

# **Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine**



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# Chronology

## *The War in Crimea and Ukraine*

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### **2013**

*21 November*—Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich refuses to sign European Union (EU) Association Agreement; the Maidan protests begin.

*24 November*—Clashes between protesters and police in Kyiv.

*30 November*—Berkut (Ukrainian special police forces) units try to disperse protesters.

*1 December*—Riots in downtown Kyiv.

*8 December*—Kyiv protesters tear down the Lenin statue in the Maidan. Seventy percent of those who come to the “March of a Million” claim that they are there because of police brutality on November 30. Fifty-four percent are protesting Yanukovich’s failure to sign the Association Agreement.<sup>1</sup>

*10–11 December*—Internal troops and Berkut units launch night assault to take back the Maidan.

*13 December*—Arrival in Kyiv of an official Russian delegation of the FSB (Russian secret service).<sup>2</sup>

*16–17 December*—Yanukovych meets with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow; they sign an agreement for lower gas prices and a \$15 billion loan.<sup>3</sup>

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## 2014

*16 January*—Ukrainian parliament passes antiprotest laws, leading to a fresh wave of protests and an escalation in violence against the protesters.

*20–21 January*—Vladislav Surkov, advisor to Putin, meets with Yanukovych. He also visits Kyiv on January 31 and February 11 and 12.<sup>4</sup>

*23 January*—Creation of a “Stop Maidan” movement in Simferopol.

*24 January*—“Russian Bloc” party announces that it is creating self-defense units in Sevastopol.

*28 January*—Ukrainian prime minister Mykola Azarov resigns; Ukrainian parliament annuls its antiprotest law of January 16.

*4 February*—Sergei Tsekov, leader of the Russian Community of Crimea (Russkaia Obshchina Kryma, ROK), proposes that the Crimean parliament appeal to Russia for support.

*6 February*—Yanukovych and Putin meet in Sochi.

*20 February*—Vitaly Zakharchenko, Ukrainian minister of the interior, authorizes the use of force against protesters; snipers fire at protesters, killing almost one hundred.

*21 February*—Yanukovych and the opposition sign an agreement, in the presence of three EU representatives, in which he agrees to create a new coalition government, hold early elections, and not institute a state of emergency.

- 21–22 *February*—Yanukovich and his family leave Ukraine for Russia via Kharkiv, Donetsk, Crimea, and Rostov-on-Don.
- 23 *February*—Ukrainian parliament votes to ban Russian as Ukraine's second official language. The ban is lifted after five days, but sets off protests.
- 24 *February*—Putin and Russian defense minister Sergey Shoygu announce snap military exercises in the western and central military districts to start on Friday the 26th.
- 25 *February*—Sevastopol City Council names Aleksey Chalyi, a Russian businessman with strongly pro-Russian views, as mayor; the new authorities install checkpoints around the city.
- 26 *February*—In Kyiv, the interim government disbands the Berkut, accusing them of firing on Maidan demonstrators. Sevastopol mayor Chalyi invites the Berkut to come live in Crimea with their families.<sup>5</sup>
- 27 *February*—Russian forces without insignia seize the Crimean parliament. The parliament names Sergei Aksyonov head of the Crimean government. Berkut police create blockades at key points on the peninsula.
- 1 *March*—Aksyonov asks Putin for help as Russian troops in unmarked uniforms fan out across the peninsula. First major pro-Russian demonstrations in Donetsk, as well as attempts to hold demonstrations in Kharkiv and Mariupol.
- 2 *March*—Ukrainian ships that refuse to recognize Russian sovereignty leave from Sevastopol for Odessa.
- 6 *March*—The Russian Black Sea Fleet sinks an old vessel to prevent other Ukrainian ships from leaving. The Crimean parliament asks Putin to take Crimea into Russia and announce an upcoming referendum to decide whether Crimea should be “joined” to Russia.
- 16 *March*—Crimeans vote in a referendum on the status of Crimea.

- 17 March*—Putin signs a decree formally recognizing Crimea as a “sovereign and independent state”; the Crimean parliament formally asks Russia to admit it as “a new subject with the status of a republic.”
- 18 March*—Putin signs a treaty making Crimea and Sevastopol official parts of Russia; gives historic speech.
- 19 March*—Russian troops storm Ukrainian naval headquarters in Sevastopol.
- 31 March*—Russian government creates a special Ministry for Crimea.<sup>6</sup>
- 7 April*—Ukraine declares “an antiterrorist operation” against the rebels in eastern Ukraine after they proclaim that they are “people’s republics” and will hold referendums as Crimea did.
- 2 May*—Deadly fire in Odessa after clashes between pro- and anti-Russian groups.
- 9 May*—Heavy fighting in Mariupol between government and rebel forces.
- 11 May*—Referendums are held in Donetsk and Luhansk.
- 25 May*—Petro Poroshenko is elected president of Ukraine.
- 17 July*—Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 is shot down and crashes in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine.
- 5 September*—First cease-fire agreement in Minsk, later known as Minsk I.
- 16 September*—EU and Ukrainian parliaments ratify the Association Agreement but delay its implementation.

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## 2015

- 11 February*—Minsk II package of peacemaking measures agreed upon following summit of French, German, Russian, and Ukrainian leaders.

## Notes

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# Introduction

ELIZABETH A. WOOD

Russian president Vladimir Putin has insisted that he and a small group of top officials decided spontaneously to invade Crimea after the departure of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych on February 22, 2014. Critics of Russia and those inclined to take a Cold War perspective have claimed, by contrast, that the invasion of Crimea represents an inherently expansionist move on Russia's part, perhaps one long contemplated by the Russian leadership. A third explanation proposed by Western observers, including a number of foreign policy experts, suggests that the Russian leadership was essentially forced into taking Crimea and potentially Ukraine because of Western aggression and moves into the buffer zone around Russia. Delving deeply into the sources available on the crisis, the four chapters in this book strive to understand the roots of Russian involvement in a more nuanced way. Ultimately, the four perspectives suggest that all three claims are at best insufficient and at worst deeply flawed.

The authors in this volume take different perspectives on the crisis in Crimea and Ukraine, addressing both international causes and conditions and domestic factors. Combining expertise in diplomacy, law, history, and journalism, as well as both American and Russian viewpoints, they address a number of core questions: What motivated the Russian leadership to send troops into Crimea and then declare that Crimea had formally chosen to “join” Russia? Even before actual violence broke out, what were the sources of conflict with Ukraine over European Union (EU) membership and trade in the preceding months? What domestic challenges inside Russia encouraged the Kremlin to take an expansionist stance toward Crimea? What does that expansionism say about Russian political, economic, and social priorities in this historical moment? And what role did the Russian president’s personal position play in the deepening of the crisis?

The four perspectives addressed here will be of interest to long-time Russia watchers, to policymakers, and to general readers. They address in turn the EU’s involvement in the crisis, the problem of Russian-Ukrainian trade relations, the domestic issue of Russians’ views of their own state, and the symbolic politics of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

## **Geography and Imagined Geography**

The Crimean Peninsula lies south of the main land mass of Ukraine, attached by the narrow Isthmus of Perekop (only three to four miles wide), and west of the Russian region of Kuban, separated by the narrow Strait of Kerch (two to

nine miles wide). Jutting out into the Black Sea, the peninsula and especially its leading port, Sevastopol, have played a dominant maritime role on trade routes in this region for centuries. Historically, tensions over Crimea have flared among a wide range of peoples, including Cimmerians, Scythians, Greeks, Romans, Goths, Huns, Bulgars, Khazars, Mongols, the Golden Horde, and even the republics of Venice and Genoa. Over the centuries, Crimea has been contested by a range of empires, including Byzantium, Kievan Rus, and Khazaria in the ninth and tenth centuries; Muscovy and the Crimean Khanate in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries; and Russia and the Ottoman Empire, together with Britain and France, in the Crimea War from 1853 to 1855. Since 1783, when Russia acquired control over the peninsula, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been based in Sevastopol. In Soviet and post-Soviet times, other issues, including access to gas pipelines, have continued to make it a place of conflict and contestation (see figure I.1). Quite recently, Russian sources have also begun to speak about the presence of significant reserves of hydrocarbons on the Black Sea shelf (i.e., the littoral around Crimea).

In the mythology and imagination of many Russians, Crimea has twice been referred to as a “gift.” In 1783, Grigory Potemkin, Catherine the Great’s leading statesman, gave the empress Crimea as a present, telling her it was “Russia’s Paradise.” In 1954, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev is said to have given Crimea as a gift to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, probably to win Ukrainian support for his own emerging position as the most powerful leader after Stalin’s death and also to gain political support in the region, which had undergone years

**Figure I.1. Major Gas Pipelines in Ukraine**

Source for map data : The National Gas Union of Ukraine. Retrieved from data in "Charlie14," "Soviet REUnion: The Power Play Behind Putin's Invasion of Crimea," SOFREP.com, March 2, 2014, <http://sofrep.com/33526/soviet-reunion-the-power-play-behind-putins-invasion-of-crimea/>.

of civil war with the annexation of the westernmost regions at the end of World War II.<sup>1</sup> As Sergei Khrushchev reminds us in his memoir about his father, internal boundaries were routinely changed in the Soviet Union: new areas were created, assigned to different republics, and raised and lowered in status as different "autonomous republics" or regions (oblasts).<sup>2</sup> No one paid much attention to the transition of Crimea from one Soviet republic to another until the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

The population of Crimea also has been historically subject to both tensions and gift-giving. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the Crimean Tatars became the dominant nationality and ruled their own land. When Prince Potemkin decided to annex the peninsula, abrogating the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), he began giving these lands (with their attached serfs) to the Russian nobility—just as the Soviet authorities would later resettle Russian nationals in regions with non-Russian demographic dominance. Potemkin's new province, known as the Tauride Province, constituted part of Catherine's southern lands, which she called *Novorossiya* (New Russia). By 1897, the last major Tsarist census, Crimean Tatars still had a slight plurality (with 35 percent of the population), while Russians constituted 33 percent, Ukrainians 11 percent, and Jews 4 percent. All that changed, however, as Soviet authorities imported more Russians into the region, and especially during World War II when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin deported all the Crimean Tatars, allegedly as punishment for their supposed cooperation with the Nazi occupation regime. The 1926 census had shown 42 percent Russians, 25 percent Tatars, and 10 percent Ukrainians, but by 1939 the corresponding numbers were almost 50 percent, 19 percent, and 14 percent; and in 1959 (the next census) there were no Tatars at all. In the most recent Ukrainian census from 2001, Russians were 60 percent of the population; Ukrainians 24 percent; and Tatars 10 percent.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this gift to the Russian Empire and within the Soviet Empire was a deep loss for the Tatar population.

Both tsarist and Soviet leaders built their palaces in Crimea, including the Livadia Palace where the Yalta



Conference was held in 1945. Numerous Soviet and post-Soviet-era films portrayed Crimea as a place of warmth and vacation, sometimes of war and heroism.<sup>4</sup> Crimea is also the location of a number of Soviet-era “resorts” such as Yalta, Koktebel, Bakhchisarai, and Feodosia. Crimea thus held a place in Soviet and post-Soviet myth as the site of battles and heroism (both in the Crimean War and in World War II) and as the site of vacations and “the good life.”<sup>5</sup> It is, after all, one of the warmest regions of the European part of the former Soviet Union.

