annual gathering of global business and political leaders, taking place in Davos, Switzerland. Not one of them volunteered to answer the question. In years following this event, Rubin's question has come to symbolise the West's preoccupation with the Russian leader's opaque past¹. What turned to be alarming, the permanently preoccupied West hardly made any progress in answering the abovementioned question in 2008. What is more important nowadays and sounds even more alarming, the West still can do little in order to get rid of the feeling of concern with the future of Putin's Russia, even though the

case with the annexation of Crime in 2014 is quite instructive.

Truly, “Putin's seizure of Crimea was so startling, so disruptive of Western expectations, that many leaders seemed to forget that he had been the leader of Russia for the last decade and a half” and definitely “not a new kid on the block”². As Rob de Wijk, founder of The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), points out, “In 2014 the Europeans failed to allow for what they regarded as old-fashioned power politics, which was focused on demarcating spheres of influence and annexing territory in order to protect interests. Europe had utterly misjudged the resentment that its policies of recent decades had caused in Russia, and Putin's desire to rectify historical humiliations”³.

1 M. Bodner, *Russia's 8 Most Memorable Davos Moments*, “The Moscow Times”, 22 January 2014 [<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/01/22/russias-8-most-memorable-davos-moments-a31309> access: 12 October 2020].

2 M. Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC 2015, p. 2.

3 R. de Wijk, *Power Politics: How China and Russia Reshape the World*, AUP: Amsterdam 2015, p. 148.

In either case, while the West did give political, diplomatic, financial, and military support to Ukraine and furthermore introduced economic sanctions against Russia in response to the latter's aggression in Crimea, even from the early days of the conflict in 2014, it became evident that the West was asymmetrically positioned and unwilling to engage in a full-fledged confrontation with Russia on this issue. It is almost impossible not to concur with the thesis that "from the perspective of the Realist school and the security dilemma, it can be argued that the crisis would not have broken out had Putin not assumed that the United States and the European allies would be too weak to respond"⁴. Furthermore, as Richard Youngs of Carnegie Europe admits, "Notwithstanding their principled and robust rhetoric, however, many member states in practice seemed to accept that Russia's annexation of Crimea and the prospect of Russian influence in eastern Ukraine needed to be accommodated within some degree of normalized geopolitical adjustment"⁵.

Does it mean that the Russian president has already outplayed the West personally and imposed his vision of the future European order starting from Russia's "near abroad"? The short answer could be "yes", but such a "yes" leads to a European disorder. A state of the European disintegration and global destruction with chaos around the Russian borders could be the intermediate destination of the Russian foreign policy where Putin's regime finds itself most comfortable while "flourishing" inside its nuclear fortress.

Personalisation of the Foreign Policy and the Case of Russia

A foreign policy of any state is highly personalised, especially in countries with a strong presidential hierarchy. Even if

a decision-making mechanism involves multiple persons who advise the head of state under the pressure of own preferences (ethics, education, religion, etc.), moral obligations, business connections, political orientation, historical and cultural inheritance of the nation, and other postulates of national interests, the head of state appears to be the last and ultimate official to sign a potentially applicable final decision. In the democratic world, a strong president takes the lead of collective responsibility when the decision-making mechanism works out in line with a system of checks and balances. In this case, a foreign policy may claim it is transparent and predictable, and national interests of a state and political elites, if not fully, but at least mostly, match both individual and collective needs.

It does not mean that countries widely recognised as democracies do not go into traditional wars with a legitimate or even questionable offensive or defensive rationale, but at least they try to avoid warfare deadlocks with each other. Sometimes they are forced into peace by preservation mechanisms, like international organisations; sometimes they consciously or unwillingly have to obey the international law and respect particular norms and obligations both bilaterally and multilaterally – due to common democratic sense and shared values, because of important economic ties, or due to a common enemy.

Such a matrix does not work well for authoritarian societies and leaders of the great powers who do have capability resources and are not willing to limit their external activity by strict obligations either within international organisations or under earlier shared norms and responsibilities

4 Ibid.

5 R. Youngs, *Europe's Eastern Crisis: The Geopolitics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017, p. 154.

of the international law. Even economic practicability can do little to prevent crises that may lead to confrontation and even open conflict. In the situation of the Russian foreign policy and the Russian Federation, which constitutionally has been treating itself as “a democratic federal law-bound State with a republican form of government” (art. 1),⁶ it does not work either. This is so despite the fact that just in 2013 the Russian Foreign policy concept, approved and signed by Vladimir Putin, identified Russia “as an integral and inseparable part of European civilisation” and claimed it had “common deep-rooted civilisational ties” with “the Euro-Atlantic states”.⁷



Not willing to democratise and show solidarity with liberal West, the Kremlin made a bet on nurturing a “martyr syndrome” both inside and outside the country, playing the role of a victim to manipulate others into psychologically rewarding it

The Constitution of the Russian Federation identifies its president – the supreme commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (art. 87) – as the key figure who “determines the guidelines of the internal and foreign policies of the State” (art. 80) and “governs the foreign policy of the Russian Federation” (art. 86)⁸. Taking into account that Russia, with its illusory separation of powers, stands apart from the

pattern of democracy, it sounds reasonable and even natural that the president of the Russian Federation takes full responsibility when implementing any decision in the international arena. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that the foreign policy of the Russian Federation with a noticeable touch of grandeur of the Russian Empire and the USSR must be identified as Putin’s foreign policy at least since his second presidential term. Since 2004, the tension, with some peaks of aggravation in relations between Russia and the West, had begun to build up rapidly, which cautiously but quite evidently ended up in “a situation of conflict” in 2014.

Frustration as a Driving Force and Putin’s “Martyr Syndrome”

Rudolph J. Rummel, professor emeritus of Political Science from the University of Hawaii, USA, indicates:

*A situation of conflict is created by attitudes transformed into interests. Interests, which is a drive toward specific goals, are a necessary condition of a situation of conflict. Also involved in a situation of conflict are capabilities and expectations, particularly those defining the credibility of – the will to carry out – promises, threats, authority, expertise, love. Capability involves the resources we have to manifest our interest. Together, interests, capability, and will define a situation of conflict.*⁹

It turned out that the Kremlin’s interests appeared to be not matching the Western ones, while Russian capability, alongside

6 *The Constitution of the Russian Federation* [<http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm> access: 15 November 2020].

7 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on 12 February 2013*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/_/asset_publisher/CptiCk6B6Z29/content/id/122186 access: 18 November 2020].


8 Supra n.6.

9 R. J. Rummel, *Understanding Conflict and War. Vol. 3. Conflict in Perspective*, Sage Publications: Beverly Hills, California 1977 [<https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTE12.HTM#1.1> access: 13 November 2020].

with Vladimir Putin's will, initiated an anti-Western scenario of the post-bipolar global re-ordering. As a result, the hybrid mechanisms of waging proxy wars against ex-Soviet republics and the rest of the democratic world have been launched to ensure the revival of the Kremlin's claims on "greatpowerness". As Steven Rosefielde from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, says, "Russia's annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, appears to herald the end of the post-Soviet world order founded on partnership and the West's Wilsonian idealist concepts of the rule of law, democracy, and the sanctity of national independence"¹⁰. Suffering from the imperial syndrome, the post-Cold War elites in the Kremlin made a decision to construct their own vision of the future world order to achieve their success. Paul D'Anieri from the University of California, Riverside, admits that Russia's deployment of force in 2014 can be viewed as a determination to no longer accept the results of a set of international rules it had not outright endorsed¹¹.

Not willing to democratise and show solidarity with liberal West, the Kremlin made a bet on nurturing a "martyr syndrome" both inside and outside the country, playing the role of a victim to manipulate others into psychologically rewarding it, while punishing both outsiders and insiders for its ongoing misery. As to the latter, for instance, it is worth mentioning quite an instructive defensive manipulation when, in the words of Putin, the Kremlin was claiming that "Western sanctions and particularly Russian counter-sanctions had in fact allowed the Russian economy to develop in unexpected ways"¹².

In the process of its voluntary and artificial self-victimisation, the Kremlin, as well as the Russian Federation as a state, prefers to respond to external challenges by applying aggression by using both "soft" and "hard" instruments. Understandably, to achieve success in a "hostile environment" is always a stress, for both the leader and his inner circle, as well as a challenge to the domestic and external outsiders at the same time. The worst news is that stress only multiplies suspicion, fear, and thus external aggression, because "when leaders are under stress, their intelligence and experience tend to interfere with each other, diminishing the leader's ability to think rationally, logically, and analytically"¹³.



In the process of its voluntary and artificial self-victimisation, the Kremlin, as well as the Russian Federation as a state, prefers to respond to external challenges by applying aggression by using both "soft" and "hard" instruments

Indeed, the paradox of the leader's behaviour under such conditions leads to the situation when his or her further policies have objectively become irrational, but subjectively still remain pragmatic to him or her, even when they appear to be destructive for the nation. At the same time, Putin's pragmatism produces danger to the outside world, because it has been

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- 10 S. Rosefielde, *The Kremlin Strikes Back: Russia and the West after Crimea's Annexation*, Cambridge University Press: New York 2017, p. 45.
 - 11 P. D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017, p. 277.
 - 12 Vladimir Putin: *Sanctions Hurt Europe More than Russia*, "DW", 20 June 2019 [<https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-sanctions-hurt-europe-more-than-russia/a-49277071> access: 03 November 2020].
 - 13 N. Borkowski, *Organizational Behavior, Theory, and Design in Health Care* (2nd Ed.), Jones & Bartlett Learning: Burlington, MA 2016, p. 212.

built on the platform of political frustration to multiply the resentment effect from the martyr's syndrome. Thus, frustration aggravates aggression, which "is disposed to be, becoming, or being offensive; that is, a disposition, power, or effect characterized by assault, attack, invasion."¹⁴ Ash Carter, the US Defense Secretary in 2015-2017, characterised Putin's behaviour in the world's arena: "One of the ways he defines the success of his policy is not by results on the ground but the level of the discomfort he can create in the rest of the world and show to his people as the point of his policy"¹⁵.

Therefore, it is not inadvertent or accidental that Russia reproduces a permanent threat to the international community. This is a quintessence of Putin's pragmatic – albeit unethical – approach to foreign policy: the creation of unnecessary, real as well as fictitious foreign enemies to Russia, which is a vital and necessary tool for Putin to hold on to his authoritarian power.

This is well in line with Putin's engagement in hybrid warfare. Experts at the Centre for Global Studies Strategy XXI in Ukraine explained that "the main driving force behind the development of the Russian version of the hybrid war is a protection from the expansion and aggression of the West, disguised by unconventional actions NATO and the EU in different regions. In this way, Russia covers its own expansionist and aggressive preparations and further actions by the imaginary Western aggression. In the case of a hybrid war against Ukraine,

the aggressor – Russia – presents itself as a victim of Western policy, and is forced to defend itself from its expansion into the post-Soviet space, which is identified as a sphere of exclusive interests of the aggressor, and Ukraine as an instrument of the West that produces and introduces 'colour revolutions'¹⁶.

Thus, it inevitably turns out that Russia's ambition to reaffirm its position as an indisputable regional superpower dictates a tough policy toward its neighbours, including Georgia and Ukraine as bright examples of the so-called "colour revolutions". Steven Rosefielde writes: "Putin's great power restoration project has strong legs, standing as it does on tsarist and Soviet tradition, energized by the power services' resentment against the West's role in Soviet disunion, katastroika (Gorbachev's catastrophic radical economic reform), and Russia's post-Soviet humiliation"¹⁷. Not surprisingly, Mikhail Alexseev of San Diego State University theorises that "the annexation of Crimea may be viewed as a long-term process leading toward USSR 2.0"¹⁸.

"In a Manipulative Siege"

Russia went further when, in its effort to somehow counterbalance American and European sanctions and criticism, it openly attacked the West via further justifications of its aggression against Ukraine. Russia's National Security Strategy, adopted in December 2015, basically claimed that

14 Supra n.9.

15 S. F. Gerald, *Ash Carter Says Putin Is Making It Harder for U.S. to Work with Russia*, "Wall Street Journal", 06 January 2017 [<https://www.wsj.com/articles/ash-carter-says-putin-is-making-it-harder-for-u-s-to-work-with-russia-1483698600> access: 05 November 2020].

16 M. Gonchar (ed.), *Війну – XXI: Полігібриція Росії (Wars – XXI: Polyhybression of Russia)*, Avega: Kyiv 2017, p. 34.

17 Supra n.10, p. 49.

18 M. Alexseev, *Backing the USSR 2.0: Russia's Ethnic Minorities and Expansionist Ethnic Russian Nationalism*, [in:] P. Kolsto, H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 2016, p.188.

Russia's actions in Ukraine were merely a defensive response aiming to counter the West's attempts at undermining Russian national security interests: "The West's stance aimed at countering integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region is exerting a negative influence on the realisation of Russian national interests"¹⁹.

Furthermore, Russia apparently decided that attack is indeed the best form of defence, and openly blamed the US and the EU for initiating an internal "armed conflict" in Ukraine, thereby attempting to subjugate the country under their direct sphere of influence: "The support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict"²⁰. It follows that Russia is trying to argue via its strategy that the root of the conflict lay not in Russia's hybrid aggression against Ukraine but in the Western alleged efforts to turn Ukraine against Russia and to render it into "a chronic status of instability" within Europe. Not surprisingly, the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 was partly justified by Russian President Putin also in relation to NATO and its perceived intention to expand eastward, retaking Crimea, which

was speculatively presented by the Russian president almost as a *fait accompli*.²¹

In a documentary aired in Russia in celebration of the first anniversary of the Crimean referendum, President Putin described the Ukrainian revolution against Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 as an armed coup "masterminded by our American friends" with the readiness to use nuclear weapons "if necessary"²². The Russian leader claimed that he had warned the US and Europe not to get involved, and directly accused them of engineering the ouster of Russian-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich at the time.²³ "I think no one wanted to start a world conflict", remarked the Russian president in 2015²⁴, clearly alluding to his victory over the West, which practically remained passive in the face of blatant Russian aggression against Ukraine in February-March 2014.

As per Putin's correct calculation, the West was neither willing nor ready to engage in a military conflict over Crimea, and Russia was hence able to annex it with a minimum of effort and cost. Even if Putin was bluffing about the vague possibility of a direct collision with the West, it still remained true that "Russia's retaking of Crimea could give it a crucial head start in the event of a global

19 *Russian National Security Strategy, 31 December 2015* [<http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf> access: 18 November 2020].

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Address by President of the Russian Federation: Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma Deputies, Federation Council Members, Heads of Russian Regions and Civil Society Representatives in the Kremlin, 18 March 2014* [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> access: 19 November 2020];
Transcript: Vladimir Putin's April 17 Q&A, "Washington Post", 17 April 2014 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-vladimir-putins-april-17-qanda/2014/04/17/ff77b4a2-c635-11e3-8b9a-8e0977a24aeb_story.html access: 19 November 2020].

22 A. Withnall, *Vladimir Putin Says Russia Was Preparing to Use Nuclear Weapons 'If Necessary' and Blames US for Ukraine Crisis*, "Independent", 15 March 2015 [<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putin-says-russia-was-preparing-to-use-nuclear-weapons-if-necessary-and-blames-us-for-10109615.html> access: 17 November 2020].

23 *Ibid.*

24 H. Meyer, *Russia Was Ready for Crimea Nuclear Standoff, Putin Says, "Bloomberg"*, 15 March 2015 [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-15/russia-was-ready-for-crimea-nuclear-standoff-putin-says> access: 19 November 2020].

conflict”²⁵. Other state actors should not underestimate the behaviour of the Russian president, whose decisions and deeds lie in the sphere of perverted political psychology and, moreover, contradict widely shared principles of openness and transparency in international relations.



even if the Russian foreign policy manages to incorporate and reflect Putin’s understanding of pragmatism, it is neither transparent nor particularly predictable

In general, the discussion of the “Ukraine issue” at the UN Security Council in 2014 exposed an unprecedented utilisation of double standards, manipulations, lies, and sheer falsifications by the Russian diplomatic corps in its bid to defend Russia’s actions in Crimea. This contemptuous and condescending behaviour of the Russian delegation toward the UN Security Council provoked a strong backlash from other council members. Illustratively, Ambassador Sir Mark Lyall Grant of the United Kingdom’s Mission to the UN stated at the Security Council meeting on Ukraine on 28 August 2014: “Violating international law and the UN Charter in such a brazen manner is not

compatible with Russia’s responsibilities as a permanent member of the Security Council”²⁶. As *Reuters* observer Lucian Kim wrote in his blog, “Lying – blatantly and repeatedly – is considered a legitimate weapon in the arsenal of hybrid warfare that Putin has unleashed in the struggle for Ukraine. Words may seem harmless in comparison to bullets and bombs, but their effect has been no less deadly”²⁷. Some diplomats and foreign affairs commentators entertained the view that Putin’s adventure in Crimea proved he had lost his diplomatic marbles²⁸.

Putin’s Misperception of Power and His Powerful Reflexion

Therefore, even if the Russian foreign policy manages to incorporate and reflect Putin’s understanding of pragmatism, it is neither transparent nor particularly predictable. In general, political psychology theories start with the assumption that a state’s behaviour in international relations can be explained by a multitude of factors, such as: a leader’s personality and motivation, the way a leader perceives the situation he or she faces (“problem representation”), the advisory systems a leader creates, or the way a leader reacts to domestic political pressure²⁹. The behaviour of Russia as a state since the dawn of the 21st century has almost exclusively been shaped by the mindset of Vladimir Putin – “a one-time KGB

25 A. Kureev, *Russia’s Military Overtures in Crimea Provoke a NATO Response*, “Russia Direct”, 28 July 2015 [https://russia-direct.org/opinion/russias-military-overtures-crimea-provoke-nato-response access: 16 November 2020].

26 *‘The UK is deeply alarmed by the escalation of Russian military intervention in eastern Ukraine’ – Statement by Ambassador Lyall Grant, UK Mission to the UN, at the Security Council Meeting on Ukraine*, 28 August 2014 [https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-is-deeply-alarmed-by-the-escalation-of-russian-military-intervention-in-eastern-ukraine access: 16 November 2020].

27 L. Kim, *Putin Waging Information War in Ukraine Worthy of George Orwell*, “Reuters”, 14 November 2014 [http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/14/putin-wages-information-war-in-ukraine-worthy-of-george-orwell/ access: 14 November 2020].

28 *Supra* n.2, p. 2.

29 A. Grove, *Political Leadership in Foreign Policy: Manipulating Support across Borders*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2007, p. 3.

lieutenant colonel – cunning, manipulative, and ultranationalistic – who was a president of severely vulnerable Russia and determined to right the wrongs he saw in post-Cold War Europe³⁰. Elisabeth Wood, professor of Russian and Soviet History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states that “the Russian president has chosen to emphasize the unpredictable and the rule-breaking in his image so that he will look powerful in the eyes of his domestic population while possibly deterring would-be aggressors from the West”³¹.

Maxim Trudolyubov, senior fellow at the Kennan Institute, offers a partial explanation for this situation. He perceives Russia as “a torn country”, which “cannot decide whether it wants to join the big world or to fight it, to build prosperity for ordinary people or engage in grand political schemes masterminded by the Kremlin”³². He elaborates further by writing:

*The main reason for this indecision is the fact that Russia still has a large constituency that is afraid of integration and does not understand costs and benefits the way they are understood in the West. This is a constituency that depends on the Soviet industrial core, which can only exist with generous state support and is Vladimir Putin’s power base.*³³

It should be admitted that the annexation of Crimea was supported by the vast majority of the Russian population, who appear increasingly ready to adopt Putin’s virtual reality descriptions of the geopolitical and legal context. The issue for Russia and for the

world is that the application of the Kremlin’s policies leads to non-virtual, tangible consequences for all parties involved.

The behaviour of President Putin on the international stage in respect to the events in Crimea was quite instructive in this sense. In April 2014, the Russian leader had to confess that the masked uniformed troops without insignia who “acted in a civil but a decisive and professional manner” and took over the Crimean parliament and other local strategic sites were indeed Russian soldiers. A cynical statement by President Putin that “Russia did not annex Crimea by force” but “created conditions...with the help of special armed groups and the Armed Forces” to ensure “free expression of will of the people living in Crimea and Sevastopol” is illustrative of the tactics used in Russia’s “hybresia” (hybrid aggression).

It is imperative for Ukraine, but also for the West, to understand and find ways of countering the asymmetric methods of Russian foreign policy and military engagement, because

in a hybrid war, everything looks different, nonlinear. A key role, together with the factor of suddenness, is played by the factor of uncertainty. For the enemy and third parties, it is difficult to identify and classify what is happening. It is worth mentioning the multifaceted media euphemisms: “green men”, “polite people” – to denote servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in military uniform without identification marks that blocked strategic facilities in Ukraine on the

30 Supra n.2, p. 2.

31 E. Wood, *A Small, Victorious War? The Symbolic Politics of Vladimir Putin*, [in:] E. Wood, M. Wayne, M. Trudolyubov (eds.), *Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine*, Columbia University Press: New York 2016, p. 123.

32 M. Trudolyubov, *Russia’s Grand Choice: To Be Feared as a Superpower or Prosperous as a Nation?* [in:] E. Wood, M. Wayne, M. Trudolyubov (eds.), *Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine*, Columbia University Press: New York 2016, p. 94.

33 Ibid.

*territory of Crimea, as well as participated in the seizure of the administrative buildings in the East of Ukraine.*³⁴

The legitimisation of such tactics by the Russian head of state as viable warfare options raises the question of whether Russia's hybresia in Crimea can be classified as "a new war", which is notable for its "barbarism, violence and total disregard for established norms and laws"³⁵. As Matt Killingsworth from the School of Social Sciences at the University of Tasmania notes, "new wars," which can be distinguished from traditional wars via the former's avoidance of large-scale battles, are "thought to consist of rolling skirmishes, objectives advanced through control of the population, population displacement and violence directed against civilians. The new war literature emphasises that force is no longer directed 'against the enemy's armed force, but against the civilian population, the aim being to either drive it from it a certain area ... or to force it to supply and support certain armed groups on a permanent basis"³⁶.

Under such circumstances, the annexation of Crimea as a starting point of a "new war" should not be mistakenly perceived as Putin's end game. Rather, it should be seen as a starting point for a politically sustainable long-term struggle for internal and external control inside Russia and across its periphery³⁷. "Ending the conflict

will require, and will likely help shape, a new set of security arrangements in Europe", indeed, but it is also likely that the conflict will endure "until Russia accepts the West's vision for Europe or the West accepts Russia's ... with Ukraine caught in the middle"³⁸. At the same time, there are escalating doubts about Russia's readiness to accept the West's calls for de-escalation in eastern Ukraine. A potential return of Crimea to Ukraine seems to be completely out of the question, not least because any concession to the West is seen as an expression of weakness by the Kremlin. Russia's establishment distrusts the West – admittedly with some justification – and will not be beguiled by American and EU professions of reason and goodwill³⁹. Putin's Russia has clearly separated itself from the West and has withdrawn from any further discourse on the creation of a common European and Euro-Atlantic security and cooperation framework with a long-term perspective. Even if the West tacitly accepts Crimea's annexation, Putin is likely to continue projecting Russia's might as a revisionist and subversive power until the West concedes to it an acceptable level of power within the new world order⁴⁰. Anyway, as Paul D'Anieri warns, "Russia's vendetta-driven annexation of Crimea and its ensuing surrogacy war against Ukraine will mark the beginning of the end of the West's post-Soviet ascendancy unless America and the European Union swiftly get their houses in order."⁴¹

34 Supra n.16, p. 30.

35 M. Killingsworth, *The Transformation of War? New and Old Conflicts in the Former USSR*, [in:] M. Sussex (ed.), *Conflict in the Former USSR*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012, p. 180.

36 Ibid.

37 Supra n.10, p. 27.

38 Supra n.11, p. 277.

39 Supra n.10, p. 27.

40 Ibid

41 Supra n.11, p. 268.

Conclusion

The Russian foreign policy has well marked the foreign and personalised features of the Russian president's image, which he has naturally or artificially been displaying since 2004. Both the policy and the image have been based on the same unilateral outbreak but with two distinctive assumptions. The first one stands for the deliberate and fake victimisation of Russia and its foreign policy, while the image of the president continuously speculates on his illusory strength, false rationality, and manipulative pragmatism. As a result, the Russian foreign policy as an inseparable expression and continuation of Putin's internal power turned out to be an "exhaust pipe" in the international arena to deliver the frustrated aggression against the West and Russia's own neighbours.



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While indulging the Kremlin's vanity in occupying the Ukrainian peninsula to satisfy regime's "greatpowerness" through overcoming the "Crimean syndrome" to confront the US and its NATO and EU

allies, Russia has isolated itself from the democratic world in its own handmade "martyr's" trap. Such voluntary isolation could not last forever and threatens the rest of the world with expanded brutality, pre-programmed destabilisation of the world order, and further escalation of international conflicts, especially once Russia starts finding ways out of its own economic and political trap not just regionally but also globally. It is very desirable that at this very moment the leaders of the democratic world may be ready to not only finally handle the "Who is Mr. Putin" question, but also deal with the Russian foreign policy satisfactorily on the basis of the overdue answer.