### **Deep Roots of the Crisis**

The tensions between Ukraine and Russia over the Crimean Peninsula and particularly the port city of Sevastopol go back as far as the breakup of the Soviet Union itself. One could even argue that that breakup is still taking place in the current crisis. As Ukraine, Russia, and many others of the fifteen former Soviet republics search for their own identities and their relationships to each other, they also have become mired in territorial conflicts.

As historian Serhii Plokhii has shown in rich detail, the “independence” of Crimea and the issue of whether it belonged to Ukraine or Russia was at the heart of the conflict between the two newly forming nations in August 1991. When Russian president Boris Yeltsin learned that the Ukrainian parliament had declared Ukraine’s independence on August 24, 1991, he radically shifted his stance toward “sovereign” republics and directly threatened the Ukrainians that if they sought independence, he would

raise the question of territorial claims. The particular claim that his deputy vice-president, Aleksandr Rutskoi, was sent to iterate to the Ukrainians was that the Supreme Soviet of Crimea would declare its own independence from Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

Even after Russia had formally recognized Ukrainian independence in December 1991, Crimea attempted to declare independence on May 5, 1992, insisting that it be viewed as “a sovereign state of the Republic of Crimea” with its own constitution. Ukraine now faced the same problem that Russia faced: namely, what to do with the constituent parts of the new state that were trying to declare their independence. (The most famous examples within Russia have been Chechnya and Tatarstan, which also sought independence in 1992.) In June 1992, Ukraine moved firmly to curtail the Crimean Constitution on the grounds of Nikita Khrushchev’s transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the early 1990s, Ukrainian and Russian sources engaged in name-calling over Sevastopol and Crimea. Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk, who had been speaker of the Ukrainian parliament at the time of independence, called Russian attempts to take back the peninsula an “imperial disease.”<sup>8</sup> In the summer of 1993, the Russian parliament tried to declare Sevastopol a “Russian city.”<sup>9</sup> Granted, at this time the Russian parliament was dominated by left- and right-wing nationalists who were becoming increasingly restive and critical of President Yeltsin. Also in the mid-1990s, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov began pouring millions of dollars in “fraternal aid” into Sevastopol, which he declared repeatedly “should again be a Russian city.”<sup>10</sup> Crimea, and especially

Sevastopol, were becoming pet projects of Russian neoimperialists, who felt that the “hero city” should be part of Russia, not Ukraine.

In October 1999, just two months after he came to power as prime minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin made his first official trip abroad to Yalta for a meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States. At the same time, he officially opened a Russian consulate in Simferopol, fifty miles away. The new consulate was given an immediate mandate to hand out Russian passports to all Black Sea sailors and their families, with the explicit subtext that then they would be able to vote in the upcoming December parliamentary elections in Russia.<sup>11</sup> Putin made a point of noting that 65 percent of the population of Crimea considered themselves Russian, and 85 percent were Russian-speaking.

The contest between Russia and Ukraine over Crimea heated up most intensively after the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which brought Viktor Yushchenko to power in a regime that openly sought to be fully independent of Russia. At this time, a wide range of Russian forces—including youth groups, paramilitary groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and business and criminal elements—began working covertly and openly on the Crimean Peninsula to agitate for rejoining Russia.<sup>12</sup> At least five principal groups became involved in the Crimean region between 2005 and 2014, including a few that were founded even earlier. It is useful to say a word about each of them.

- The first to be active, the Russian Community of Crimea (Russkaia Obshchina Kryma, ROK), addressed a so-called kowtowing petition (*chelobitnaia*) to Putin in

November 2000: “Little Crimea looks, as always, with hope to big Russia. We would like the President of Russia to respond to our petition and to come to the defense of our Russian societies.”<sup>13</sup> Sergei Aksyonov, the future head of Crimea after the February 2014 Russian invasion, became one of the ROK’s most prominent members in 2008.

- In August 2005, Russian nationalist sources in Crimea (and in Moscow) backed the formation of a youth group called Proryv (Breakthrough), which was already active in the breakaway regions of Transdnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. By December 2005, the Proryv Crimea group leader, Aleksei Dobychin, was arguing that war in Crimea was “inevitable” given what he claimed was a buildup of Wahhabism among Crimean Tartars. This, he claimed, signaled a “Kosovo precedent” in which the Muslim nation would try to secede from the Christian one. The non-Tatars of Crimea could only rely on Russia for support, he argued.<sup>14</sup> In January 2006, Dobychin demanded that President Putin “initiate the return of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia.”<sup>15</sup> Historian Andrew Wilson has called the “Proryv Corporation” “a sort of paramilitary NGO [nongovernmental organization] umbrella,” and noted that pro-Russian activists have promoted “a series of faux-academic, faux-international conferences on the ‘Kosovo precedent’ to justify ‘parallel’ claims to secession in the region.”<sup>16</sup>
- In January 2006, a diverse group of nationalists created the People’s Front Sevastopol-Crimea-Russia, with the

explicit goal “to disrupt the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Ukraine.” Although their goal was to return Crimea to Russia by lawful means, they have served as an umbrella organization for nine other organizations, not all of which have been committed to purely legal approaches.<sup>17</sup>

- Paramilitary Cossack groups, including and especially the Crimean Cossack Union (founded in August 1992), have lobbied to join the main Russian Registry of Cossack Organizations, which they usually refer to as “fraternal” organizations.<sup>18</sup> One source claims that up to a hundred different Cossack groups have registered at the district level and have been actively involved in harassment and even riots directed against the Crimean Tatar population. On August 11, 2006, Crimean member of parliament Oleg Rodivilov sparked a riot against a peaceful Crimea Tatar rally in Bakhchysarai.<sup>19</sup>
- The Eurasian Youth Movement, founded in Moscow in February 2005 and affiliated with extreme nationalist Alexander Dugin, has claimed as its model Ivan the Terrible’s dreaded *oprichnina* (secret police).<sup>20</sup> The movement has been active in Crimea, especially in organizing anti-NATO rallies and “patriotic education” with a strongly military flavor. In 2011, the organization was banned in Ukraine, including Crimea, for “anti-Ukrainian” activities. However, since March 2014 they have been actively recruiting people with military experience to fight in Donetsk.<sup>21</sup>

Although the numbers of members in each of these groups are small and they seem to have quarreled incessantly among themselves, many have received material and moral support from the Russian secret service, the FSB, which was stationed in Sevastopol as part of the Black Sea Fleet forces.<sup>22</sup>

Annual NATO exercises since 1997 also have made the pro-Russian Crimeans and Moscow extremely nervous. In 2006, NATO was forced to call off the exercises because of mass protests organized by a number of pro-Russian groups, including the ROK and some members of the Eurasian Youth Movement.<sup>23</sup> The youth group Proryv, led by Dobychin, played a leading role in blocking the airport in Simferopol where the NATO commanders had been planning to fly in sailors for the exercises.<sup>24</sup> Protesters shouted slogans such as “No NATO in Crimea.” On June 6, the State Council of Crimea declared Crimea to be “a territory without NATO.”<sup>25</sup> By 2008, Ukrainian government ministers and intelligence officials had good evidence that the Russian government was handing out passports in Crimea, a technique for encouraging separatism that had been used before in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>26</sup>

Tensions between Ukraine and Russia flared in late 2009 when then Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko ordered the FSB to pull out all its personnel from the Black Sea Fleet and made it clear that, were it not for the twenty-year treaty signed between Russia and Ukraine in 1997, he might have sent the whole fleet packing. This did not last very long—the FSB personnel were reinstated as soon as Viktor Yanukovich came to power in 2010—but it did show the vulnerability of the fleet if a political force hostile

to Russia were to come to power in Kyiv. Russian naval commanders also chafed openly for years at restrictions in the agreements with Ukraine over the Black Sea Fleet that prohibited ship and aircraft upgrades.<sup>27</sup> One of the main reasons that Vladimir Putin supported Yanukovych's bid for the Ukrainian presidency in 2010 was the latter's support for an indefinite extension of Russian use of the Sevastopol base.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Story in 2014**

The EuroMaidan uprising in the fall of 2013 brought Ukrainians of many different political views together in the leading square of Kyiv to protest President Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement proposed by the EU, as well as to protest domestic corruption and repression. The Association Agreement contained a broad number of points of cooperation between the EU and Ukraine, including agreements on economic relations and free trade; industrial cooperation; gradual moves toward visa-free movement; exchange of information, especially in legal spheres; access to the European Investment Bank; and modernization of Ukraine's energy sector. Although the protesters were not pleased with Yanukovych and made their dissatisfaction visible and audible in protests and chants, they were not initially seeking his ouster (whatever later Russian sources may have claimed). However, once the decision was made to use violence against the protesters, the stakes were raised and the protesters became much more virulently anti-Yanukovych.

On the night of February 21–22, 2014, Yanukovych fled the country and his security services melted away. Vladimir Putin claimed in October 2014 and again in March 2015 that Yanukovych's flight was the precipitating event in what is usually referred to as the Russian annexation of Crimea. Certainly, Yanukovych's ouster created problems for Russia, but to most Western observers it does not explain why Russian forces would choose to invade Crimea, stage a referendum, and declare Crimea to be part of Russia. Putin's own justification has rested on claiming to "protect" Russia's "fellow citizens" (*sootechestvenniki*), though there is no evidence of harm to Russians in Crimea from anyone in the Maidan.

In fact, there is evidence that preparations for some kind of action in Crimea began from the start of the Maidan uprising in late November 2013. Russian media immediately began broadcasting extensive anti-Maidan programs, playing on the fears of those in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Pro-Russian groups in the Crimean parliament intensified their insistence that Crimea secede from Ukraine and join Russia. By December 12, pro-Russian forces were claiming that it was time to create "self-defense" units in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> On December 14, the leaders of two pro-Russian groups, Gennadi Basov of the Russian Bloc and Sergei Aksyonov of Russian Unity, met with Vyacheslav Svitlychny, the Russian consul general in Crimea, and declared that they were preparing an anti-Maidan demonstration to demand Crimea's secession from Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> In late January 2014, Crimean pro-Russian groups held demonstrations in several cities, burning EU flags and blaming the United States, the EU, and NATO for



the crisis.<sup>31</sup> The Night Wolves motorcycle band and local Cossack groups, numbering some 700 to 800, joined forces as the “Slavic shield” (*slavianskii shchit*), they claimed, to guard key buildings in Sevastopol.<sup>32</sup>

The top Russian elite now became visibly involved. On January 27–29, the chair of the Crimean parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, met with Putin’s advisor Vladislav Surkov in Moscow. On January 30, Russian Duma deputy Aleksei Zhuravlev, who had revived the nationalist party Rodina (Motherland) in 2012, announced the creation of a new “Slavic Anti-Fascist Front” (*Slavianskii anti-fashistskii front*).<sup>33</sup> On February 3, Zhuravlev came to Crimea to hold the opening congress of this new group, which claimed to bring together over thirty different organizations, including the ROK, the Congress of Russian Communities, and Ukraine’s Russian Unity political party. They listed their goals as serving as “a counterweight to the anti-constitutional, fascist uprising” in Ukraine, defending the interests of the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine, and forming public opinion for Ukraine to join the customs union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.<sup>34</sup> In an interview on February 6, Zhuravlev explained that they had had no troubles at their opening meeting because they were already organized in Crimea in strong militias.<sup>35</sup>

On February 4, the Crimean parliament announced that it would seek a referendum on the “status of Crimea” and would appeal to the president of the Russian Federation for “the defense and autonomy” of Crimea.<sup>36</sup> Vladislav Surkov appeared in Crimea again on February 14, and Vladimir Konstantinov traveled to Moscow again on February 19.<sup>37</sup> Although no one knows what they spoke

about, the presence of such high-level Russian officials, especially one responsible for policy in this area (Surkov), suggests that the Russian leaders were at a minimum closely monitoring the situation in this region and may have been involved in further agitation.