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RUSSIA AND THE DILEMMA OF SEPARATIST TERRITORIES

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An important part of Russia's grand strategy since the 1990s has been the use of conflict zones across the post-Soviet space for geopolitical aims. Moscow's battle with the West over the borderlands – i.e., the regions that adjoin Russia from the west and south – has involved keeping Moldova, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus through at times deliberate stoking of separatist conflicts. This policy has been successful so far, as the EU and NATO have refrained from extending membership to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. However, over the past several years, Russia has started to face long-term problems: financing the entities; attaining a wider recognition for the separatist regions; inability to reverse the pro-Western course of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; and the failure to produce a long-term political or economic development vision for the unrecognised territories.

Russia's Policy on Separatist Regions of Third States

Russia's policy toward the conflicts in the post-Soviet space has been conditioned by various factors, including Moscow's relations with the West, Turkey, and Iran, pure military calculations, as well as ups and downs in bilateral ties with specific states neighbouring Russia¹. Although it has been hard to see the emergence of a veritable Russian strategy in the 1990s and early 2000s toward territorial conflicts, by 2020 (as evidenced by the results of the second Karabakh war), it could be argued with some certainty that a purposeful use and subsequent management of conflict zones across the post-Soviet space has turned into an important part of Russia's grand strategy toward the Eurasian landmass.

The emergence of the strategy is also closely related to the ongoing geopolitical struggle Russia has with the West over the borderlands – i.e., the regions that adjoin Russia from the west and south. The competition is manifested in the expansion of Western institutions such as the EU, its related Eastern Partnership, and NATO into Eastern Europe and, as a countermeasure, the Russian efforts to build the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with the aim to engulf what once constituted the Soviet territory. Therefore, maintaining buffer states around Russia has been a cornerstone of the Kremlin's foreign policy against the West's eastward projection of military and economic influence. The emergence of the Russian strategy toward territorial conflicts has also been conditioned by the arising constraints as an effective countermeasure


1 T. de Waal, N. von Twickel, *Beyond Frozen Conflict: Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe* (ed. M. Emerson), Brussels 2020, pp. 18-24.

against the neighbouring states' westward geopolitical inclinations. The Russian political elite knew that because of the country's low economic attractiveness, the South Caucasus states would inevitably turn to Europe. The same was likely to occur with Moldova and Ukraine on Russia's western frontier, as their geographical proximity to and historical interconnections with Europe render them particularly susceptible to the West's attractiveness.

To prevent Western economic and military penetration and the pro-Western foreign policy vector in the neighbouring states, the Kremlin has in many cases deliberately fomented various territorial conflicts. This policy has proved successful so far. Although the EU and NATO refrained from extending membership to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova because of economic and judicial problems even before the active phases of territorial conflicts, currently it is the land disputes and Russian military presence that serve as the biggest obstacle for the West's institutional expansion.

However, Russia now faces a different problem: It has so far failed to produce a long-term vision for the separatist regions. Creating a unified economic space with the separatist territories is not an option, as usually little economic benefit is expected. Even if in some cases benefits could still be harnessed, the territories' poor infrastructure prevents active Russian involvement. Additionally, local political elites are often sensitive to Russian domination. For instance, Abkhazia has for decades resisted Russian businesses' attempts to buy local land. Moscow understands that more financing has to be dedicated to the regions, whose populations could otherwise turn increasingly disenchanted with the hopes they pinned

on Russia. Indeed, the system is difficult to navigate for Russia: While in the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had to manage breakaway conflicts only in small and poor Georgia and Moldova, Moscow's responsibilities have increased significantly by late 2020 with Donbas and now Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts added to its strategy.



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Following the events in Ukraine in 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk became part of Russia's sphere of territorial conflicts. One could also add Syria to the list. The latter's inclusion might be surprising, but, considering the level of Russian influence there and the stripping away of many of Damascus's international contacts, the war-torn country is essentially now fully dependent on Russia².

With Syria and Donbas on the roster, the Kremlin now has to manage a range of territories that rely almost entirely, in both the military and economic senses, on Russia – but that are also geographically dispersed, economically disadvantageous, and geopolitically vulnerable.

This means that at a time when economic problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, Western sanctions, and the lack of reforms are looming large on the Russian

2 E. Avdaliani, *Russia's Troubles with Its "String of Pearls"*, Besa Center, August 2020 [<https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/russia-separatist-states/>].

home front, Moscow has to pour yet more money into multiple separatist actors spread across the former Soviet space as well as Syria. Moscow's broader strategy of managing separatist conflicts is therefore under increasing stress.


It is more and more difficult for the Kremlin to manoeuvre across so many diverse conflicts simultaneously. At times, actors in the conflict zones try to play their own game independently from Moscow and the latter has to closely monitor any deviations lest they harm the Kremlin's strategic calculus. This has often happened in Abkhazia, where in early 2020 Raul Khadjimba resigned, not without Russian interference, or in Donbas, where occasional infighting, as in 2015 and 2018, among rebel groups takes place.

Apart from internal differences, the geographic dispersal of those conflicts also creates difficulties for Russia's projection of power. Since 2014, Kyiv and Chisinau, for example, have considered constraining the breakaway territory of Transnistria, and Moscow – which has no direct land or air route (Kyiv would likely block the latter) – can do little about it, although overall the situation seems to be quite manageable for Russia. Following the changes after the presidential election in Moldova, demands for Russian troops' removal are likely to increase. What is crucial here is how Russia will be able to respond. Even in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russian troops altogether number more than 10,000, the deadlock is evident. Russian forces stand by and watch as NATO exercises take place on Georgian soil – an indication that despite Russia's military presence, the West is continuing to expand its military support for Georgia, although it still falls short of outright NATO/EU membership.

Geopolitical trends indicate that Russia's long-term strategy to stop Western expansion in the former Soviet space is losing its rigour. While it is true that Moscow

stopped its neighbours from joining the EU and NATO, its gamble that those breakaway regions would undermine the pro-Western resolve of Georgia and Ukraine has largely failed. In Moldova, a victory by the pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu signals the country might be setting on a course of fewer internal divisions and a more coherent pro-Western foreign policy.

Apart from the failure to preclude pro-Western sentiments among the neighbouring states, economic components also indicate Moscow has been less successful. Western economic expansion via the Eastern Partnership and other programmes is proving to be more efficient.



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Nor can the Russian leadership entice states around the world to recognise the independence of the breakaway entities. For instance, in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, only Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru have extended them recognition. This trend is not likely to change anytime soon. Moscow simply does not have sufficient resources – and in any case, US laws on withholding financial aid from states that recognise the independence of separatist territories throughout the former Soviet space remain a major disincentive. In case of other territorial conflicts, no recognition has taken place.

Nor does Russia have any long-term economic vision for the breakaway territories. Dire economic straits have inevitably caused populations to flee toward abundant medical, trade, and educational opportunities other countries provide. Usually these are the

territories from which the separatist forces initially tried to break away. The Kremlin has failed to transform those entities into secure and economically stable lands. Crime levels as well as high-level corruption and active black markets have been on an upward trajectory, which undermines the effectiveness of financial largesse Moscow has to provide on a regular basis.

Over the past several years, there have been hints in the media about rising discontent within the Russian political elite on how the breakaway territories (plus Syria) are being run. Questions have been raised about how Russian money is being spent and about the increasingly predatory nature of the separatist (plus Syrian) political elites, which are focused on extracting as much economic benefit as they can from Moscow. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for the leaders in the non-recognised entities to secure Russian funding. Usually, it takes several visits to Russian leadership and counterdemands by Moscow that would further increase Russian influence in the territories. For example, Abkhazian leadership has barely secured finances from Russia, but has also received conditions upon which the largesse was dependent – the right to buy land and partake in the electricity system in Abkhazia³.

This situation with Russian financing of these regions is similar to the state of affairs in the late 1980s, just prior to the Soviet Union's collapse. At that time, members of the Soviet elite started to realise that Moscow had become little more than a supplier to the Soviet republics that had grown more and more predatory as corruption skyrocketed and production levels sank. That was one of the reasons for the Soviet Union's dissolution.

The Soviet level of endowment to the republics was far higher than what Moscow provides to the non-recognised regions, but a similarity in patterns is evident. Moscow has to cope with domestic economic troubles, “disobedience” from separatist leaders, and problematic relations with the West. These challenges make it difficult for Moscow to pull the strings in multiple separatist regions at once. As a result, the Russian elite has grown less willing to provide direct economic benefit to the separatists, as the return is too marginal to warrant the expense. This produces counterdemands by Moscow to further cement its influence and maximise the dependence of the entities on Russian largesse.

The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh

A special case for the study of Russia's evolving approach toward territorial conflicts along its borders is the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The long-standing Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, in which Russia has never been militarily involved but has indirectly been in its orbit, is now under the Kremlin's direct geopolitical influence. Russia's decision to send some 2,000 peacekeepers to the conflict zone signals toward the existing pattern of Moscow's geopolitical approach to the territorial conflicts discussed above.

Although Russia has long been the guarantor of order in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's recent military success in and around Nagorno-Karabakh has presented Moscow with a major challenge. Its approach of maintaining the post-1994 status quo between the two South Caucasus rivals was clearly no longer sustainable. A new reality, reflecting a new balance of power with another power – Turkey, has been emerging.

3 A. Bzhania, *A Group of States in the Post-Soviet Space... Will Organise Some Union (Группа государств на постсоветском пространстве... будет организовывать некий союз)*, “Ekho Kavkaza”, December 2020 [<https://www.ekhokavkaz.com/a/30982664.html>].

Russia found itself boxed out of easily influencing future outcomes in the region.

This moment has been a long time coming. Azerbaijan has raced far ahead in the regional arms race, managing to purchase high-tech weaponry from Turkey and Israel, all the while successfully quashing any attempts by Nagorno-Karabakh to gain international recognition. Moreover, the 2016 four-day “April War” over Nagorno-Karabakh can in retrospect be seen as Azerbaijan testing out what it already judged to be its growing military superiority. Although the conflict did not lead to any major territorial adjustments, Armenia clearly saw itself as the loser, with President Serzh Sargsyan firing several top generals in its aftermath. At its conclusion, Russia managed to play its traditional role of the arbiter, with a ceasefire negotiated in Moscow.

Additionally, although Russia has been selling arms to Azerbaijan, its leverage over authorities in Baku has been in decline, while the Turkish influence has been on the rise. Therefore, Moscow faced a somewhat similar dilemma to what it witnessed in other regions: an emergence of another power gradually eating at Russian regional standing. Elsewhere it has been the collective West; in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it is Turkey.

In the 2020 war, the territorial gains made by Azerbaijan are a concrete manifestation of the growing military imbalance that was already apparent four years ago. And this time around, Russian attempts at brokering some kind of a lasting ceasefire in Moscow were patently ignored by troops on the ground. Indeed, faced with a territorial *fait accompli* Russia felt tempted to openly legitimate Azerbaijan’s gains rather than appear even more powerless.

Such a move, however, could come with costs to Russia’s clout within Armenia. As a full member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia expected

Russian aid should its territorial integrity come under direct threat. But given that Nagorno-Karabakh is not even officially recognised by the Armenians themselves, Russia is not treaty-bound to intervene.

Nevertheless, Russia did not make a move for weeks. Some speculated that the reason for Russian reticence could have been Moscow’s antipathy toward Armenia’s reformist prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 following the so-called Velvet Revolution and has since tried to foster deeper ties with the West than his predecessors. However, the Russian vision was purely geopolitical. The Armenians, trapped between Azerbaijan and Turkey, had no potential alternative patrons and the Russians may have banked on a stinging defeat hurting Pashinyan to attain additional concessions from Yerevan.

The defeat did not mean the fall of the densely populated core of Nagorno-Karabakh. This would have been a red line for Russia. Such a defeat would inflict a lasting damage to Russia’s reputation in the region: By allowing Azerbaijan to reconquer all its claimed territories, Russia would lose one of its main sources of leverage in the region – over both countries. Therefore, sending Russian peacekeepers to the conflict was a major decision Moscow has been working toward.