No sooner had Yanukovych fled on February 22 than pro-Russian Crimeans began to hold demonstrations and form militias. In Sevastopol, a crowd of 20,000 demonstrators demanded a new mayor, Aleksei Chalyi, a Russian citizen known for his outspoken pro-Russian views. Thousands turned out in the streets of both Simferopol and Sevastopol, organized in large measure by the Night Wolves motorcyclists. Night Wolves' leader Dmitry Sinichkin, dressed in the group's trademark black leather, announced that in his view, "Bloodshed is inevitable." Chalyi and pro-Russian crowds in Sevastopol welcomed the Ukrainian secret police, the infamous Berkut, which only recently had been disbanded by the new Ukrainian government for their attacks on the Maidan demonstrators.<sup>38</sup>

On February 27, armed men without any evident insignia seized the buildings of the Crimean government and parliament, raising the Russian flag. A new prime minister, Sergei Aksyonov, was "elected" by the deputies who were in the occupied building. Blockades were also put in place on the Isthmus of Perekop. Russian armed forces rapidly moved in, using a wide range of groups from naval infantry (marines) to paratroopers and special operations. They came from all different parts of Russia and descended on the peninsula in a coordinated fashion. On February 24, President Putin called snap military exercises that were ostensibly in the western and central districts of Russia, but

not the southern, where Crimea is located.<sup>39</sup> This was almost surely a diversion, since airborne divisions soon began traveling from Pskov to Rostov-on-Don (in the south), to set up a staging ground for shifting planes and transport helicopters for Crimea. The Syrian Express amphibious ship was diverted from its normal route to Syria to deliver 300 special forces, including the newly minted special forces that Putin had ordered in 2012, to Crimea's capital. Roadblocks were set up, and transport and gunship helicopters flew in from Rostov to Crimea. In Kerch, jamming equipment was set up so the Ukrainian forces on the peninsula would be unable to receive any orders from the new government in Kyiv, which in any event was barely operational after the flight of Yanukovich. By February 30, the main military actions had all been taken with barely a shot being fired.

How was the takeover so bloodless? First, the pro-Russian militias and other paramilitary groups posted checkpoints and supported the work of the military, making the invading force overwhelming for the local Ukrainian forces. Second, the Russian military displayed their own high level of professionalism and training, a result perhaps of the six snap exercises Putin had called in the previous year. Third, while the Ukrainian troops and Ukrainian government had expected trouble from the pro-Russian militias, they had no idea that a full-fledged invasion was imminent. Finally, under the existing agreements concerning the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, Russia was permitted to station a maximum of 25,000 troops, 132 armored combat vehicles, and 24 pieces of artillery at its military facilities in Crimea.<sup>40</sup> The

Ukrainian forces serving there had no reason to be surprised to see Russian troops, though they certainly did not expect that those troops would proceed to take over the government of the peninsula.

The question of why the Russian government soon moved from the mostly bloodless military intervention in Crimea to the more complicated and secretive support for the “separatists” in eastern Ukraine is moot. The main theories are that (a) the success of the operation in Crimea led Putin and the Kremlin to keep going, as it were, in the hope that the population of eastern Ukraine would support military intervention because of their pro-Russian sentiments, and (b) that Russian strategists had planned this as another “frozen conflict,” perhaps to punish Ukraine for its EU ambitions or to keep it from joining the EU or NATO, since countries with unresolved conflicts are not allowed to join.<sup>41</sup>

A number of scholars and observers have published overviews of the crisis in Ukraine and Crimea, each trying to situate it in the history and geopolitics of the region. In *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (MIT Press, 2015), Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer focus on the crisis from an international perspective and especially “the most severe disruption in East-West relations” since the end of the Cold War. Richard Sakwa also looks at the broader question of the meaning of “Europe” in the post-1989 world and Ukraine’s place in it in his *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (I. B. Tauris, 2015), but he castigates “the ‘Russophobe’ tradition” (223) of those who criticize Russia’s actions. For Sakwa, “Russian actions were an angry and ad hoc

response to Yanukovych's overthrow" (209). Andrew Wilson, in *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (Yale University Press, 2014), focuses principally on the internal dynamics of Russia and Ukraine, especially the role of "political technologists" who have manipulated and shaped public opinion in the two countries for the past twenty years. For Wilson, the main causes of the crisis lie in Russia's "addiction to dangerous myths" (vii) and Ukraine's corruption, especially the key role of the "family" around President Yanukovych.

This book is intended to provide four distinct and new perspectives on the crisis in Crimea and Ukraine from the Russian perspective. Collectively, they articulate Russia's choices leading up to the crisis and explain why the Russian leadership decided to act as it did. On the international level, the Russian political leadership came to reject both the EU's shared sovereignty model and the European notion of win-win in global trade. Russian authorities also seem to have chosen to accentuate the power of the state over the economic well-being of the people, all the while assuming the latter's acquiescence. And finally, since public relations has been an essential part of Putin's rule, the Crimean and Ukrainian crises can be seen as a response to the 2011–12 Russian protests and the 2013 Maidan protests, which encouraged the Kremlin spin doctors to seek new forms of heroism for the Russian president, even as they have tried to find an ideology that could respond to the protests.

## Conclusion

The earliest analyses of the crisis in Crimea and Ukraine have tended to diverge over the question whether the taking of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine were tactical, improvised responses of the Russian leadership, as Putin has claimed, or strategic and long-term engagements in taking control of the Russian “neighborhood,” as it is often called in foreign policy circles. They have also tended to diverge over the question of blame: was this a rational response on Russia’s part to repeated incursions into their space (in the guise of NATO and EU expansion) or was it an irrational and dangerous irredentism designed to recapture perhaps the Soviet or even the tsarist space?

The analyses in this book suggest that Russian actions in this area may combine the rational and the irrational, as well as short- and long-term considerations. They are not easily divided into the justified and the unjustified, the acceptable and the Machiavellian. Only by teasing apart the threads is it possible to understand the situation that has arisen and to consider possible recommendations. In the end, the crisis bears the hallmarks of such a tangle of justifications and causes that it seems unlikely that it will be resolved anytime soon.

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## The Origins of Russia's War in Ukraine

### *The Clash of Russian and European "Civilizational Choices" for Ukraine*

E. WAYNE MERRY

In 2014, the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation came to grief through policies that transformed Ukraine's domestic political crisis into an international competition for dominance over that country. Although the clash was the product of myriad strategic and economic factors, it was also the consequence of incompatible—perhaps even mutually incomprehensible—philosophies of state sovereignty and interstate relations: Russia's traditional Great Power approach, based on its concept of *derzhavnost* and its pursuit of regional suzerainty; and the EU's shared-sovereignty model, a still-experimental construct in international affairs. Although the EU and Russia share responsibility for the crisis, it was Moscow's decision to militarize the competition that fundamentally altered the character and consequences of the conflict.

The origins and evolution of the Ukraine crisis are and will continue to be the subject of extensive analysis and debate. This chapter does not attempt a systematic survey of the crisis or of Russia's policies in it. It examines only the clash between the EU and Russia. Important components of a comprehensive analysis—the historical background of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the prolonged deterioration of the political and economic situation within Ukraine, EU-Russia relations before the crisis, Russian domestic political factors, Moscow's relations with other “near abroad” states, EU relations with regional countries other than Ukraine, and the American role in the developing crisis—are not discussed here.

The premises of this analysis are that the Ukraine crisis was the product of multiple policy actors and was, as Talleyrand famously said of one of Napoleon's actions, “worse than a crime, it was a mistake.”<sup>1</sup> Moscow and Brussels are both culpable, regardless of the intentions or expectations that underlay their policies. The paper intentionally does not engage in *ad hominem* judgments, but it does assess broad responsibilities for the crisis, and the range of probable outcomes for Ukraine.

## **Russia as Regional Great Power and Suzerain**

The Russian national leadership has stated in many venues that its policies toward Ukraine during the crisis were motivated by vital national interests (that is, interests for which a country is prepared to go to war),<sup>2</sup> that these policies lie well within the parameters of the behavior of

Great Powers (both traditional and contemporary), and that its use of armed force was reactive to clear challenges to its security and international status.

The Russian perspective is historically grounded in its pursuit of traditional Great Power status, although with Russian characteristics. A central feature of Russian Great Power policy is *derzhavnost*, a term with no clear equivalent in Anglo-American political vocabulary. It is somewhat akin to French *étatisme*, but a much stronger manifestation of the concept. *Derzhavnost* is the belief in the primacy and greatness of the Russian state raised almost to the level of a secular religion. In contemporary Russia, as was true in both Soviet and pre-Soviet Russia, the greatness of the state is central to all domestic and external public policy. It justifies the subordination of the rights and welfare of the citizen at home and the practice of pure power politics in relations abroad. The elites who rule Russia today, whatever their differences, are dedicated to the proposition that Russia must be such a Great Power—a *derzhava*—and to the belief that the experience of the early post-Soviet years demonstrated that failure to do so would endanger the very integrity and survival of the Russian nation.

*Derzhavnost* carries with it important assumptions in international relations. It rejects the notion that all member states of the United Nations enjoy equal sovereignty;<sup>3</sup> it perceives that there are in fact only a handful of truly sovereign states in the world; it believes it is essential that Russia be one of them and be recognized as such; it concludes that most of Russia's post-Soviet neighbors—the so-called near abroad—are not truly sovereign, and therefore Russia can



and should behave toward them as befits its superior position. This overall outlook and the view that some states are more sovereign than others are hardly new. They have been practiced by Great Powers throughout history: indeed, the concept of equality of state sovereignty is comparatively recent. There is nothing uniquely Russian in this outlook. Derzhavnost would have been quite congenial to Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Bismarck, to name only a few.

What makes the contemporary practice of Russian derzhavnost problematic is its incompatibility with prevailing international norms of sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> The Russian approach is jarring in its overtness, even its candor, in a global environment accustomed to at least the facade of sovereign equality among states. After all, American or Chinese behavior is sometimes seen as domineering by countries in their respective “near abroads,” but both Washington and Beijing maintain the outward manifestations of respect for equality of sovereignty. Moscow generally does not bother with such formalities and pursues policies around its periphery with an unambiguous stance of “first among unequals,” whether in bilateral or multilateral relations. Russia does respect the sovereignty of countries outside its periphery or of such size as to command its respect, such as China, Iran, Turkey, and the United States.

Russian policies toward its post-Soviet neighbors presume a primacy for Russian interests over the pursuit of mutual goals. This approach is not satisfied with an “area of privileged interest” (to use then-President Dmitry Medvedev’s phrase)<sup>5</sup> or even with regional hegemony, but constitutes in reality the pursuit of suzerainty. Although this concept is not widely employed today, suzerainty

describes how major powers often have exercised effective control over states that they choose not to either incorporate into an overt empire or accept into an alliance system of formal equality. In a suzerain relationship, the patron Great Power significantly limits the external sovereignty of its client while according it almost complete autonomy in internal matters. The client state acknowledges the primacy of its Great Power patron, accommodates its interests, and renders tribute in at least symbolic terms, but at the same time it receives from the patron legitimacy, protection, and tangible support, often in the form of subsidies. Suzerain relationships throughout history have varied greatly in form and practice. Some client states are reduced to effective vassalage, while others may enjoy most of the appearances of genuine sovereignty. However, the key element of a suzerain relationship is the derogation of the effective external sovereignty of the client state.

Throughout most of the post-Soviet period, Russia practiced a moderate and purportedly “fraternal” suzerain relationship with Ukraine. The government in Kyiv maintained all the forms of external sovereignty but chose to endure, or even embrace, the reality of a subordinate relationship with Russia on key geopolitical and economic issues. In return, Moscow provided regular and massive subsidies, principally in the form of energy at below-world-market prices. Indeed, Ukraine effectively paid nothing for the huge amounts of natural gas that it misappropriated from transit pipelines, a practice that Moscow tolerated for years. The scale of these subsidies is subject to debate, but in every year the Russian energy subsidy exceeded the combined assistance and investment to Ukraine from all other countries. The reality

of this dependency was very well understood in Kyiv but, over two decades, no government there undertook serious policies to free Ukraine from it.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, no Great Power, least of all Russia, provides large-scale subsidies for nothing. In return for Moscow's energy largesse, Kyiv accommodated Russian preferences on a range of bilateral issues and respected the primacy of Russian interests on most regional questions. Even during the period of overtly anti-Russian nationalist rhetoric by President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–10), the administration of his prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko (2007–10), pursued policies—especially in the energy sphere—that were almost entirely satisfactory to Moscow.

This was the status quo that Russia sought to preserve in its relations with Ukraine and even to expand within its proposed Eurasian Economic Union, a nascent trading bloc and customs union loosely modeled on the EU. Moscow was aware of strains in the relationship and also of growing tensions within the Ukrainian body politic, but saw no reason to expect that its suzerain status should not endure. Indeed, the previous signing of long-term bilateral agreements on energy and on naval basing rights demonstrated that the Russian leadership believed that its primacy in Ukrainian policymaking could and would continue indefinitely.<sup>7</sup> A generation of Ukrainian political and economic ruling elites, from both the western and eastern parts of the country, had demonstrated a high level of comfort in their relations with Russia, especially as these facilitated massive personal enrichment but did not inhibit profitable ties with the West.

Russia was not even the focus of the growing political crisis within Ukraine, which was largely driven by pervasive

corruption and abuse of power by national and regional elites. Public opinion in most of the country was favorable toward Russia and—except within nationalist-oriented western districts—opposed to endangering mutually beneficial ties that were built on generations of shared experience.<sup>8</sup> In some opinion surveys, Vladimir Putin was more popular among Ukrainians than any of their own political leaders. The 2010 election of Viktor Yanukovych as Ukrainian president and the 2012 elections of a Rada dominated by his Party of Regions promised continuity in ties with Moscow, so much so that Moscow actively planned for Ukrainian participation in the Eurasian Economic Union. Finally, Moscow was not reticent in telling European and American officials that Russia would defend its primacy in Ukraine as a matter of vital national interest.<sup>9</sup> Putin later did so in unvarnished terms during his summit meeting with EU leaders in Brussels in January 2014.<sup>10</sup>

### **European Union Shared-Sovereignty Model for Export**

The European Union perspective stands in sharp contrast with that of Russia. Compared with Russia's long-standing state philosophy of *derzhavnost*, the EU's structure is non-traditional and, in important ways, still experimental: it is an amalgam of traditional and innovative forms of governance and is very much a work in progress. The institutions and agreements that comprise the European Project (as it is often called) are based on the concept of shared or pooled sovereignty over many functional areas, with the objective of creating a European whole greater than the sum of its

parts. The project thus far is neither a federation nor a confederation, and falls far short of a state exercising traditional sovereign powers. (It is sometimes called a “United Europe of States,” as opposed to a “United States of Europe.”) Its own rhetoric notwithstanding, the EU is based not so much on “shared European values” as on the establishment of common standards and implementation of regulations over a wide array of public-sector issues. Many important areas of public policy remain wholly or largely in the hands of the member states, and efforts to fashion a common European external diplomacy are continually inhibited by the preference of the larger European states to exercise a large measure of independence in this key area of traditional state sovereignty. In fact, the most fundamental of all public priorities, external security, is largely outsourced to a non-European Great Power, the United States, through the parallel mechanism of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Six decades after the founding Treaty of Rome, the EU is a mixed picture of major achievements, tentative successes, and serious policy deficiencies. Notably, the creation of a common currency and the institutions of a shared monetary policy without adequate coordination of fiscal policies counts among the critical shortcomings, one sufficiently serious to challenge the very integrity of the Eurozone. In addition, the European Project remains very much a top-down, elite-group enterprise, resulting in the notorious “democratic deficit” that has fueled anti-EU sentiment in national elections in diverse member states. A still-fragile sense of European identity among ordinary citizens across Europe leaves them uncertain about and often alienated from the European Project.

Nonetheless, despite the somewhat inchoate nature of European integration, a strong belief exists among EU policy elites and within its massive Brussels bureaucracy that the shared-sovereignty experiment already stands superior to other regional associations and even to the traditional nation-state itself. Indeed, enthusiasts proclaim the EU as the global model for the twenty-first century, and a model that is ready for export. These pretensions are reflected in a pervasively condescending rhetoric about the supposed superiority of European political culture to others and a hubristic characterization of the EU as a “civilizational choice.” The incongruities of this stance with Europe’s recent history may be more obvious the more distant one is from Brussels. Certainly, Russian political consciousness retains vivid memories of the rhetoric of the Third Reich in contrasting its “European civilization” with Russian “Asiatic barbarism.”

The principal export mechanism for the EU model is the Eastern Partnership, which followed the more amorphous Union for the Mediterranean of 2008. Launched in 2009, the Eastern Partnership encompassed ties with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, to be conducted “in parallel with the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia.” The program proposed a deepening of economic and energy cooperation, increased freedom of movement, and the promotion of democracy and the rule of law within the six partner states. The EU initiated negotiations with each on a formalized relationship—an Association Agreement, plus a so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area—that would export EU regulations and practices onto the partner countries. In effect, the partnership

asserted an EU “near abroad” in the east to overlap Russia’s “near abroads” in the west and south. Although Brussels proclaimed that the program was entirely benign and “non-zero sum” toward Russia, the program’s leading advocates, Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt and Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski, were not shy about its essentially adversarial character in relation to Moscow.<sup>11</sup>

Had the ambitions of the partnership remained modest, Brussels and Moscow might have achieved accommodation, as Russia initially perceived the Eastern Partnership as a preferable alternative to NATO expansion. This perception did not endure for long. The scope of the proposed Association Agreements expanded to encompass major portions of the EU’s vast body of law and regulation, especially in the economic field. The agreements would impose EU standards directly onto partner countries, even if those standards were in conflict with existing trade and financial ties with Russia.<sup>12</sup> During a period of general deterioration in Russian-EU relations, the partnership was increasingly perceived in Moscow as intended less to engage partner countries than to absorb them into EU structures, at Russian expense. Indeed, by mid-2013, Russian leadership circles regarded the challenge from the EU as almost equal to that from NATO.<sup>13</sup> However, despite multiple warnings from the Russian side, EU officials behaved as if the previous benign Russian position toward the EU program had not changed. In addition, the almost pervasive EU rhetoric that the partnership offered a “civilizational choice” for partner states was understandably offensive to Russian ears. Thus, Moscow came to see a basic challenge to its suzerain status in its western “near abroad.”

## When Conceptions of International Relations Clash

The six national programs in the Eastern Partnership varied greatly, but the Ukrainian program was the most important for both Brussels and Moscow. Ukraine is by far the largest and most populous of the six target countries and has the most diverse economy (although with a depressing post-Soviet record), but at the time it was undergoing a profound domestic popular revulsion against pervasive corruption and public malfeasance. To many Ukrainians, a European offer of partnership appeared to be exactly what their country needed, even though few had a real grasp of what the negotiations entailed.

Although the draft Association Agreement contained much of potential value for Ukraine, the negotiations through 2012–13 failed to account for the reality of Ukraine's existing client-state relationship with Russia. The core dilemma was how Ukraine could surrender aspects of its sovereignty to the EU when it had already compromised many of them with Russia. The EU agreement would compel Ukraine into a series of "either/or" choices to Russian disadvantage, but Brussels firmly rebuffed proposals from both Moscow and Kyiv to engage in three-way talks to reconcile these issues.<sup>14</sup> An additional central issue was the unique character of Moscow's suzerainty toward Ukraine, which was based on ethnic, cultural, and even psychological factors not present in Georgia, Moldova, or elsewhere. Russian leaders reflect a widely held Russian belief that a truly independent Ukraine is fundamentally unnatural. Driven by perceptions of shared history, religion, and culture, much of the Russian elite is



incapable of thinking about Ukraine other than as a suzerain client.<sup>15</sup> These elites perceive a challenge to this relationship, whether from the EU or NATO, as a threat not just to Russian vital interests but to their own national and historical identity. If EU leaders were aware of these attitudes, they failed to appreciate the implications for their own policies.

By mid-2013, the Association Agreement draft grew to over a thousand pages of text that proposed to export to Ukraine much of the EU's *acquis communautaire* (its body of shared law and regulation and the reservoir of EU pooled sovereignty). It would require Ukraine to adopt EU standards even when those standards conflicted with existing Ukrainian obligations to Russia. Whether Ukraine was capable of absorbing such a massive, complex program remains doubtful, but there is no doubt that the agreement would require major derogations on Ukrainian sovereignty at the expense of Russian interests, especially in the close ties of Russian military industry with Ukrainian counterparts. Indeed, for some EU advocates of the agreement, challenging Russia's interests and primacy in Ukraine was the object of the exercise.<sup>16</sup> Given that potential EU membership is beyond Ukrainian grasp for many years to come, the likely consequence of the Association Agreement would be the assertion of an effective EU suzerainty over much of Ukraine in direct competition with that of Russia. Thus, overlapping "near abroads" would become overlapping suzerainties, an unstable and dangerous mixture.

President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the Vilnius summit in late 2013, and to accept a financial counteroffer from

Moscow, unleashed frustrations that had been building within Ukrainian society for years.<sup>17</sup> The results of his decision need not be recited here. Certainly, the promise of “Europe” was attractive to many people who were fed up with the dysfunction and corruption of their own country, even if few understood what the Association Agreement would require in terms of reform and austerity. However, for most Ukrainians, there was no question of choosing an exclusively Western or Eastern orientation. Understandably, they wanted to maintain their Janus-like external policy, including preferential ties with Russia, not knowing that the Association Agreement precluded that approach. Except for a minority, the political revolt on the Maidan was not fundamentally anti-Russian, but anti-regime and anti-elite.