Such a decision fits neatly into the Russian vision of using unrecognised territories for geopolitical aims of keeping other powers at bay. The Russian move was also conditioned by Turkey’s bold policy in the region. Turkey’s very vocal and active support of Azerbaijan cuts at the very essence of Russia’s role as a regional arbiter. Although Russia’s decision to move its peacekeeping troops into the conflict zone is a definite retrenchment of its power in the South Caucasus, Moscow, similarly to other territories discussed above, will face an unenviable task of maintaining peace,

building a long-term solution that would not question its geopolitical position, fostering closer relations with Yerevan and Baku without causing resentment in either of the capitals, and, last but not least, containing Turkey's pressure.

One of the first problems Moscow will face is the lack of vision over the political status for Nagorno-Karabakh. This is bound to create uncertainties and insecurities for the remaining Armenian population. What kind of communal coexistence is possible between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians is yet another question⁴.

The November agreement reads that "internally displaced persons and refugees shall return to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas under the supervision of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees"⁵. The stipulation's viability is unclear unless Yerevan and Baku willingly cooperate – an unlikely scenario. Concomitant competing property claims between both ethnic groups will further complicate the peace process.

Yet another challenge will be the division between Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, which now goes right between Shusha and Stepanakert, Karabakh's capital. Since the cities are only 10 kilometres apart, the defence of Stepanakert, which is downhill from Azerbaijani-controlled Shusha, will be particularly difficult. This makes Stepanakert militarily vulnerable – another source of tensions Russian troops will have to face.

The five-year term of the Russian peacekeeping mission in the region is also an uncomfortable reality for the Armenians

in Karabakh. As the stipulation says, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a right to stop the extension of the agreement. Surely, Russia will work hard to make sure neither Baku nor Yerevan would want to have Russian peacekeepers return home. It is also clear that Yerevan is unlikely to be a side that would support the removal of the Russian troops. Baku, on the contrary, could pedal this scenario. This would create problems for Russia and its geopolitical interests in the region. After all, with the euphoria around the war gains slowly dissipating, Azerbaijan's political elites and the general public will start to realise that the conflict has not been resolved and that Yerevan still has a direct line to the truncated Karabakh territory. Besides, the very prospect of Russian troops' long-term presence on Azerbaijani soil undoubtedly would be an uncomfortable reality for the country's politicians.

While thankful to Moscow's reticent position during the war, Baku could see resentment toward the Russian military presence unwilling to leave Karabakh slowly emerging. In Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, Russian presence was either negatively viewed from the very beginning or became so over a certain period of time. Azerbaijan is unlikely to be a different case. Navigating between its geopolitical needs to influence both Yerevan and Baku and the latter's growing resentment, Moscow will have to constantly keep balance between the two states, remain as unbiased as possible, and lay out a realistic approach to the final resolution of the conflict – an unenviable task for Russian policy-makers. However, the opposite scenario of ignoring the balancing option for gaining other political benefits is also possible.

4 E. Avdaliani, *Russia's Unenviable Position in Karabakh*, "Caucasus Watch", November 2020 [<https://caucasuswatch.de/news/3288.html>].

5 *Official text of Nagorno Karabakh armistice*, November 2020 [<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1034480.html>]

Another challenge for Russia is of a much bigger calibre. NATO member Turkey's emergence as a direct military player in the South Caucasus after 100 years is a significant development, which will influence Russia's calculus. Although scholarly discussions on the results of the war vary⁶, what is clear is that Azerbaijan allied itself with Turkey and won a war, while Russia's ally – Armenia – lost. This has been made possible through Azerbaijan's decade-long military buildup and Turkey's continuous logistical support and training.



As the case of sending a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh shows, Russia views the conflicts in its neighbourhood as a potential to advance its interests, maximise gains, and keep foreign powers at bay

Russia's decision to station its forces in Karabakh is in a way an escalation of those options, which were traditionally in the hands of Russian politicians since the breakup of the Soviet Union. As a dominant power, Russia ideally should have navigated the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan without entering the fray. Acting as a power that dissuades from war based on its prestige, rather than acts out of necessity, is what constitutes a great power position⁷. The Russian decision, however, signals if not an outright decline, then a limit of options, escalation of commitments. In addition, Turkey is instrumental here. After all, if not

for the dispatch of forces, Ankara's influence in Baku would have grown even further.

The Kremlin's inability to address Turkey's role is also seen in the fact that the country has not been mentioned in the November agreement. This creates a significant loophole. Ankara will try to gain its own military presence on Azerbaijani soil. Cooperation with Russia will take place, but as long as it fits in with Turkish interests. Otherwise, Moscow's military position could be challenged through various means considering how intensive Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan are. A negative trend in Moscow-Baku relations would be an opportunity for Ankara to use.

Although Russian peacekeeping troops in Karabakh have stopped the war, the November agreement leaves numerous questions unanswered: safe return of refugees, humanitarian concerns, security of the Armenian community in the truncated Karabakh, Turkey's fluid role, etc. Moscow's position is much more limited than it was before the conflict. The Kremlin will have to navigate between different actors and try to find a balance by not causing resentment in Baku, which could push it to embrace Turkey.

Conclusion

Although Russia's approach to each territorial dispute near its borders differs, an overall pattern is nevertheless evident – the use of separatist conflicts to increase its geopolitical influence. As the case of sending a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh shows, Russia views the conflicts in its neighbourhood as a potential to

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- 6 J. Losh, *Russian Troops in Nagorno-Karabakh 'Clearly a Win for Moscow'*, "Foreign Policy", November 2020 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/25/russian-troops-nagorno-karabakh-peacekeepers-win-moscow-armenia-azerbaijan/>];
E. Avdaliani, *Winners and Losers in the South Caucasus*, "CEPA", December 2020 [<https://cepa.org/winners-and-losers-in-the-south-caucasus/>].
- 7 L. Broers, *Did Russia Win the Karabakh War?*, "EurasiaNet", November 2020 [<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-did-russia-win-the-karabakh-war/>].

advance its interests, maximise gains, and keep foreign powers at bay.

Along with the increase in influence, however, the separatist political elites in all the above-discussed entities have become increasingly predatory, raising unwillingness in the Kremlin to disburse financial aid. The long-term economic effects of the pandemic as well as Russia's difficult economic situation also undermine development of a long-term vision for the unrecognised regions. Nor did wider international recognition materialise. Moreover, although Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have not attained NATO/EU membership status, the Russian policy of using the disputes has failed to reverse pro-Western sentiments in those states.

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INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY ARSENAL: TARGETING RELATIONS BETWEEN POLAND AND UKRAINE

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Information security has become a strategically important aspect of international relations. Rapid development of information and communications technologies increases its importance. This paper focuses on the analysis of Russia's capabilities to achieve its foreign policy goals through methods of negative informational impact. Attempts to undermine the information security of Poland and Ukraine and to provoke tensions between the two countries are taken as an example.

Introduction

Information operations are an important tool in the Kremlin's foreign policy arsenal. Russia is systematically trying to influence public opinion worldwide. State intelligence services, fake accounts on social networks, state-funded media, and bot farms, the so-called "troll factories", are all involved in global information warfare that brings uncertainty and unpredictability and almost blurs the line between peace and war. The pillars of Russia's international information operations are multilingual information resources, such as the TV channel *Russia Today (RT)* and news agency *Sputnik*, as well as local alternative media – niche right-wing sites specialising in conspiracy theories and anti-European, anti-American, and anti-liberal content.

Russia invests significantly in its foreign media platforms. For instance, the non-profit organisation TV-Novosti, which owns RT, was subsidised with USD 369.7 million in 2020. The funding amount allocated for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), Russian officialdom's mouthpiece in the post-Soviet space, was USD 327.4 million in 2020¹.

Russia's information activities aimed at foreign audiences were detected as a threat by Western societies not so long ago. Particular concerns were caused by the Kremlin's manipulative practices during previous US and French presidential elections (in 2016 and 2017, respectively), as well as the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. From the Kremlin's perspective, the result of information operations abroad

1 *Records at Budget's Expense (Рекорды за счёт бюджета)*, "Secret Mag", 20 April 2020
[<https://secretmag.ru/news/rekordy-za-schyot-byudzheteta-telekanal-russia-today-potratil-22-3-mlrd-rublei-za-god.html>].

turned out to be rather questionable. The Russian government did not receive expected dividends in the diplomatic field. On the contrary, Russia's provocative behaviour has forced Western governments to take a closer look at information security issues. A number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of citizens and debunking fake news were launched in response.



Russia's information activities aimed at foreign audiences were detected as a threat by Western societies not so long ago. Particular concerns were caused by the Kremlin's manipulative practices during previous US and French presidential elections

Countering Russian social media influence has become especially relevant on the eve of the 2020 US presidential election. How did the platforms handle the challenge? Facebook, for instance, developed partnerships with a bipartisan network of fact-checkers, added prominent labels to disputed stories, and changed the News Feed algorithm to favour posts from friends over links from publishers². Other social networking giants (YouTube, Twitter) also restricted access to manipulative publications of about 20 Russian media (*RIA Novosti, RT, Sputnik, Russia 1, etc.*)³.

For the domestic consumer, Russian propaganda constructs an image of Russia as a "besieged fortress". Therefore, the Kremlin

portrays its information policy as a response to provocative actions of "Western hostile forces". The framework of this narrative was laid out in the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (adopted in December 2016). In the document, Russia appears as an object of destructive information influence of external forces – states that carry out hostile policy toward Russia, and terrorist organisations. However, in reality, we see the opposite picture, in which Russia continues to invade the information space of other states.

Russia's Information Toolkit in Poland and Ukraine

One of the key priorities of the Kremlin's policy in the region is to freeze Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration and slow down its cooperation with the EU. An obvious way to achieve this goal by means of a non-military toolkit is to provoke new and deepen existing misunderstandings in Ukraine's relations with its Western neighbours.

Poland also has a special place in the Russian anti-Western rhetoric. In the framework of a pro-Russian information paradigm, Poland is portrayed at the forefront of US political and energy interests in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, even partial success of Russia's attempts to discredit Warsaw's policies in the military-political sphere in the eyes of neighbouring societies may weaken the ability to reach consensus within the EU and NATO, undermining the foundations of the Eastern Partnership policy.

Given the language barrier and cultural differences, the structure and methodology

2 *Labeling State-Controlled Media on Facebook*, "Facebook", June 2020

[<https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/>].

3 *Social Networks Limiting State Media Proposed to Be Blocked in Russia (В России предложили блокировать соцсети, ограничивающие государственные СМИ)*, "BBC", 19 November 2020
[<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-54999609>].


of Russian information activities and impact in Ukraine and Poland differ significantly. Therefore, the tools of Russia's information influence in Poland and Ukraine should be defined.

Poland

Moscow has relatively limited possibilities of influencing Polish society through information activities. There are no TV news channels linked to the Kremlin in Poland, and there are no key information portals actively lobbying Russian disinformation messages. Polish society does not use Russian-language television channels or internet portals due to the low percentage of people speaking Russian. The English-language channel RT, which is available via satellite platforms, is also extremely unpopular – the Poles who have access to English-language channels are much more likely to choose Western sources. Due to the small percentage of people who know Russian, the Telegram platform, which is actively used by Russians for disinformation and propaganda activities, is also not gaining popularity in Poland. Russian platforms such as Vkontakte (VK) or Odnoklassniki (OK) are not recognised as the leading ones, which makes it difficult to obtain data about the number of users. However, it is likely that the level of popularity is in line with the European trend (0.58% of Europeans using social networking platforms used VK in 2020)⁴. We can also assume that the main group using Russian platforms are Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians (including economic migrants) living in Poland, who are increasing the proportion of VK and OK users.

Under such circumstances, Russia is looking for ways to influence Polish society by using

Polish-language portals with controversial and radical content (on the verge of conspiracy theories), fan pages, and groups operating on Facebook or YouTube channels. Russia also attempts to influence the Polish information space through Russian portals that have Polish language versions (e.g., the portal that primarily affects the population of the Baltic states, *Rubaltic.ru*).



Russia is looking for ways to influence Polish society by using Polish-language portals with controversial and radical content (on the verge of conspiracy theories), fan pages, and groups operating on Facebook or YouTube channels

The Russian side also uses pro-Russian or national-radical organisations to lobby for its messages and to organise demonstrations or social actions that build desired narratives and messages. These organisations correspondingly have their own websites and fan pages that popularise the messages close to the Russian propaganda or introduce translations of Russian propaganda articles into the Polish infosphere.

YouTube plays a major role in the process of spreading messages of Russian propaganda in the Polish information space. It is on this platform that recordings of, among others, a few pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian actions are placed, as well as recordings that openly serve Russian disinformation purposes (e.g., arguing against the presence of US troops in Poland or arousing hatred toward Ukrainian migrants).