Whatever else may be said about President Yanukovich and his government, the Ukrainian president did possess electoral and constitutional legitimacy. His election had been monitored with a passing grade by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.<sup>18</sup> If the people of Ukraine felt a pressing need to replace their government before its electoral term, and even to do so by unconstitutional means, it was at least their country, and the consequences lay with them. However, when leading European officials participated in the Maidan demonstrations that called for the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, they intruded on Ukrainian sovereignty at the very least. Moscow certainly was also contemptuous of Ukrainian sovereignty, but the EU claimed to bring different “values” to Ukraine. At their Brussels summit in January 2014, President Putin reportedly asked his EU counterparts how

they would react if he sent his foreign minister to participate in anti-EU demonstrations in Greece, and received no reply. Behind the pretense of bringing “European values” to Kyiv, the EU treated the Ukrainian constitutional republic with little more respect than did Moscow.

### **Sleepwalking toward Yet Another European Crisis**

Even among European officials who may have believed their own rhetoric about a benign Eastern Partnership, why did no one anticipate that Russia would respond to what it saw as a threat to its vital interests? There is no indication that anyone in Brussels seriously considered that Moscow might use force, despite ample warnings from the Russian side. Within the flood of recent Russian misinformation about Ukraine, there is at least one nugget of truth: Moscow had warned its European counterparts that it would not passively accept the challenge to its interests in Ukraine. Why, then, did EU leaders pursue the policy without even serious debate?

There are now serious retrospective doubts in many European capitals about the wisdom of the EU’s Ukraine policy, and many prominent Europeans have proclaimed it a blunder.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the European Commission is re-examining the entire Eastern Partnership in light of the Ukraine experience and has begun to water down some of its more ambitious goals. The May 2015 Riga summit proved a major disappointment to partner countries Georgia and Moldova, as EU actions fell far short of previous promises and still more so of the partners’ expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Privately, a number of European officials explain that senior policymakers were absorbed in the crisis of the Eurozone and other issues in late 2013, had largely delegated the Eastern Partnership to enthusiasts in the Commission, and simply did not give adequate credence to Russian warnings.<sup>21</sup> Although the full explanation must wait for the historical record, it is clear that Europe's leaders failed to appreciate that a scheme to export the EU's shared-sovereignty model to Ukraine would clash head-on there with Russian suzerainty and Moscow's perceived vital interests. In the assessment of a committee of the British House of Lords, like European leaders a century earlier, they sleepwalked into the confrontation.<sup>22</sup>

With the Ukraine crisis still ongoing, it is premature to draw final conclusions. However, the Eastern Partnership may already rank as the worst policy failure in EU history. In contrast to the problems of the common currency, whose costs are financial and largely contained within the Eurozone, the consequences of the EU confrontation with Russia can be tallied thus far in bloodshed and destruction on Ukrainian soil and in severe long-term damage to Ukraine itself. Its collateral effects will poison international relations for decades, if not generations. Whether or not we face a "new Cold War," the negative impact is certainly global in scope.<sup>23</sup>

### **Shared—But Not Identical—Accountability**

In sum, the clash of EU and Russian policies in Ukraine transformed the long-simmering political crisis of that

country into an international competition for influence and dominance. There was no inevitability to the clash; it was the product of policy choices. Both Brussels and Moscow conducted the competition without regard for its potential damage to Ukraine and without respect for its sovereignty. Thus, the EU and Russia share the responsibility for internationalizing the Ukrainian political crisis. However, Brussels initiated the competition, as it sought to alter an existing status quo in Ukraine at Russia's expense, whereas Moscow sought to preserve that status quo without compromising EU interests (Moscow saw Ukraine's interests as clearly subordinate to its own). The authors of EU policy perhaps believed their "civilizational choice" for Ukraine would enjoy such political, economic, and cultural competitive advantages that Russia could not adequately respond. What they failed to appreciate was that Moscow could and would escalate the rivalry to the military sphere, where it enjoyed an overwhelming competitive advantage.

Responsibility for the militarization of the competition—for the resort to covert and overt war—is not shared. That responsibility rests exclusively with Moscow. Russia possessed substantial political resources to combat EU influence in Ukraine and could have retained the military option until other tactics had been exhausted. Techniques of influence and subversion require more time than do overt violations of treaties and of territorial integrity, but they are also much less costly. Russia itself certainly would be better off if its leadership had demonstrated greater patience, finesse, and policy stamina in the Ukraine crisis. It is nonsense to think that Moscow had no viable alternatives to the use of force; none was seriously tried after the fall of

the Yanukovich government. An impatient Russian leadership acted as if it had been deliberately double-crossed in the diplomatic deal-making in Kyiv and opted for a military solution. This opened a Pandora's box for the region, with results which redounded first and foremost on Ukraine and its people but then very much on Russia itself. Moscow's suzerainty in most of Ukraine is now a thing of the past. Although only a minority of Ukraine's population was anti-Russian before the crisis, Moscow's resort to war has created a genuine sense of nationhood in parts of that country where previously it had been weak.

The consequences for Ukraine are severe. Crimea and the Donbas are Russian protectorates for the foreseeable future. Despite Ukraine's vast human and natural assets, its legacy of decades of political dysfunction and economic corruption, greatly compounded by the impact of war, have reduced Kyiv to dependency on the EU as well as on the International Monetary Fund and the United States. The fate of Ukraine's relationship with the EU remains to be seen, but the emergence of true Ukrainian sovereignty remains distant.

Before examining the prospects for Ukraine's future, it bears noting that the case of Crimea is in important respects *sui generis*. This is not to legitimize Moscow's historical rationale for seizing the peninsula, let alone its methods, which clearly violated basic treaty-based obligations. Crimea has a long history, and some Turks even propose a parallel narrative asserting their own claim. Nonetheless, Crimea's status within post-Soviet Ukraine was always special and contested. In the Soviet era, Crimea was one of two entities geographically contained within

the territory of one Union republic but with a majority of inhabitants of the nationality of another Union republic. The other was Karabakh, contested by Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is hardly surprising that, in the absence of Soviet power, both entities should become the object of dispute, conflict, and ultimately war. Wars do not of themselves legitimize possession, but wars certainly can create enduring realities. Given the near-consensual Russian view that Crimea is by rights part of Russia, it is difficult to see how its restoration to Ukraine could be achieved short of a European cataclysm. An illustrative comparison is the case of Goa, a territory possessed by Portugal for 451 years before India seized it in an act of blatant and bloody military aggression in 1961. Western governments, including the United States, condemned India's actions at the time.<sup>24</sup> Today, those same governments accept India's hold on Goa. A similar fate may be in store for Crimea, with a similar passage of time.

## **Consequences and Prospects**

To survey Ukraine's prospects is also to review the EU's options in supporting its new stepchild. The country was in dire political and economic shape before the crisis, reflecting two decades of lost opportunities and misrule. The EU-Russian confrontation in Ukraine made a bad situation immeasurably worse. Both contributed to the outcome, and both thereby damaged their own interests, above all their mutual interests. By seeking to maintain its suzerain role in Ukraine when a less dominant and intrusive status

was clearly overdue, Russia has lost most of its influence in Kyiv and converted a friendly neighbor into an adversary. By heedlessly and prematurely seeking to export its own model of shared sovereignty, the EU victimized rather than helped Ukraine and now faces a long-term moral obligation to assist the victim.

Conceptually, there are perhaps six alternative paths ahead for Ukraine and its European sponsors:

- First, seek to restore the status quo ante in territorial integrity. The prospects through either political/diplomatic or military means are effectively nil. Russia enjoys massive escalation dominance (the ability to overmatch any Ukrainian or Western deployments or weaponry), nor will it surrender in talks what it has achieved (or inflicted) with arms.
- Second, seek Ukraine's entry (in whatever configuration) into the EU and/or NATO. The prospects for this outcome also are effectively nil. Moscow has shown its willingness and ability to prevent such options, while major European governments would exercise their veto powers.
- Third, make Ukraine a "bridge" between Europe and Russia. This old dream is effectively dead, due to the de facto war in the Donbas and the alienation of much of the Ukrainian populace from Russia.
- Fourth, partition eastern Ukraine. This option is reportedly looked on with favor in some European capitals. However, partition would not solve the Ukraine crisis,



nor would it even “freeze” the conflict. On the contrary, it would likely restart large-scale fighting to move the partition line.

- Fifth, accept a buffer-state status for Ukraine, in which the EU and Russia manage their respective “zones” of suzerain power in a mutually administered cordon sanitaire. Without much planning, this option may be coming into existence, in an analogy to the division of Austria following World War II.
- Sixth, resume or expand armed conflict. Whatever the patriotic motives of Ukrainians, a battlefield option would become a proxy war between Russia and the West. In proxy wars, the interests of external sponsors always dominate over those of the local combatants.

For any Ukrainian—let alone any patriotic Ukrainian—these options must appear odious, because they are odious. What the options all have in common is that they reflect external forces working on Ukraine rather than choices made by and for its inhabitants. Although Ukraine before the crisis was a political and economic failure, at least it was its own worst enemy. No longer. Now, it is not too much to speak of Ukraine as an international crime scene, like a neighborhood cursed as the sparring ground of rival criminal gangs. Honesty demands acknowledgment of both Russian and European fingerprints on the crime scene. Russia may bear the greater guilt, but the presumed good intentions of the EU abrogate neither its culpability nor its continuing responsibilities for the crisis. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

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CHAPTER **2**

## **Ground Zero**

### *How a Trade Dispute Sparked the Russia-Ukraine Crisis*

WILLIAM E. POMERANZ

Russia and Ukraine's amicable divorce in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse unexpectedly and violently unraveled in 2014. This dramatic course of events threw open the history textbooks as commentators struggled with eighteenth-century maps, nineteenth-century notions of statehood and sovereignty, and twentieth-century designations of borders in order to explain the conflict. By seeking answers in Russia's distant past, however, the immediate spark that started this conflagration quickly passed from view—namely, Ukraine's attempt to pursue its own free trade agreement with the European Union (EU).

How a trade dispute morphed into a global crisis remains a puzzle. After all, by 2013 both Russia and Ukraine had navigated their respective paths from socialist to market economies to become full-fledged members

of the international trading system. Yet even though all of the main players in this dispute (Russia, Ukraine, and the EU) were talking trade, they were speaking different languages. For the EU, free trade is a “win-win” scenario where both sides make concessions to gain access to new markets. The EU already has some fifty trade agreements in place with foreign partners.<sup>1</sup> Ukraine’s was just another agreement, and no country, from the EU’s perspective, reserves the right to interfere in such bilateral trade negotiations among sovereign states.

As a smaller market, Ukraine possesses fewer options within the global trading system. Yet prior to the crisis, Ukraine had managed to preserve significant flexibility and control over its trade policies. As the country’s economy collapsed in 2013, however, President Viktor Yanukovich changed tactics. Instead of trying to serve as a profitable intermediary between two trade blocs, Yanukovich decided to play one side against the other—a disastrous policy, as it turned out, for both Ukraine and Yanukovich.

Russia brought yet a third perspective on trade to the table. Despite Russia’s relatively successful assimilation into the global economy since 1991, it never has embraced the “win-win” attitude to international trade that now dominates global markets. Instead, President Vladimir Putin retains a zero-sum mentality to foreign policy that looks for “winners” and “losers” in any interaction. This approach carried over to trade—especially as it related to Ukraine—and ultimately proved decisive in the escalation of this conflict.