⁴ *Ranking 2020*, "Najpopularniejsze portale społecznościowe", 01 November 2020 [<https://lepiej-widoczni.pl/najpopularniejsze-portale-spolecznościowe-ranking-2020/>].

There is a noticeable tendency that the Polish language version of the Sputnik portal sets the agenda of disinformation content, which is popularised by alternative portals. It is also noticeable that some of the alternative portals are publishing articles clearly imitating Russian-language publications that have appeared on key information portals of the Russian Federation. Polish alternative portals draw not only on topics and narratives but also on phrases directly from Russian portals, which are actively used for propaganda.

Ukraine

Russia had expanded its presence in the information environment of Ukraine almost without hindrance until 2014. The key resource of Russia's information influence was television, one of the main sources of news for Ukrainians. During the occupation of Crimea and armed intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Russian propaganda machine was aimed at undermining the foundations of Ukrainian statehood. It is not surprising that the Ukrainian authorities "turned off the tap" of Russian state-sponsored television: Broadcasting of most Russian channels has been banned since the spring of 2014. Moreover, films glorifying Russian military and special forces, as well as Russian cultural figures supporting Russia's policy toward Ukraine, were also banned. As of today, the National Council of Ukraine for Television and Radio Broadcasting has restricted the broadcasting of more than 90 foreign TV channels, the vast majority of which are of Russian origin⁵.

According to a survey, 17% of Ukrainian citizens continue to use Russian media,

and Russian television remains one of the major sources of information for almost 6% of respondents. Russian TV channels are most often watched by respondents over 50 years of age living in the eastern regions of Ukraine (about a quarter of respondents in Donetsk and Zaporizhia regions). It is worth noting that the motivation is quite different: to receive news from Russia, to learn an alternative point of view on the events in Ukraine, to receive news in Russian⁶.



The Russian side also uses pro-Russian or national-radical organisations to lobby for its messages and to organise demonstrations or social actions that build desired narratives and messages


A real challenge in the context of information security of the state is the penetration of Russian narratives through the media network of local agents of Russian influence in Ukraine. A special role in this algorithm is given to Victor Medvedchuk, widely known in Ukraine as Putin's crony. No wonder Medvedchuk is recognised as the main Kremlin voice in Ukraine. In 2018-19, he indirectly acquired three news channels – NewsOne, 112 Ukraine, and ZIK. Thus, Russian propaganda received a "residence permit", which complicates the state's response to pro-Russian "information sabotage" on screen.

However, the effectiveness of these media resources is quite insignificant. First, although TV channels from Medvedchuk's

5 *Ukraine Banned Three Russian Channels – State Rada (В Україні заборонили три російські канали – Нацрада)*, "Radio Svoboda", 27 February 2020 [https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-nacrada-rosijski-kanaly/30458438.html].

6 *17% of Ukrainians Use Russian Media – Poll (Російськими ЗМІ користуються 17% українців – опитування)*, "Interfax", 16 October 2020 [https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/general/695544.html].

political orbit hold leading positions among Ukrainian news channels, the share of their audience on national air varies within only 1-2%. Secondly, although the editorial policy of TV channels usually sounds in tune with the main narratives of Russian propaganda, it is determined in the first place by the party line ("The Opposition Platform for Life") and its electoral interests. Preference is given to the topics of Russian propaganda that strengthen the party's position.



A real challenge in the context of information security of the state is the penetration of Russian narratives through the media network of local agents of Russian influence in Ukraine

Social networks remain the main source of news for Ukrainians. Therefore, an important step in enhancing Ukraine's information resilience and data privacy was taken in May 2017, when Russian social networks VK and OK, as well as Mail.Ru, Yandex services, and a number of other Russian internet resources, were banned for three years. (Recently, President Volodymyr Zelensky extended the ban for another three years. Probably, a similar decision will be made in 2023). As a result, the number of VK visitors dropped more than five times (down to 10% of all Ukrainian internet users), while OK audience decreased threefold⁷.

Lately, the fears of Telegram as a new "Trojan horse" of Russian information influence have spread among the expert community in Ukraine. Thus, attempts to block Telegram

in Russia back in 2018 were perceived by many as a covert attempt to draw public attention to Telegram channels as sources of information and give the appearance of the state's non-involvement in their activities. Indeed, it may seem suspicious that political Telegram channels began to expand in the Ukrainian segment of Telegram network on the eve of the 2019 election campaign. Moreover, behind the activities of a number of Telegram channels stood representatives of the inner circle of Ukrainian fugitive ex-president Viktor Yanukovich hiding in Russia. However, it is worth noting that despite 5.6 million users of the communication platform in Ukraine as of mid-2020, Telegram channels that cover political topics are less popular, but the popularity has been significantly increasing within the year.

The political situation in Belarus is a clear example of helplessness of a rigid administrative hierarchy when it faces a horizontal social communication network. Hence, the threat of possible Russian influence on information security of Ukraine by means of Telegram is overestimated in some aspects. It is unlikely that the Kremlin will choose a "Telegram Revolution" scenario to destabilise Ukraine because it may turn out to be a shot in its own foot: The use of Telegram as a communication platform for coordinating protests in Belarus and Ukraine will become a clear example of an instrument of civil disobedience in the eyes of the society in Russia. Given the popularity of the messenger among Russians (the number of Telegram users in the Russian Federation has exceeded 30 million⁸), the Kremlin may eventually run into trouble on the domestic political front, especially on the eve of the State Duma elections in September 2021.

7 *Three Years without Vkontakte (Три года без "Вконтакте")*, "e-Pravda", 14 November 2019 [<https://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/publications/2019/11/14/653664/>].

8 *Number of Telegram Users in Russia Increased to 30mln (Число пользователей Telegram из России возросло до 30 млн человек)*, "Kod.ru", 04 June 2020 [<https://kod.ru/telegram-30-mln-users-from-russia/>].

Ukrainian Labour Migrants – Another Horror Story from Russian Propaganda

In the broader aspect, the issue of Ukrainian economic migrants is related to the spread of messages about the threat that Ukrainians pose to Polish workers (overtaking jobs). These messages were expanded to include the plots of banditism and alcoholism, which are supposed to be characteristic features of Ukrainian migrants. The messages popularised by portals involved in the distribution of content similar to Russian propaganda tried to arouse fear and dissatisfaction among the Poles with the presence of Ukrainians.



The Russian government uses the “national memory” policy as a trouble-proof tool for political mobilisation. The war against both internal and external “falsifiers of true history” is an inexhaustible resource for maintaining ratings of the national leader and enhancing state mythology

These narratives were combined with an attempt to spark social rebellion against the Polish government that opened the country to “wild hordes of bandits”. The messages indicated above were, over time, developed with current plots – for example, the threat posed to the society of becoming infected with COVID-19 by Ukrainians coming from a country that is completely unable to cope with the pandemic. In the picture created by the mentioned media centres, Ukrainians became a source of pestilence, banditry – and a source of social tensions. In order to emphasise the level of social anger of the Poles against the Ukrainians, the outlets connected with Russia broadcast the

frequency of attacks on Ukrainian migrants, remind about earlier beatings, and refresh the plots concerning fights between the Poles and Ukrainians.

In Ukraine, pro-Russian media gladly replicate news about conflicts between the Ukrainians and the Poles. This creates a hypertrophied impression of an atmosphere of hatred that seems to prevail between the Poles and Ukrainian migrants. Additionally, Russian media often use derogatory language relative to migrant workers from Ukraine, calling them “Gastarbeiters”.

Ukrainian labour migration is used by the Russian propaganda to construct an image of official Warsaw as a selfish “exploiter” of human resources of Ukraine. At the same time, Warsaw allegedly cultivates “russophobic” sentiments and artificially incites hostility and violence between the Ukrainians and Russians. Thus, Russian media sometimes portray Ukrainian migrants in Poland as “bearers of nationalist ideology” and its propagators.

All Quiet on the Historical Front

The Russian government uses the “national memory” policy as a trouble-proof tool for political mobilisation. The war against both internal and external “falsifiers of true history” is an inexhaustible resource for maintaining ratings of the national leader and enhancing state mythology. Practices of this kind are characteristic of many states that build their pantheons of heroes and adjust their national history in accordance with the political situation. Usually, such agenda does not coincide with the historical vision of other countries. Therefore, the battle over memory becomes more aggressive and fierce year after year. Not surprisingly, the aggressive tone of the Kremlin’s national memory policy is projected onto its foreign policy. This trend, of course, determines the agenda of Poland–Russia relations at the current stage.

The period of 2019-2020 saw a number of important anniversaries in the history of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia (in particular the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, centennial anniversary of the Polish-Soviet War and its culmination – the Battle of Warsaw). Perhaps the harshest historical controversy between Poland and Russia arose over the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. Ukraine’s ambassador to Poland, Andrii Deshchytisia, noted the following: “Vladimir Putin and his entourage launched a large-scale propaganda campaign accusing Poland of anti-Semitism and responsibility for the outbreak of World War II. The reaction of the Ukrainian side to these false reproaches must be unequivocal: we are in solidarity with Poland”⁹. It should be emphasised that these statements became the leitmotif of the Ukrainian president’s participation in commemoration events in Poland.

However, a fierce confrontation with Warsaw over history did not prevent Russian propaganda from exploiting its favourite topic: Ukrainian nationalists. Russian media gladly picked up critical statements by the ambassadors of Israel and Poland regarding the honouring of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in early January 2020. The response of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was interpreted as evidence of glorifying “Nazi collaborators”¹⁰.

The global coronavirus pandemic has temporarily overshadowed wars on the edges of national memory. However, one of the recent events that served to refresh these narratives was the visit of President Duda of Poland to Ukraine. Media centres have been permanently engaged in popularising Russian propaganda, focusing on the motive of the “Bandera greeting” (“Sława Ukrajini”), which, on the first day of the visit, during the official welcome at Mariyinsky Palace, was shouted out by the president of Poland according to Ukrainian protocol.

Competing Economies

In the picture of the world created by Russian propaganda for Ukrainian audience, Poland appears as Ukraine’s competitor in the European market. In this vein, Russian media reacted to the news about the plans of official Kyiv to start negotiations on the revision of the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement (in 2021). Ukrainian Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Agriculture Igor Petrashko stated that Ukraine counts on “Poland’s friendly support in this important issue”¹¹.

At the same time, Russian media spread the thesis that the Association Agreement benefits Warsaw “as well as the European Union”, so Ukraine should not expect real support from the Polish side¹². Another almost similar argument is as follows: Polish

9 *Deshchytisia on Russia’s Information Attacks (Дециця - про інформатаки Росії)*, “UkrInform”, 02 January 2020 [<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/2848593-desica-pro-informataki-rosii-polsa-ne-musit-nicogo-poasnuvati.html>].

10 *“Condemn Once and For All”: Will Israeli and Polish Ambassadors’ Call to Reject Heroization of Bandera Influence Kyiv? («Раз и навсегда осудить»: повлияет ли на Киев призыв послов Израиля и Польши отказаться от героизации Бандеры)*, “RT”, 03 January 2020 [<https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/704449-posly-izrail-polsha-bandera>].

11 *Revision of the Association Agreement: Ukraine Looks Forward to the Start of Negotiations with the EU in 2021 (Перегляд Угоди про асоціацію: Україна розраховує на початок переговорів з ЄС у 2021 році)*, “UkrInform”, 09 September 2020 [<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3096013-pereglad-ugodi-pro-asociaciu-ukraina-rozrahovue-na-pocatok-peregovoriv-z-es-u-2021-roci.html>].

12 *Revision of Partnership: Why Kyiv Intends to Change EU Association Agreement (Пересмотр сотрудничества: почему Киев намерен изменить Соглашение об ассоциации с ЕС)*, “RT”, 10 September 2020 [<https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/782045-ukraina-soglashenie-associaciya-es-peregovory-2021>].

entrepreneurs, and hence the government, are not interested in strengthening Ukrainian economy due to the fear of an outflow of labour migrants.

Also, Russian media are trying to spread scepticism concerning cooperation between Ukraine and Poland in the energy sector. The Kremlin's irritation due to the consolidated position of Kyiv and Warsaw over Nord Stream 2 can be easily seen in Russia's attempts to generate mistrust. Moscow attempts to discredit Poland in terms of energy supplies to Ukraine: This is evidenced by a number of publications that critically assess the prospects of a trilateral agreement on the need to strengthen energy security in the region, which was signed on August 31, 2019, by US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Danilyuk, and Polish Government Plenipotentiary for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimsky (according to the agreement, Poland will supply Ukraine with six billion cubic metres of natural gas in 2021)¹³.

Moreover, Kremlin-controlled media produce a negative information background for the agreements with the Polish company PGNiG over the search for gas deposits in western Ukraine. The main narrative sounds like this: Poland tries to become a regional gas hub through the sale of US gas to Ukraine. According to the interpretation of Russian propagandists, this violates Kyiv's main interest in energy, which is to buy Russian gas directly from Russia¹⁴.

Russian propaganda processes a lot of messages that strike at the image of the Polish

government (stimulating dissatisfaction with the government's actions, taking away part of the electorate and directing it toward parties of a more radical/right-wing nature). According to this narrative, bad (including anti-Russian) actions of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly lead to the full international isolation of Poland. Poland is to be isolated by the EU and Russia (after J. Biden's victory, there were also reports of impending isolation from the US). Poland is therefore to be condemned to relations with Ukraine and Lithuania, which are presented as weak and insignificant countries. The negative image of Ukraine is being used to create a negative image of the current government and other parties that allegedly seek to be subordinate to the US or Germany (EU). At the same time, a subliminal message is being built, according to which only normalised relations with Russia will allow Poland to strengthen its position in the world.

Conclusions

Deterioration of relations between Kyiv and Warsaw generates a number of benefits for Moscow. Thus, Ukraine and Poland are both in the focus of Russia's propaganda. Russian information warfare is aimed at undermining solidarity between the two states, eroding regional cooperation, and elevating cross-border tensions.

The activities of outlets controlled by the Kremlin or the activity of alternative portals permanently involved in spreading Russian narratives promote a negative image of Ukraine and Ukrainians, aiming to block the possibility of closer cooperation between Warsaw and Kyiv. The actions of the Russian propagandists serve to limit the support

13 *Ukraine, Poland, and US Will Sign a Memorandum on Gas Supply (Україна, Польща і США підпишуть меморандум про постачання газу)*, "EuroIntegration", 30 August 2020 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2019/08/30/7100236/].

14 *Poland Will Look for Gas in Ukraine and Will Take It (Польща поищет газ на Украине и заберет его себе)*, "Lenta.ru", 09 December 2020 [https://lenta.ru/news/2019/12/09/pgnig/].

of the Poles for political forces advocating cooperation with Ukraine, whether in diplomatic, military, or economic space.

Our analysis indicates the following key areas of Russian disinformation activities: manipulations in the sphere of collective memory, constructing a negative image of Ukrainian labour migration to Poland, and undermining energy cooperation.

In the face of such actions on the part of the Russian side, the response of Poland and Ukraine lies in the sphere of education. The goal is to reach out to the citizens with a clear message (accessible analyses), which would continuously reveal the mechanisms and goals of Russian disinformation. An effective tool seems to be the popularisation of social networking platforms that would tell the citizens of Ukraine and Poland (supported by examples of disinformation content – including screens of Russian articles) about the tools and goals of the

Kremlin on the basis of short and simple analyses/explanations.

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INSTRUMENTS OF RUSSIAN HYBRID ACTIONS AGAINST BRITISH AND AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

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The US elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 marked a peculiar milestone of informational and quasi-political confrontation. Not only the results of the said events were surprising for the general public, but they also revealed specific peculiarities of the capacity of hybrid influence and interference in domestic democratic processes of other countries. Russian state agents conducted a large-scale disinformation campaign aimed at British and US populations in order to influence the results of the vote. Such activities should be viewed in the context of a greater Russian strategy of hybrid meddling in democratic processes of the West. The purpose of this paper is to identify and define the strategies of the Russian hybrid aggression against Western democracies.

Introduction

The famous "Gerasimov doctrine", which is essentially a somewhat doctrinised by the Western specialists Russian approach to modern warfare, was first laid down in an article by General Valery Gerasimov in 2013. If we are to put the whole concept of that article into a single sentence, it will go as follows: "The emphasis of the used methods of confrontation is shifting towards the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures".¹ Such a shift toward the effective use and capacity building of non-military means of confrontation presupposes a corresponding change in the strategic perspective. It is obvious that the notion of military confrontation as a real-time clash of military potentials of two

sovereign states on the battlefield remains an archaism of the 20th century. In this context, it becomes dangerous to consider the information activities of a country – through government news agencies, funding of independent media agents, or other similar activities – only as its own positioning in the international arena or the process creating a certain image. At present, such actions of the Russian military and political leadership in many cases are genuine acts of aggression that require clear and accurate tracking.

In 2014, the world saw for the first time visible results of a long and strategically planned information campaign conducted by the Russian Federation in preparation for its aggressive actions against Ukraine. The work of Russian media and information outlets in the preparation and implementation

1 V. Gerasimov, *Ценность науки в предвидении (The Value of Science Is in Foresight)*, "Военно-промышленный курьер" ("Military-Industrial Kurier"), 26 February 2013 [<https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>].

of Operation “Russian Spring” and the attempted illegal annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 was one of the key factors in the initial success of the Russian aggressors, creating an appropriate information basis both for Russian population and for inhabitants of target regions.



it should be divided into formal measures (open information platforms, forums, state-sponsored media, diplomatic channels of influence) and informal measures (so-called “troll factories”, means of indirect media influence, targeted use of flows of “fake news”

Achieving the first success in conducting information military operations without any adequate deterrence, the Russian information agents began to expand their scope and potential for lesion. Thus, we observed interference in the referendum on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2016 and in the US presidential elections the same year. Obviously, it would be an exaggeration to say that in both cases Russian influence and Russian hybrid measures played a key role in the final result of these democratic processes, but they can serve as the most evident cases for dissecting and researching Russian hybrid influence and its future potential. After the aforementioned cases, such a policy did continue and could be seen

in the parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom in 2019 and in the presidential election in the United States in 2020.

Russian Handbook on Hybrid Warfare: Main Tools

In the cases of Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, it is worth starting with the general disposition of Russian potential. First, it should be divided into formal measures (open information platforms, forums, state-sponsored media, diplomatic channels of influence) and informal measures (so-called “troll factories”, means of indirect media influence, targeted use of flows of “fake news”², shady financing of specific political and information instruments, etc.). At the same time, it must be clearly understood that both the formal and informal components of this arsenal are a single system that functioned inextricably to implement a geopolitical course to destabilise leading Western democracies and create an illusion of weakness of their institutions. It should be noted that the unofficial part was conducted under the direct and clear control of the top leadership of the Russian Federation and President Putin himself – such conclusions were reached both by authorities from the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence³ and by specialists from the Intelligence and Security Committee of the United Kingdom Parliament⁴.

Based on the evidence studied by the US and British specialists, it is possible to outline the following areas of informal influence

- 2 For the purposes of this article, “fake news” shall be defined in accordance with Cambridge dictionary as “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke”. Cambridge Dictionary, Fake News, n.d. [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news>].
- 3 National Intelligence Council, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*, “ICA 2017-01D”, 06 January 2017 [<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3719492/Read-the-declassified-report-on-Russian.pdf>].
- 4 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Russia*, “HC 632”, 21 July 2020 [<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/intelligence-and-security-committee-s-russia-report/9c665c08033cab70/full.pdf>].

of Russian agents on the situation with democratic processes:

1. Cyber threats;
2. Information threats (disinformation and decision influence, propaganda);
3. Russian expatriates (viewed mostly as a financial tool).


Also, as an indispensable part of a grand informational geopolitics, each part of this triumvirate has its own role and variety of tasks. Let us consider each of them separately.

Cyber Threats

Cyber threats encompass a wide variety of tools, mostly exercised by semi-governmental professional hacker networks. Their main targets include critical information infrastructure (such as election databases, political parties' online communication networks, and information agencies), main national security and intelligence agencies, and independent accounts or data of prominent persons. The starkest and, clearly, most influential example is the leakage of information from the Democratic Party convention's email and data sets. According to Mueller investigation, this operation was conducted by representatives of Russian intelligence units operating under the pseudonym "Guccifer 2.0"⁵.

Among the most notorious "players" in the field of Russian cyber threats is the Internet Research Agency (*Агентство интернет-исследований*), also known as "Kremlin trolls" or "troll farms". Set up in 2013, this organisation – located in several equipped offices throughout Russia, mostly

in the vicinity of St. Petersburg – is directly connected to the high Russian executive power and, as numerous sources suggest, controlled strategically by the closest circle of the Russian president⁶. Along with their main line of work as hackers and cyber specialists, the "trolls" also conduct high-profile, strategically planned information campaigns throughout popular social media platforms in order to create an appropriate and convincing information narrative.



A separate important task of cyber specialists in the Russian intelligence was the creation of a so-called "complex landscape" – a situation in which the response to certain aggressive actions slows down or becomes impossible due to the difficulty of determining the source of the threat

Although such a narrative can be called a "pro-Russian", that is low-level messaging – too obvious for an experienced Web user to rely on. Instead, more sophisticated approaches were deployed. If direct support for the ideas of the "Russian World" (*Русский мир*) is not really effective, then the attempt to show the weakness of leadership in a country, the ineffectiveness of democratic institutions, or the lack of social justice is much more impactful. Such reports find a strong response from society, and on both sides of the political spectrum. Basic topics of resentment and anti-establishment moods are multicultural and multifaceted, which makes them adaptable to any social reality.

5 US Department of Justice, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III, March 2019 [<https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>].

6 C. A. Bail, B. Guay, E. Maloney, et al., *Assessing the Russian Internet Research Agency's Impact on the Political Attitudes and Behaviors of American Twitter Users in Late 2017*, "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences", vol. 117, no. 1, pp. 243-250, January 2020 [<https://www.pnas.org/content/117/1/243>].

A separate important task of cyber specialists in the Russian intelligence was the creation of a so-called “complex landscape” – a situation in which the response to certain aggressive actions slows down or becomes impossible due to the difficulty of determining the source of the threat, areas of responsibility for certain threats, and the creation of real physical barriers to any response. With the help of targeted hacker attacks, modern encryption methods, and multiple information contact points, Russian cyber experts created an operational platform for the work of their own information sources, to which the opposite side found it difficult to respond. As it is specified in the report of the Intelligence and Security Committee of the Parliament of the United Kingdom on Russia, “there are a number of agencies and organisations across the Intelligence Community which have a role in countering the Russian cyber threat, and it was not immediately apparent how these various agencies and organisations are co-ordinated and indeed complement each other”⁷.

Information Threats

The narratives in the field of cyber threats are virtually identical to those in the field of information threats. As noted in the previous section, the key information narratives of the Russian media include weakness of democratic regimes, the inability of their institutions and elected representatives to ensure the interests of citizens and their security. The main difference is that at this stage of the deployment of hybrid aggression, the potential and values of the formal and

informal dimensions are commensurate and form a single synergistic structure.

Russian media outlets position themselves as an “alternative” to traditional Western media, thus trying to become an opposition to the main information narratives. This position allows them to maintain the image of anti-establishment, which in turn helps to attract a large and diverse support base. The use of the already classic means of spreading fakes, constant emotional pressure, and conciseness of the main message helps to keep the audience’s attention for a long time and occupy their own niche in the general media pool.



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It is important to note that Russia’s state media receive full and fairly large funding for their activities. For example, the well-known information channel RT is a brand of *TV-Novosti (TV-News)*, which was included in the list of organisations of strategic importance for the Russian economy⁸. During 2014-2016, RT funding was about USD 236-400 million per year⁹. A multimillion audience, a large staff, and strong funding from the centre allow media outlets such as RT to become the de facto

7 Ibid., n4, p.6.

8 *The Governmental Commission on Sustainable Development of the Russian Economy Approved a List of Core Organisations of Strategic Importance*, “Vladimir Putin official website”, 25 December 2008 [<http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/messages/2883/>].

9 See for details: *Russia in ‘Information War’ with West to Win Hearts and Minds*, “BBC”, 15 September 2015 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34248178>]; *Russia Cuts State Spending on RT News Network*, “Moscow Times”, 30 January 2016 [<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/looking-west-russia-beefs-up-spending-on-global-media-giants/507692.html>].

speaker for the Russian government, while at the same time being in a semi-official position and maintaining their own status of “opposition media” that will support the mood of anti-establishment.

Another important instrument of the Russian propaganda media is creating fake news concerning a wide range of topics. These fakes are naturally embedded into information narrative of such media outlets alongside proven information. Such manipulation creates an aura of trust in information from these media as a whole and at the same time provides for better dissemination and adaptation of fake news in the given society.

Russian Expatriates

The role of Russian expats in the overall strategy is often that of ideological and resource basis for implementing the next steps.