In reality, trade was at the bottom of each side’s calculations and miscalculations throughout the crisis. This chapter, therefore, focuses specifically on the respective trade

policies of Russia and Ukraine since 1991 to identify the origins of this conflict and demonstrate why the EU's rather conventional offer of free trade to Ukraine proved so controversial. It further addresses how, in the aftermath of annexation, war, and sanctions, the search for a unified Eurasian trade space has been severely upended. In particular, Russia has alienated its largest and most established partners in Eurasia and the EU while adopting policies that undermine its ability to participate in—and take full advantage of—the global trading system.

### **Russia's Trade Strategy**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was both an economic catastrophe and a commercial opportunity at the same time. Russia's established economic partners and trade blocs fell by the wayside while new markets suddenly appeared. Yet in order to take advantage of overseas markets—and open its own domestic economy to foreign investment—Russia had to play by a new set of global trade rules, ones not of its making.

Russia proved to be a quick learner and immediately began negotiating agreements that sought to integrate it into the global economy. The Russian government signed numerous bilateral investment treaties and double taxation treaties to encourage investment from abroad. When Russia found itself on the Financial Action Task Force blacklist for being uncooperative in the global fight against money laundering, it passed the necessary legislation and subsequently joined the organization in 2003.



Russia further used the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to push for a free trade zone within the post-Soviet space. Although the CIS was largely a moribund organization, in 2011 it finally succeeded in uniting eight successor states (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) in a free trade area that removed customs duties and allowed for the free movement of goods among these countries. In pursuing this agreement, Russia acted no differently than the United States, the EU, and other countries and regional trade blocs in seeing the economic advantages of increased foreign trade through the removal of customs duties and nontariff trade barriers.

Yet Russia wanted more than just a free trade area among its neighbors; it also wanted to emulate the EU and create its own trade bloc via a customs union. The distinction between these two types of multinational economic regimes is critical to understanding the origins of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. A free trade area eliminates tariffs among its respective participants, but each country still retains the right to set its external tariffs on nonmembers, thereby granting members significant autonomy in terms of how they approach international trade (i.e., what sectors of the economy they want to protect; what sectors should be subject to increased foreign competition). A customs union, by contrast, requires that all member-states establish the same tariffs for third countries, meaning that each member surrenders control of its external trade policy.<sup>2</sup>

Putin was never satisfied with just a free trade area; he aspired to a more unified Eurasian customs union that would support his broader geostrategic goals in the region

while placing Russia among the world's leading trade powers. He further viewed such a common Eurasian economic space as the critical bridge between Europe and Asia, with Russia essentially controlling the middle ground.

Some Western leaders voiced concern about the recreation of the Soviet Union, but while Putin talked about long-term political and economic integration, the tangible prize remained increased trade. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan repeatedly insisted that there would be no political union among the participating states, only more trade. After years of extensive negotiations, the new customs union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan came into existence on January 1, 2012 (the "Customs Union"). It expanded to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in January 2015, and was renamed the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Russia clearly stands out as the EEU's dominant member, with 86 percent of the bloc's gross domestic product.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin further demanded that other members raise their tariffs to Russian levels, which resulted in substantial increases for Kazakhstan (and later for Kyrgyzstan) to the immediate detriment to their respective trade with China. But while Russia remains the driving force behind the EEU, each member received equal representation on the organization's governing body, the Eurasian Economic Commission. Moreover, all decisions are based on consensus and can be blocked by any individual dissenting member.

Russia largely followed the EU example and established trade theory in its attempt to maximize the economic benefits of international trade. Whom do you trade with, if not your neighbors? From Putin's perspective, there was only

one glaring deficiency with the EEU: Ukraine, Russia's most important trade partner within the post-Soviet space, was not a member. The Kremlin attempted to pressure Ukraine into joining the Customs Union, most notably by withholding discounts on natural gas exports.<sup>4</sup> Such heavy-handed tactics, however, did not rise to the level of crisis. Ukraine clearly remained within Russia's economic orbit because of the CIS free trade agreement and long-standing business and historical ties. Nonetheless, Putin's message was straightforward: Ukraine remained central to Russia's future trade strategy, and he was not about to share his country's neighbor and main trade partner with anyone.

### **Russia's WTO Accession: A Missed Opportunity**

The last piece of Russia's international trade policy fell into place in 2012, when after nineteen years of protracted and difficult negotiations, Russia finally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Admittedly, during the long course of the talks, certain sectors of the Russian economy (e.g., automobile, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, agriculture) grew increasingly skeptical about the promised rewards of international trade. The Russian Ministry of Economic Development estimated the losses of Russia's first two years of WTO membership at \$13 billion.<sup>5</sup> Putin ultimately agreed to Russia's accession to the WTO, even though he recognized that by opening Russia's markets to foreign competition, parts of the economy undoubtedly would suffer.<sup>6</sup>

Putin's commitment to trade remained lukewarm, especially since Russia had not participated in the drafting of

the post-World War II rules of international commerce. The failure to grasp the rules essentially delayed Russia's entry by several years when Putin insisted that the Customs Union be admitted into the WTO as a unified group. Putin backed down only when it became apparent that it would be years before Kazakhstan and Belarus achieved the economic prerequisites to join the WTO. Moreover, the ink was barely dry on Russia's WTO accession agreement when Putin announced that he wanted to amend the rules and allow member states to defend national industries during times of global instability.<sup>7</sup> Such protectionist sentiments suggested that Putin was still not in tune with the WTO's free trade principles.

One final coda to Russia's accession to the WTO turned what should have been a milestone in US-Russian relations into a new source of tension. For the United States to ratify Russia's entry into the WTO, Congress first had to rescind the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the iconic 1970s legislation that tied US trade preferences for the (then) Soviet Union to its domestic policies on immigration. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment was long overdue for repeal, but political pressures in Congress ultimately linked Russia's accession to the WTO with a new piece of human rights legislation: the Magnitsky list, named after Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in prison in 2009 while trying to expose major corruption within Russian law enforcement.

President Barack Obama and the US business community faced a difficult choice. The only way that US business could take advantage of the numerous trade concessions negotiated as part of Russia's WTO accession was to repeal Jackson-Vanik. The president wanted a clean bill; Congress

pressed for the inclusion of the Magnitsky list. The Obama administration ultimately submitted to congressional demands in the hope that the economic advantages of WTO membership for Russia would eclipse any political fallout from the Magnitsky list, but this belief turned out to be wildly optimistic. The Kremlin loudly protested the Magnitsky list as an unwarranted interference in Russian internal affairs and, in typical tit-for-tat fashion, introduced its own prohibited persons list named after Dima Yakovlev, an adopted Russian child who had died in 2008 because of the negligence of his US parents.

Thus, the controversy surrounding the Magnitsky list quickly overshadowed any goodwill that might have accompanied Russia's entry into the WTO. From Russia's perspective, the United States had not pursued a "win-win" policy, but instead had played politics with trade. Putin would reciprocate with Ukraine.

## **Ukraine's Options**

As noted earlier, despite significant pressure from Russia, Ukraine managed to remain outside the Customs Union. Even President Yanukovich resisted membership, largely because Ukraine had no economic incentive for joining it. To begin with, as a fellow WTO member, Russia was already required to grant Ukraine permanent normal trade relations, which meant that Russia could not raise the tariffs on Ukrainian goods above the rate that it charged any other WTO member. The existing CIS free trade agreement provided additional trading privileges for Ukraine.

Why should Ukraine join the Customs Union, critics asked, when the CIS free trade agreement already gave it unfettered access to Russian markets? Customs Union membership further dictated that Ukraine sacrifice its right to set its own customs duties, a clear loss of sovereignty. Instead, Ukraine would have to adopt the Customs Union's rates, which generally were higher than the existing Ukrainian ones and would damage its trade with nonmember nations.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Ukraine already belonged to another regional free trade area, the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, which included Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. The GUAM free trade zone may have generated only a few billion dollars of turnover, but nonetheless it allowed Ukraine to be a big fish in a little pond. If Ukraine joined the Customs Union and implemented the latter's strict external tariff requirements, GUAM would be unlikely to survive.

As a result, no Ukrainian leader—not even a Kremlin ally like Viktor Yanukovich—believed that it was in Ukraine's economic interest to join Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in their customs union. When Yanukovich flew to Kazakhstan in May 2013 to discuss Ukraine's possible participation, he proposed the nebulous status of observer, as opposed to member, of the organization.<sup>9</sup> Such ambivalence was understandable, since from Yanukovich's standpoint, a potentially bigger prize loomed just over the horizon: a free trade agreement with the EU.

## The EU Association Agreement

It remains unclear whether the EU contemplated such a generous reward as free trade agreements when it began its Eastern Partnership Program with six former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) in 2009. If so, the Kremlin may have voiced its objections to the EU partnership project much earlier, thereby pushing negotiations away from full-fledged free trade agreements. As it was, once Russia appreciated what was being offered, it forced Armenia to abandon its EU free trade agreement in September 2013 and sign up for the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015.

Ukraine proved more resistant to Moscow's pressures. As the November 2013 Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit approached, a free trade deal between Europe and Ukraine (the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) was on the table as part of the Association Agreement, with only one major precondition set by the EU: that Yanukovich release his long-time political rival Yulia Tymoshenko from jail.<sup>10</sup> Yanukovich recoiled from making such a concession, but at the same time, the ultimate best-case trade scenario—free trade agreements and unfettered access to both the EU and the CIS—seemed within reach for Ukraine. Moreover, the EU had no fundamental objections to such an arrangement, as international trade theory views free trade, and multiple trade agreements, as a net positive in virtually all circumstances.

Regrettably, the Russian leaders did not share this positive outlook. At least initially, they framed their objections to the Association Agreement from a trade standpoint.

Russia complained that Ukraine theoretically could bring EU goods into Ukraine duty-free and then reexport them to Russia, thereby circumventing Russian tariffs on European products. A second major concern involved Ukraine's planned switch to EU standards under the Association Agreement. From Russia's perspective, these enhanced standards would disadvantage its future exports to Ukraine, since Russian products were unlikely to meet these requirements in the immediate future.

In late November 2013, Putin openly warned Ukraine and the EU that Russia would have to respond to a free trade agreement. According to Putin, allowing European products to enter the Russian market essentially duty-free via Ukraine would be "ruinous" for numerous sectors of the Russian economy, including agriculture, aviation, and car manufacturing. In such circumstances, Putin added, Russia would be forced to end its preferential trade agreements with Ukraine. "This is not a political issue," he emphasized. "It is a pragmatic matter, an economic issue."<sup>11</sup>

Western trade experts roundly rejected Putin's economic worries as groundless. In November 2013, Michael Emerson, the former EU ambassador to Russia, insisted that there was no real threat of illegal reexports, since Ukraine was required to observe all rules of origin and labeling requirements.<sup>12</sup> Such regulations, properly enforced, would restrict the reexport of European goods into Russia. Emerson further argued that new EU standards would not disrupt established Russia-Ukraine trade relations. As a result, from a purely trade perspective, the EU dismissed Russia's concerns and insisted that no third country possessed veto power over a EU trade agreement.



Yet although the EU's response may have been technically accurate and largely supported by trade theory, it still made a serious miscalculation. Dry bureaucratic statements about proper labeling requirements and the sanctity of bilateral trade negotiations did not address Russia's fundamental geostrategic objection: if the Association Agreement was signed, Russia's attempt to establish a competing trade bloc would be over. Trade remained a zero-sum game, not a win-win scenario, for Russia, and Ukraine was at the center of the struggle.

### **Russia Wins, then Loses**

Several factors, most notably money, initially pushed Ukraine in Russia's direction. Yanukovich arrived at this critical phase of negotiations with no economic leverage. In fact, Ukraine was flat broke in November 2013 and in desperate need of a bailout. Therefore, since Yanukovich could no longer pursue a middle path between his two potential trade partners, he instead initiated an unseemly winner-take-all competition to determine which bloc Ukraine would join.

Russia emerged as the winner of this bidding contest when the two countries agreed to a \$15 billion bailout in December 2013. The EU offered much less in terms of direct financial assistance and seemingly walked away without much overt disappointment. Yet even after the first \$3 billion payment, Russia did not demand that Ukraine formally join the EEU, although that requirement may well have been in the cards. Before Ukraine could

announce such a major change in trade policy, however, the Maidan first had to be cleared of protesters. And that act turned out to be a game changer.

The story of the Maidan and the revolution of dignity has been discussed in great detail elsewhere and will not be retold here.<sup>13</sup> Suffice it to say that as of February 22, 2014, Yanukovich was gone and the EU free trade agreement suddenly was back in play. Indeed, the Association Agreement served as the crucial road map and legislative plan for Ukraine's path forward, although formal EU membership remained years, if not decades, away.

In the aftermath of the Maidan and revolution, Russia ceased to talk the language of trade. Indeed, the EU had already dismissed Russia's trade-related concerns during the preliminary negotiations of the Association Agreement, so from Putin's perspective a more emphatic statement was required. This statement turned out to be the annexation of Crimea. Yet even as events cascaded out of control, the EU made one last attempt to refocus the crisis on more narrow trade terms. In September 2014, Brussels decided to implement only part of the Association Agreement. The EU specifically agreed to reduce its tariffs on Ukrainian goods, but the free flow of EU goods to Ukraine was suspended until January 1, 2016, so that Russia could more fully articulate its objections to the Association Agreement.<sup>14</sup> Yet this concession clearly proved too little, too late. Russia transformed Ukraine into a global crisis and *ex post facto* applied virtually every historical theory and myth of the past five hundred years to the present day. Admittedly, many of these ideas—patriotism, irredentism, statism, empire—had never disappeared from the Russian

discourse and had been cultivated assiduously by Putin for years. Whether Putin was driving or reacting to events remains open to interpretation, but if he was searching for a pretext to play the nationalist card, then the Russia-Ukraine trade dispute provided just such an excuse.

The losses quickly added up in terms of lives lost, people misplaced, infrastructure destroyed, and historical ties broken. Both Russia's and Ukraine's trade policies should be counted among the casualties. Russia quickly went from trade insider to international outcast, while Ukraine lost control of its border and its economic fate.

### **Eurasia's Broken Trade Landscape**

The most immediate result of Russia's actions in Ukraine was the imposition of sectoral sanctions by the United States, EU, and several other countries. Even Putin later admitted that sanctions had a negative impact on the domestic economy, particularly in terms of closing off Russian business to Western financial markets. Yet the most devastating sanctions were imposed by Russia itself and prohibited the import of EU and US agricultural products. Russia justified such measures by emphasizing that it would encourage domestic food production through the process of import substitution. In reality, the Russia's countersanctions have led to dramatic increases in food prices and Russian inflation.

The imposition of sanctions also meant that Russia was the odd man out in the global discussions on trade. The G8 quickly reverted back to being the G7, although Russia

shrugged off its exclusion as relatively unimportant. Putin also received a chilly reception at the November 2014 Brisbane G20 conference. This gathering focused in part on promoting free trade and making sure that member states refrained from imposing new protectionist measures. Having just imposed import restrictions in an overt attempt to promote domestic agricultural products, Russia was clearly out of step with the organization's goals.<sup>15</sup> Putin ultimately left Brisbane early, a fitting symbol of Russia's growing disconnect with the major trade powers.

Russia is not completely isolated. It remains a WTO member, and as such it continues to lower its tariffs as per its WTO commitments. Furthermore, it remains subject to the WTO dispute settlement procedures, although this is a mixed blessing, since WTO members increasingly have questioned Russia's trade practices. In particular, the EU has convened several dispute resolution panels to protest Russian customs duties against various European agricultural and manufacturing products.<sup>16</sup> Russia's WTO membership belies the notion that it is unwilling to sacrifice some sovereignty to global institutions, especially for its economic benefit. Yet as with the G20, Russian trade policies have now diverged from the WTO's core mission. The WTO exists to promote global trade and encourage countries to identify—and profit from—their comparative economic advantage. A policy of self-reliance and import substitution contradicts the very *raison d'être* of the WTO. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has recognized the drawbacks of such a strategy.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in addition to its protectionist plans for its agricultural and energy sectors, Russia plans to start producing more computers,

servers, laptops, and smartphones.<sup>18</sup> Such a retrograde policy has a particularly Soviet ring to it and inevitably will produce similar results, namely relatively expensive and noncompetitive goods.<sup>19</sup>

Russia's regional trade strategy also has suffered a devastating blow. Previously, Ukraine was Russia's number-one trade partner within the CIS; in the aftermath of war and invasion, that relationship has been destroyed. In the short term, Russia continues to increase border inspections of Ukrainian products so as to prevent a wide variety of goods (e.g., cosmetics, cleaning agents, wallpaper, furniture, bedclothes) from entering the country.<sup>20</sup> Other major Ukrainian export-oriented industries, especially the military sector, have lost their major and often only market for their products. Pursuant to the Minsk II cease-fire, Ukraine will only gain control of its eastern border with Russia in December 2015. Few observers, however, believe that this deadline will be met, meaning that for the foreseeable future, Ukraine cannot perform one of its basic trade functions: the supervision of its border.

In reality, Ukraine's trade agenda is in shambles. Having fostered an economic shift to Europe before it actually produced something of value (other than agricultural products) that Europeans wanted to buy, Ukraine's economic fate now hinges on maintaining a fragile cease-fire while attracting new foreign investment to rebuild its manufacturing sector, a financial high-wire act with only the International Monetary Fund serving as a safety net.<sup>21</sup>

Yet even if Ukraine's immediate trade prospects look rather bleak, it still has managed to disrupt Putin's favorite project, the EEU. Neither Kazakhstan nor Belarus chose to

follow Russia's lead and impose food bans against Western products, nor did they restrict imports from Ukraine. Thus, two gaping holes emerged in Russia's countersanctions regime, and Belarus in particular has been busy relabeling and reexporting various Western food products to Russia.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Russia's original reason for opposing the Association Agreement—fear of the illegal reexport of goods—was realized, except that the guilty party was Russia's fellow EEU member, not Ukraine. The situation got so out of hand that a customs border between Belarus and Russia was reestablished in December 2014, thereby undermining the very rationale for forming a trade bloc.<sup>23</sup> Russia's trade relations with Kazakhstan similarly have frayed. The rapid decline of the ruble suddenly made Russian products much more competitive in Kazakhstan. Thus, in March 2015 Kazakhstan imposed a forty-five-day embargo on the import of Russian oil products and further managed to clear local shelves of various Russian imports (e.g., meat, chocolate, dairy) by citing alleged health code violations.<sup>24</sup> Russia quickly promised to retaliate against Kazakh products, and Kazakhstan's decision to float its currency in August 2015 was in large measure an attempt to increase its competitiveness within the EEU. According to one commentator, this decision was also bound to "build up the mutual resentment between Russia and Kazakhstan."<sup>25</sup>

Such blatant protectionism and open disunity undermines any possibility that a common Eurasian space can compete with the world's major economic powers. Moreover, Belarus and Kazakhstan appear to have taken Russia's revived nationalist rhetoric to heart, especially since both countries are home to millions of Russian

speakers that Putin's new foreign policy doctrine claims to defend. In March 2015, Putin flew to Astana to propose a common currency for the EEU.<sup>26</sup> Kazakhstan and Belarus greeted this offer with stony silence, and it has no chance of being implemented anytime soon.

Russia admittedly continues to "talk the talk" on international trade despite its present difficulties, and it has not abandoned trade as a foreign policy goal. The EEU signed a free trade agreement with Vietnam in May 2015. Other trade agreements appear in the offing in the Middle East, Asia, and South America, as well as among Russia's fellow BRICS members. Moreover, in May 2015, when the EU, Russia, and Ukraine finally sat down to discuss Russia's concerns about the Association Agreement, Russian minister for economic development Alexei Ulyukayev did not object to the implementation of the second half of the agreement as of January 1, 2016.<sup>27</sup> Ulyukayev's surprising acquiescence can be interpreted as a positive sign, although just three months later he demanded that the EU and Ukraine sign a legal agreement to mitigate the risk of illegal reexports from Ukraine to Russia.<sup>28</sup> Ulyukayev further threatened a trade embargo on Ukrainian goods if such an agreement was not in place by January 2016. So even though Russia now appears resigned to the full enactment of the Association Agreement, it also remains committed to a post-Crimea trade policy of import substitution, protectionism, and self-reliance. Two decades after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia once again is out of step with the global trade agenda, where "victory" invariably leads to another economic dead end.

## Conclusion

Russian history provides a rich assortment of theories and explanations for the Ukrainian conflict. Nationalism, sovereignty, statehood, and empire all have been cited as underlying factors. Yet while Putin has called upon these ideas to justify his actions, they do not get to the root cause of the crisis. As this chapter demonstrates, the spark that ignited this dispute was trade, further aggravated by competing (mis)understandings as to how nations pursue economic advantage in a highly competitive global marketplace.

Trade stands out as one of the main successes of the post-Cold War transition period. The leading economic powers consistently called for the inclusion of Russia and Ukraine in the global trading system, a policy that culminated in the admission of both countries to the WTO. Yet the pursuit of greater integration and new markets also fueled old suspicions and rivalries, as revealed in the run-up to the crisis. From the EU's perspective, it had offered Ukraine a relatively noncontroversial concession: a free trade agreement. Russia also wanted closer trade relations with Ukraine, but as a member of a more rigid customs union that categorically ruled out the EU proposal. Ukraine was stuck in the middle; it wanted access to both markets, but under no condition could it enter into a free trade agreement with the EU if it agreed to be bound by the external custom rates of the EEU.

The rules of international trade, therefore, unwittingly and step by step led to a showdown. But while the stakes were clear to everyone, each party consistently misjudged the opposing side's intentions and reaction to events, and



so the conflict escalated and ultimately escaped the bounds of a mere trade dispute to become a regional and global crisis. One of the first steps in resolving the crisis will depend on when and how Russia decides to change course and reverse its counterproductive trade policies. At this stage, however, the most likely end result will be a new frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine that will undermine the region's long-standing trade relationships for years, if not for decades. Win-win and zero-sum have given way to lose-lose, and this outcome will serve as one of the primary legacies of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis.

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## **Russia's Grand Choice**

*To Be Feared as a Superpower or  
Prosperous as a Nation?*

MAXIM TRUDOLYUBOV

Ever since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia has been torn by a question: do Russians want their country to be feared as a superpower or to be a nation whose primary concern is its citizens' well-being? The annexation of Crimea and Russia's military operation in eastern Ukraine seem at first glance to have provided a definitive answer. Many in Russia have seen the Crimea decision as a pivotal moment in Russia's struggle to redefine and reassert itself in a post-Cold War world. Many in the world have also seen the Crimea decision as a game changer. To both these groups of observers, Russia was openly breaking out of the post-World War II mold and choosing expansionist politics rather than peaceful domestic development.