It should be noted that mainly the problem of Russian expats, and especially the financial elite, is singled out as a component of the threat by British MPs and intelligence officers. In the case of Russian interference in the democratic processes of the United States, it is more a matter of systematic visits by Russian agents of influence and establishing contacts on the ground, rather than using the potential of the diaspora or expats.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the main problem with Russian expats concerns the financial influence of Russian oligarchs, who once found political and tax haven in London. Over the past 30 years, they have become a

real tool of political influence, which from time to time can play a destructive role in British politics, supporting one or another key party. The latest such scandal took place during the rule of the current prime minister, Boris Johnson, and concerned illegal sources of funding¹⁰ (it should be noted that the case did not become prominent in public life and no official charges were brought forward). The same influence was noticed during the Brexit referendum and the subsequent political turmoil¹¹.

The main influence of the shady Russian oligarchs – both in the United Kingdom and in the United States – is as follows:

- Financing marginalised political campaigns in order to promote a destabilising informational agenda;
- Supporting pro-Russian politicians and legislature;
- Forming a pool of “alternative media” in order to create an information flow for Russian narratives;
- Performing negotiations with prominent politicians behind the scenes, de facto on behalf of Russian government officials.

This position allows them to have a point of impact and purposeful influence on specific issues of Russian geopolitics. Unlike official diplomatic and economic channels of communication, the work of Russian expats allows most of the strategy and activities of the Russian information agents to be left outside the public eye. In addition, given their political and financial weight, as well as the fact that they have lived in the country for many years, Russian expats are gradually able to form a network of lobbyists, which also becomes a separate and partly important means of influence.

10 14 Ministers in Boris Johnson's Government Received Funding from Donors Linked to Russia, “Business Insider”, 23 July 2020 [<https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-report-donors-boris-johnson-conservative-party-2020-7>].

11 Ibid., n4, pp. 15-18.

Conclusions: New Systematisation of Non-Military Means of Warfare

It would be an exaggeration to say that hybrid warfare is solely a feature and characteristic of the early 21st century military conflicts. Even the most superficial analysis of the classics of military conflict theory shows that the use of information and other non-military means was recognised as one of the key components of confrontation between two sides for a very long time. Victory over the enemy with minimal loss of personnel, minimal strain on your own economy, and minimal destruction of conquered territories was considered a more outstanding achievement than a large-scale and bloody victory on the battlefield.



The actions of the Russian Federation in 2016 and 2019 to influence democratic processes in the United States and the United Kingdom have shown the real ability of such measures to both damage the system of government in general and create a negative public response

At present, we have a manifestation of the developed subject matter of information warfare and the question of the priority of non-military methods of confrontation as a basis for not only avoiding a direct clash but also preparing for a possible development of such a clash. At the same time, the development of informational, digital, and financial means at the present stage allows to separate information aggression and information confrontation from the general pool of hybrid means of warfare into a distinct, completely self-sufficient

set of measures to influence the enemy – conditional or real.

The actions of the Russian Federation in 2016 and 2019 to influence democratic processes in the United States and the United Kingdom have shown the real ability of such measures to both damage the system of government in general and create a negative public response that will be a long-term destructive element for internal stability.

According to Antony Oberschall, social mobilisation is impossible in organisations that consist of separated and lonely people. It is possible only as a result of the involvement of associations of people who are already well organised and ready to work together¹². The creation of such a divided society will make it weak and unable to respond to the challenges and crises of today. It is obvious that this is the effect that the Kremlin is trying to achieve by using the tools and methods of information aggression described in the article. The collapse of the institutions of Western democracy can indeed be used as a key to undermining the stability of societies, which in the face of escalating global confrontation – the basis of which should be sought in the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine since 2014 – will become an important tool of Russian geopolitics.

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12 See more on the issue in: A. Oberschall, *Social Movements: Ideologies, Interest and Identities*, Routledge: London 2017.

CURRENT RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARD THE MENA REGION

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The article studies current policy of the Russian Federation in the MENA region, which is becoming one of the pivots of the Kremlin's revisionist approach to the post-bipolar world order. It examines the main goals pursued by Moscow in the Middle East, conditions and factors that lead to the strengthening of Russian positions in the region, and threats and challenges that undermine the Kremlin's regional perspectives. It demonstrates that Moscow's recent successes were achieved not only by skilful activities but also because of the insufficient Western attention. In the future, Russia's prospects are uncertain in the face of natural limits and lack of resources.

The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region retains its strategic importance in contemporary international relations. Today, it remains a source of threats and instability, and at the same time, it becomes an arena of active confrontation in which influential regional actors compete for leadership. It is also exposed to the influence of external players, who seek to ensure their dominance in the global arena by strengthening their positions in the region. The Russian Federation is acting precisely in this direction. Moscow regards its Middle East policy as an influential tool for revising the existing world order and has thus stepped up its efforts in the region. Through a wide array of methods, it has capitalised on the balance of power in the Middle East, trying to turn it into long-term political capital. However, the results of its Middle East policy cause different assessments – from the optimistic proclamation of Russia as the new patron of the region to pessimistic statements about the trap into which the Kremlin has driven itself. The truth lies in between these extremes – and its identification requires an objective analysis of the factors and components that shape the potential and prospects of the Russian policy in the Middle East.

The Goals of the Russian Middle East Policy

The Russian Federation primarily views the Middle East as a platform for implementing its geopolitical ambitions – retrieval of the superpower status. Increasing influence in the region aims to demonstrate the validity of Russian claims to the role of a centre of power in international relations.

 ***the results of its Middle East policy cause different assessments – from the optimistic proclamation of Russia as the new patron of the region to pessimistic statements about the trap into which the Kremlin has driven itself***

Involvement in solving urgent Middle East issues (such as civil conflicts in Syria and Libya) is used to strengthen the Russian position in relations with the West. It is becoming an important diplomacy tool for imposing Moscow's own agenda on the US

and Europe and creates prerequisites for intensive dialogue with the West in order to overcome the isolation in which Moscow found itself as a result of its aggression against Ukraine. The Kremlin tries to demonstrate itself as a useful partner capable of helping to solve the most pressing international problems. In this direction, it has managed to achieve some success – as evidenced by the compelled revival of the US-Russian contacts at the highest level and between military structures¹.



If these plans are successfully implemented, Russia will get an arc of military bases, starting in the temporarily occupied Crimea and continuing through the Levant to the Central Mediterranean

While fighting for recognition of equality with the West, Russia is also trying to undermine Western positions in the global geopolitical game. The situation in the Middle East is being used as an element of the Russian campaign to weaken the United States and the EU. Moscow blames Washington for collaboration with the Islamists and the destructive tendencies that are ripping the region apart – and thus tries to show the US inability for global leadership. The promotion of a narrative about the radicalisation of the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring undermines the concept of the people's struggle against criminal regimes – which is one of the major elements of Western democratic values.

While proving its inconsistency, Russia proposes no alternative to the authoritarian model of government as a counterweight to the Islamists.

At the same time, Russia is striving to form a positive image of itself in the eyes of the population of Western states. By resorting to a widespread disinformation campaign about its activities in the Middle East (primarily by spreading false statements about the decisive contribution of the Russian Federation to the victory over ISIS in Syria²), Moscow wants to correct its image of an authoritarian revisionist state that threatens international stability. Also, Russia sends signals to its clients-partners on the world stage. The rescue of Bashar Assad's regime in Syria is intended to show that Moscow values its allies and is ready to protect them.

The Middle East is important not only for diplomatic but also for military provisions of the Kremlin's revisionist policy. Russian military presence in the region provides a foundation for encirclement of the southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic space. At the moment, it relies on infrastructure located in Syria, regarding which long-term agreements have been concluded with the Assad regime³. At the same time, Moscow is considering expanding its network of facilities in the region by returning to Egypt and ensuring a presence in Libya, where it is supporting the forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the civil war. If these plans are successfully implemented, Russia will get an arc of military bases, starting in the temporarily occupied Crimea and continuing through the Levant to the

- 1 V. Socor, *The End of Russia's 'International Isolation': Potential Implications for Ukraine*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", vol. 12, no. 221, 10 December 2015 [<https://jamestown.org/program/the-end-of-russias-international-isolation-potential-implications-for-ukraine/>; access: 30 November 2020].
- 2 F. Gaub, *Russia's Non-War on Daesh*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, pp. 57-58, 61-62.
- 3 A. V. Krylov, N. Z. Shuminov, *The Marine Strategy of Russia in the Middle East*, "Comparative Politics Russia", vol. 12, no. 1, 2020, p. 86.

Central Mediterranean. Its reinforcement with appropriate types of weapons opens up opportunities for creating a full-fledged “anti-access and area denial zone” for the Kremlin’s opponents in the region.

In addition to the traditional component of the projection of power, Russia seeks, by some elements of its MENA policy, to strengthen its own potential for the implementation of hybrid pressure on Europe. The use of the migration factor is becoming one of its promising tools. Ensuring the Russian presence in areas that are the source of migration flows to Europe (Syria), including their routes, opens up opportunities for Moscow to control this threat.

The defensive context of Russian interests in the Middle East is important as well. The Kremlin views radical Islam as an immediate threat to the internal stability of the Russian Federation – so the Russian authorities view the weakening of the influence of Islamists in the Middle East as an element of a campaign to defend its own borders, carried out far from them, on “enemy territory”.

The intensification of the Middle East policy also serves the internal political goals of the Putin regime. Strengthening positions in the region, illustrated by participation in solving key problems and an active dialogue with regional players (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran) and global competitors (the USA, the EU), shows the Russians a success in achieving the “sacred goal” of regaining geopolitical influence. The “small victorious war” in Syria is used to demonstrate the military power of the reformed Russian army. Declared participation in the fight against a global threat – Islamic terrorism⁴ –

increases the self-esteem of Russian society. All this remains an element of strengthening the position of the regime.

Russia uses political and military instruments to ensure its economic interests in the region. They help to increase the competitiveness of Russian goods by non-market methods⁵. Arms exports remain a key dimension of Russian trade with the Middle East. Moscow seeks to secure lucrative contracts with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and North Africa, which bring replenishment to its state budget. Military operations in the region are considered as an advertising campaign for Russian weapons.

Energy diplomacy remains another important element of Russia’s Middle East policy. On the one hand, Russia is forced to take into account the region’s potential as an alternative source of energy supplies to world markets. It is interested in preventing the implementation of infrastructure transit projects that could threaten its positions (for example, Qatar’s plans to build a gas pipeline through Syria). On the other hand, common interests with the OPEC states regarding maintaining stable prices for energy resources intensify the need to develop an active dialogue with them and formulate a joint position on the issue.

Factors Contributing to the Growing Influence of the Russian Federation in the Middle East

The strengthening of the Russian position in the MENA was primarily facilitated by the deep destabilisation of the region in the 21st century, which irrevocably changed the balance of power within its borders. After the

4 *Speech by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin at the Plenary Meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly*, President of the Russian Federation official website, 28 September 2015 [http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385 access: 15 December 2020].

5 O. Litvinenko (ed.), *Близький Схід і Північна Африка як сфера інтересів України (The Middle East and North Africa as a Sphere of Ukraine’s Interests)*, National Institute for Strategic Studies: Kyiv 2020, p. 21.

US military campaign in 2003, Iraq lost its status as a counterweight to Iranian regional expansionist ambitions. The Arab Spring has led to the destabilisation of important regional players, which at best have been weakened (Egypt) and at worst were torn apart by civil conflicts (Libya, Syria)⁶. The threat of Islamic terrorism, embodied by ISIS, actualised. The fight among influential actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) for the status of the regional leader intensified. Together, these tendencies exacerbated the regional situation, creating a platform for the implementation of the geopolitical ambitions of Moscow, which played on the existing threats and contradictions to ensure its return to the Middle East.



Unlike relations with the West and the post-Soviet states, where Russia demonstrates aggressiveness and toughness, its policy in the Middle East remains more moderate and patient

The implementation of this strategy was simplified by the power vacuum, created as a result of insufficient attention to the region from key Western actors. In the early 2010s, there was a visible loss of interest in the Middle East. Barack Obama's policy in Iraq and Syria demonstrated unwillingness to take tough measures in the implementation of regional policy. The change of administration in Washington did not improve the situation, as Donald Trump also declared his desire to abandon the expansionist foreign policy in the Middle East⁷.

Overall, the United States provided opportunities for its European allies to occupy the vacant niche in the regional balance of power, to assume part of the responsibility for shaping the Middle East policy of the collective West. However, Europe turned out to be unprepared for such a role, suffering from a lack of a collective vision and determination in promoting its views. As a result, the weakening of the West opened doors for other external forces, including the Russian Federation, to enhance their presence in the MENA.

Unlike relations with the West and the post-Soviet states, where Russia demonstrates aggressiveness and toughness, its policy in the Middle East remains more moderate and patient. Moscow is building its relations with the MENA players on the basis of political realism, common sense, and pragmatism. It does not build trusting stable alliances, nor does it display full-scale ideological intolerance toward any of the local players⁸. On the contrary, Russia is increasing its influence in the region by playing on the contradictions among Middle Eastern countries and at the same time not openly ruining relations with any of them. It recognises the right of local players for their own national interests and is ready for certain compromises on these issues. For example, the Kremlin is doing everything it can to stabilise the Assad regime in Syria. However, it recognises Turkey's right to form a security belt near the Turkish-Syrian border and to conduct counter-terrorism operations against the Syrian Kurds. It also tries to show that support for Assad does not mean an anti-Sunni direction of the Russian policy. After all, it is in the Russian interest to attract investments from the rich countries

6 M. Yahya, *The Middle East's Lost Decades*, "Foreign Affairs", November/December 2019, p. 48.

7 G. Rachman, *End of the American Era in the Middle East*, "Financial Times", 30 December 2019 [<https://www.ft.com/content/960b06d0-2a35-11ea-bc77-65e4aa615551> access: 29 November 2020].

8 D. Trenin, *What Drives Russia's Policy in the Middle East?*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 21.

of the Persian Gulf, coordinate the pricing policy for energy resources, and develop cooperation in the field of arms exports with them.

In the inter-Arab conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Russia does not take sides. Moscow and Tehran together help Assad to stay in power, while demonstrating a high level of interaction in the global arena (largely based on anti-Americanism). However, Russia remains on the sidelines of the Iranian-Israeli and Iranian-Arab confrontation, not supporting the Iranian expansionist concept of the Shia Crescent. For Israel, it remains not so much an ally of the hostile Assad regime as the only counterweight to the strengthening of Iran in Syria.

In promoting its interests in the Middle East, Moscow primarily relies on the traditional power element of politics. Its cornerstone is the conduct of military operations in support of friendly regimes and forces. But Russian authorities take into account the presence of a certain prejudice in Russian society against protracted military campaigns far from national borders, caused by the “Afghan syndrome”. The limited nature of official participation in the Middle East conflicts, which is accompanied by the active use of proxy forces, helps to settle this issue. Formally, Russia only maintains a relatively small contingent in Syria, which is trying to avoid direct participation in ground battles with hostile forces, concentrating on provision of air support to Assad’s forces. That is why Russian official casualties in this conflict still remain at an acceptable level for public opinion.

However, Russian mercenaries (the so-called “Wagner Group”) are actively operating in the region in parallel with the national armed forces. They play an important role in promoting Russian interests not only in Syria but also in Libya⁹. Legally unrelated to the Russian authorities, in practice they remain directly subordinate to the Kremlin. Acting under the patronage of the Russian special services and enjoying all-round support, they are becoming an important element of the Russian power projection in the region, which is carried out in a relatively covert mode. It allows Moscow to pretend not to be officially involved in their actions, while granting support to partners (as in the case of the transfer of modern combat aircraft without identification marks to Libya in May 2020¹⁰).

Other factors also help the implementation of Russia’s Middle East policy. Not least among them is the Russian claim to the Soviet legacy. The stable ties formed between the USSR and the Arab world are used by the Kremlin to increase its influence. During the Cold War, Arab nationalists considered Moscow a natural partner. Its anti-imperialist, anti-Western rhetoric was in line with the Soviet position then – and remains a useful deposit for Russia today. The traditional perception of Moscow as a friendly force is still widespread among a certain section of the Arab elite. The authoritarian nature of Putin’s regime in Russia makes it easier for him to find a common language with partners in the MENA. Personalisation of public policy is typical for the region – be it the monarchies of the Persian Gulf or military and hereditary dictatorships. The lack of attention to democracy and values

9 *Russian Influence in the Mediterranean*, “Press Statement by Michael R. Pompeo, US Secretary of State”, US Department of State official website, 15 December 2020 [https://www.state.gov/russian-influence-in-the-mediterranean/?fbclid=IwAR3Ysl9cFetW6KgFu1pR7eFrE2IQ4v ih-UlwmGH47_nGSYiRVuUBBnpAhww access: 16 December 2020].

10 *New Evidence of Russian Aircraft Active in Libyan Airspace*, “United States Africa Command Press Release”, 18 June 2020 [https://www.afcom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li access: 30 November 2020].

issues in Russian foreign policy naturally brings them closer to Moscow.

Russia's positions on the international arms market create another channel for projecting its influence in the Middle East. The supply of weapons is viewed by the Kremlin not as an end goal but as a tool designed to tie the MENA states to the Russian Federation and intensify partnership in other spheres¹¹. Many states of the region represent exactly that market segment to which Russian export is oriented. The absence of moral and ideological restrictions on the development of military cooperation with non-democratic regimes also plays into the hands of Moscow. Today, Russia offers a wide range of military goods to the region. Cooperation in this field is being developed not only with long-term partners (Algeria) but also with states traditionally or situationally oriented toward the West (Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq)¹².



the West refuses to build its relations with the Russian Federation based on an integrated approach. It continues to consider the Middle East, Ukrainian, and energy issues separately, and not as a single problem, on which it is possible to reach compromises for a set of concessions on certain fronts

Partnership in the field of nuclear energy remains an important tool for enhancing Russian influence in the Middle East. Russia is a key exporter of nuclear technologies due to the activities of the "Rosatom" company.

The desire of the Middle Eastern states to get nuclear energy at their disposal and Russia's readiness for partnership in this area create the basis for fruitful cooperation with many MENA countries (Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco). This activity not only benefits the image of the Russian Federation but also brings direct income, providing a significant number of jobs within Russia and an inflow of revenues for companies involved in the implementation of projects¹³.

Threats and Challenges to Russia's Positions in the Middle East

Despite the undoubted strengthening of Russia's presence in the region, its positions in the Middle East are not secure. They are threatened by many factors that undermine Moscow's potential to achieve the strategic goals of its Middle East policy.

From the point of view of ensuring Russian global interests, raising its status in relations with geopolitical opponents, they have not been achieved yet. Moscow managed to return to dialogue with the West – but the process stalled. It resulted neither in the final revision of the position of the United States and Europe in relation to Russian ambitions, nor in the division of spheres of influence and the formation of a new Yalta agreement, which Putin aspired to.

Contrary to some statements and initiatives, the West refuses to build its relations with the Russian Federation based on an integrated approach. It continues to consider the Middle East, Ukrainian, and energy issues separately, and not as a single problem, on which it is possible to reach

11 T. Borisov, *Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 42.

12 A. Khlebnikov, *Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports*, "Middle East Institute", 08 April 2019 [https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports access: 15 December 2020].

13 C. Nakhle, *Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 34.

compromises for a set of concessions on certain fronts. At the same time, Russia's activities in the Middle East raise concerns in the West. Moscow's expansion beyond the borders of the post-Soviet space, which has always been viewed as its natural zone of influence, is a clear sign of the danger of its ambitions to the interests of the democratic world. In the long term, this can help to increase the level of the Russian threat in the eyes of Western leaders and experts and initiate an appropriate reaction aimed at countering the Russian efforts.

Russian influence in the Middle East has natural frameworks. Moscow lacks economic resources for full leadership in the region. Russian positions in trade relations in the Middle East remain rather weak. Russian export is limited to several main categories and therefore cannot provide the country with sufficient economic leverage in the region. Its resource-based economy lacks the financial reserves to become an important investment player – rather, Russia itself is interested in attracting funds from the wealthy monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The available resources are insufficient to solve the most pressing economic problems of the region. For example, the role of the Russian Federation in the reconstruction of post-war Syria remains questionable. Despite the importance of Russia's military power in preserving the Assad regime, it is obvious that Russian economy will not be able to pull off the rebuilding of the war-torn country¹⁴. For now, the weakness of Russia's position in the global economy is being compensated by military successes and

active diplomacy – but in the end, it limits the state's capabilities and potential.

The projection of the Russian military force in the region also has natural limitations – primarily logistical. An analysis of the Russian operation in Syria shows that Moscow had to make significant efforts to supply a limited military contingent¹⁵. The dependence of the naval route on Turkey's position adds constraints to possible planning of military activities in the MENA. Under these conditions, Russia's ability to support significant expeditionary operations in the Middle East looks questionable. The readiness of Russian society for major military operations in the region also remains in question. The geographic remoteness of the MENA raises doubts in society about the advisability of active involvement in local conflicts.

Russian military export to the region also faces some problems. Obtaining political dividends through de facto gratuitous supplies of weapons to friendly actors (such as the Assad regime in Syria) contributes to the further waste of economic resources. The use of military operations in the region to demonstrate the developments of the Russian defence industry has not always been successful. For example, the performance of modern UAVs in Syria and Libya cast a shadow on the image of Russian air defence systems¹⁶. These failures call into question the rationality of buying them. Another threat is China, which is actively entering the regional market and can compete with the Russian Federation.

14 M. Asseburg, *Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States*, "Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs) Research Paper", no. 11, July 2020, pp. 12-13.

15 A. Lavrov, *Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 55.

16 J. V. Parachini, P. A. Wilson, *Drone-Era Warfare Shows the Operational Limits of Air Defense Systems*, "The RAND Blog", 02 July 2020 [<https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/drone-era-warfare-shows-the-operational-limits-of-air.html> access: 30 November 2020].

The heterogeneity of the region complicates the field of work for Russian diplomatic activities. Russia finds it increasingly difficult to manoeuvre between the interests of local players. Turkey does not forget its regional ambitions and, continuing an active dialogue with the Russian Federation, does not neglect to weaken the position of the pro-Russian forces in the MENA. Iran and the United Arab Emirates entered the struggle for influence on Assad, pushing him to active military operations, which does not correspond to the current interests of the Kremlin. The OPEC countries in the Middle East have their views on the pricing policy regarding energy resources, which do not always coincide with Russian ones. At the end of 2016, they managed to work out a joint position with the Russian Federation regarding the reduction of production volume. But in 2020, the actions of Saudi Arabia and its allies in the market have caused a new fall in prices, which negatively affected Russia¹⁷.



The MENA remains primarily a tool, a factor that Moscow seeks to use to satisfy global ambitions

The perspectives of the Russian policy in the Middle East are also threatened by its perception by the population of the region. No matter how dominant the influence of authoritarian and leadership regimes on state policy may be, the opinion of the “Arab street” cannot be disregarded. Moscow tried to show itself as an adequate counterbalance to the United States. However, the barbaric bombing

of Syrian cities by Russian aircraft was the same example of external expansionism as the actions of Washington in the eyes of local population. Active intervention in conflicts did not contribute to the formation of a positive image of Russian policy among a significant part of the Arab world¹⁸.

Conclusions

The Middle East remains one of the priority directions of the Russian foreign policy. However, it is not its goal. The MENA remains primarily a tool, a factor that Moscow seeks to use to satisfy global ambitions. Relying on the current situation in the region (permanent destabilisation and the resulting power vacuum), Russia uses a wide range of tools to strengthen its positions, considering them as an asset necessary to achieve the status of a superpower. Basically, it relies on the traditional power component of the projection of influence, using it to support friendly regimes and weaken geopolitical opponents. Through a diplomatic approach to the struggle of regional actors for leadership, it seeks to become a key mediator in solving Middle East problems, while at the same time ensuring its interests in the economic and energy spheres.

Such actions have brought success to Russia; however, the implementation of the strategic goals of its Middle East policy in terms of ensuring global influence and consolidating a new world order has not yet been achieved. In these conditions, attempts to reconsider the approach to the Middle East – in favour of turning it from an instrument into a goal of foreign policy – have run into a dead end. Russia’s influence in the region has objective limitations – primarily caused by its low

17 G. Calhoun, *The Saudi/Russia Oil Price War: Historic Blunder #1*, “Forbes”, 03 June 2020 [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgecalhoun/2020/06/03/the-other-epidemic-a-cluster-of-historic-blunders---exhibit-1-the-saudirusia-oil-price-war/?sh=332f74cd4f7f> access: 30 November 2020].

18 *Arab Opinion Index 2017-2018. Main Results in Brief*, Arab Centre: Washington, DC 2020, pp. 14-16.

economic potential and the heterogeneity of the Middle East itself, where the interests of local players more often come into conflict with Moscow's plans.

An important factor that contributed to the strengthening of the Russian Federation in the Middle East was the passive position of the West. In fact, Russia's achievements were largely due not to its strength but to the neglect of the United States and Europe toward the region. In the context of the actualisation of the need to fight global Russian revisionism, the situation may change – and active steps from geopolitical

opponents will significantly shake Moscow's Middle East positions, which today seem relatively powerful.

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