If Crimea indeed is a pivot, it will define Russia's future. It will likely fuel a regional arms race and force Eastern

Europeans and Russians to choose guns over butter. It will force the citizens of Russia to accept, once again, a social contract that is all too familiar to their older generations: greatness and prospects for the country should take precedence over the person's individual rights and prospects. Russians will have chosen to be a part of a great power rather than be great individually.

The decision to take one quick move has tipped not just one balance, but many. It has changed Russia's course from one of integration to one of isolation, from development to survival, from peace to conflict, from building the citizens' well-being to superpower [*derzhava*] political scheming. Have the Russians accepted all these trade-offs? Have they made a final choice to be a *derzhava* rather than a nation? In this chapter, I will go through each of the oppositions (i.e., integration vs. isolation, development vs. survival) and argue that the grand choice has not in fact been made. The Russian public is still undecided. Russia historically has oscillated between the extremes rather wildly. Knowing Russia's history, one can hardly conclude that the current state of militant isolationism will hold forever. It does not stand by itself and has to be propped up. A lot of it comes from the top down rather than from the bottom up.

### **Integration vs. Isolation**

Unlike Japan or China, Russia has never entirely sealed itself off from the rest of the world. There were relatively closed periods, like the one during the Stalinist Soviet Union, but even then the economic, technological, and

political exchanges continued. Throughout its history, Russia has moved several times from being almost entirely isolated to being almost entirely integrated.

The most recent bout of openness to the world and to the West in particular started in the second half of the 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first democratically elected president, surrounded himself with pro-Western intellectuals—political and social scientists, market economists, and journalists. The Kremlin's expectations were high, but the post-Soviet economic crisis proved too deep, while oil and gas prices stayed at record lows throughout the 1990s. As the new Russia was not turning into a rich democracy quickly enough, the initial enthusiasm for openness was severely diminished. Many leading Russians became suspicious and antagonistic toward Western economic and political institutions. High-ranking bureaucrats, members of parliament, business executives, and top law enforcement and security officials polled by William Zimmerman between 1993 and 2012 showed continuously rising levels of anti-Americanism. Russian elites have felt disappointed and frustrated over the failure to modernize the country along a foreign model. The phenomenon of *ressentiment* became the initial driver of anti-Americanism in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the 1990s, Yeltsin started to bring in people whom he hoped would bring back some stability. It just so happened that for many of those people, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy. They brooded over Russia's diminished state, angry that Russia has never been repaid or appreciated by the West for—as Vladimir Putin



would repeatedly point out—voluntarily giving up its eastern and central European interests. In 1997, Yeltsin appointed Putin, then a relatively obscure former foreign intelligence officer, as head of the Main Control Directorate of the Presidential Property Management Department, which keeps close watch on spending by government officials and records their activities. Another security specialist, Lt. Gen. Nikolai Patrushev (now secretary of Russia's Security Council), succeeded Putin in that role in 1998. Gen. Nikolay Bordyuzha (now general secretary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, an alliance of post-Soviet states) became head of the presidential administration in 1998. Yeltsin saw these and other KGB alumni as a bulwark against disintegration and corruption. But these new people also had to be managed and had to remain faithful to those who brought them to power. Putin demonstrated exemplary loyalty to his former boss Anatoly Sobchak, the former mayor of St. Petersburg, during the late 1990s when Sobchak lost the mayoral elections and was charged with corruption. Putin's willingness and ability to help a colleague who became the target of an investigation might have been a factor behind Yeltsin's decision, in 1999, to choose Putin as prime minister, and eventually endorse him as his successor.

Mutual trust between Russian and American elites did rise slightly in the early years of this century. President George W. Bush and Putin exhibited a warm rapport during their first meeting in Slovenia in June 2001. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the Kremlin voiced strong support for Washington's war on terror. But the show of cordiality did not hold: clashes erupted over the

2003 war in Iraq, NATO expansion, and the so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005. The Russian ruling class saw these events as hostile acts directed at Moscow by the West. "When Russian elites eventually passed on their anti-American sentiment to the mass public, it became a factor in its own right in the context of the still-competitive Russian political arena of 1999–2000," writes Eduard Ponarin of the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg. "Since then, it has been rational for politicians to instrumentally apply anti-American rhetoric in bids to garner public support."<sup>2</sup>

The elites who went through a profound disillusionment with Western ways are now occupying key decision-making positions in the Kremlin, state-owned business, and media. These people learned most of their survival skills in the 1990s. They know how to operate in a market that is barely regulated. They know how to keep their adversaries guessing. It is an environment where the levels of trust are low, the levels of uncertainty are high, and the rule of law does not mean much.

In 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev, Putin's younger colleague from St. Petersburg, became president, Putin retained a key voice in crucial decisions as prime minister. Despite being number one in the Kremlin pecking order, Putin must have felt insecure being officially regarded as number two. How it must have rankled him when President Barack Obama and Chancellor Angela Merkel were especially careful to defer to President Medvedev. The German chancellor even hinted during Medvedev's visit to Hanover in July 2011 that she preferred him to Putin as a candidate in the approaching presidential race.

That was bad timing. In the Middle East, a number of strongmen had been or were about to be ousted in the turmoil of the Arab Spring. Yet in 2012, Putin returned to the presidency, determined to bring his fight for political survival to a new level. In his public statements, it was the West that had fueled the color revolutions and the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, just as it had stoked the angry protests in Russian cities over rigged parliamentary elections in the winter of 2011–12.

In Putin's new presidency after 2012, the Kremlin's anti-Western rhetoric reached levels unheard of since the Soviet days. Openness in various spheres, from computer networks to culture, was now presented as weakness. During Putin's third term as president, Russia started to build virtual walls along its borders, but the decision to annex Crimea took this isolationist drive to a completely new level. The move against Ukraine was presented domestically as a just and justified measure that the West took with inexplicable hostility. It was the West that was inciting conflict and hitting Russia with sanctions. Russia's plunging economy was thus presented as the price of pursuing a noble cause: standing up to America, fighting "fascism" in Ukraine, and winning recognition for Russia as a global power.

### **Survival vs. Development**

Putin's noble cause notwithstanding, it was not a given that the Russian public would accept the great-power rhetoric at face value. Mass economic attitudes and priorities have

been changing according to a logic of their own. That logic was recently shown and explained by Mikhail Dmitriev, a former government official and a respected social scientist.

Decent pay and current consumption were at the top of the society's agenda from the early 1990s to early 2000s. But by 2011–12, it became clear that Russians had developed a palpable demand for better housing and health care, for a better environment and a comfortable urban space, for good governance and modern education. Russian society gradually transitioned from a survivalist mode to priorities of development.<sup>3</sup> That was the real reason why Russia's middle class erupted in protest in late 2011 and early 2012 for a seemingly mundane reason of another rigged election. "Disgruntled urbanites," as a presidential administration official christened the driving force of the movement at the time, realized that mere income growth would no longer make their lives any better—only better governance would. The protests were suppressed, their leaders marginalized and dispersed, but the main grievances remained. Public officials were too obviously corrupt; good health care and education were too hard to get or too expensive. The Russian institutional machinery needed a major revamp, and everybody knew it.

During his first two terms, from 2000 to 2008, Putin was a strong source of hope, owing largely to the rapid increase in Russians' incomes. In 2012, as this growth began to wane, so did Putin's popularity. His 63 to 65 percent approval rating prior to the annexation of Crimea appeared high by Western standards, but compared with his previous record it was low—and was dangerously close to levels that would threaten his leadership. Shocked to

discover this decline, the Kremlin tried to retarget the state propaganda machine to the tasks of inventing or exaggerating various threats the Russians were supposedly facing. Between early 2012 and late 2013, Russian political managers embarked on a radical information offensive to divide and frighten the populace. State-controlled television channels spread dire warnings of vague conspiracies to overthrow the government, attacks on artists supposedly seeking to humiliate the Russian church, and warnings that homosexuals and a “pedophile lobby” were using the Internet to undermine the traditional family and Russian society.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, spurred by the Kremlin leadership, the State Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian parliament, went into action. It severely restricted public activism by enacting exorbitant fines for unauthorized protest; introduced rules against “foreign agents,” which effectively prevented Russian nongovernmental organizations from raising funds from international donors; alienated Russia’s gay and lesbian community by enacting the so-called gay propaganda law; and criminalized acts that offended religious feelings, effectively reintroducing blasphemy into Russia’s legal code. In this period between March 2012 and December 2013, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, two members of the feminist punk protest group Pussy Riot, were arrested and sent to jail.<sup>5</sup>

The Kremlin’s “conservative offensive” proved a very efficient policy in the sense that it divided and disoriented Russia’s public opinion. Traditionalist values and gay rights, religious and secular education, and Russia’s identity vis-à-vis the West became major talking points. Torn by culture wars artfully instigated by the state-controlled media,

Russian society could no longer focus on governance. But a major discrepancy remained. In 2013, Russia's income per capita (in purchasing power parity terms) reached a historic maximum compared to that of the United States: 46 percent. A gap that narrow had never been achieved before. According to a 2015 assessment by Mikhail Dmitriev, in certain areas of consumption, including the level of motorization of the economy, ownership of cell phones, or the consumption of expensive electronic gadgets, Russia had neared the levels of advanced economies. Nonetheless, the conservative offensive failed to address the elephant in the room. Russia was a relatively affluent society stymied by an obsolete, highly corrupt state. The climax of public disappointment was therefore reached not in 2012 but at the end of 2013, when Putin's personal approval rating dipped to its lowest point in three years. In Dmitriev's words, "It was a gloomy and pessimistic period."<sup>6</sup>

Decrepit hospitals, deteriorating education standards, and official corruption once again could have become a national cause, this time for real. Frustrated elites, unable and unwilling to produce real institutional change, needed an emergency to reinstall the survivalist mode. It is important to note that the logic of survival is close to the heart of Vladimir Putin, who keeps referring to Russia's ability to survive any calamity. "Survivalist" is one of Putin's identities described by political scientists Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy: "Surviving in a hostile and competitive world means thinking about the worst thing that could happen, and having something to rely upon to assure yourself, and the state, when the external shocks come along. These ideas have governed Putin's policies as Russia's leader since 2000."<sup>7</sup>

Putin repeatedly turned himself into a figure that the population would rely upon to assure itself against an external shock: that was how he became popular in the first place, during the Chechen war of 1999–2000. He was able to create the same rally-around-the-flag effect during the war with Georgia in 2008. But in 2013, there was no enemy at the gate. And the image of the United States, always handy as a bogeyman, could not be used effectively without a major conflict. A conflict arrived just in time. It was practically a godsend.

### **War vs. Peace**

Ukraine decided to leave Russia for Europe—at least, that was how many Russian observers saw the Association Agreement that Ukraine and the European Union (EU) were supposed to sign at a summit meeting in Vilnius at the end of November 2013. At the time, Vladimir Putin declared that opening borders to European goods and services under the free trade pact was Ukraine's sovereign choice. But Russia's president had in fact promised his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yanukovich, president since 2010, that he would inflict a lot of pain on Ukraine if the Association Agreement was signed. So Yanukovich did not sign the agreement. This decision angered many Ukrainians, and popular unrest followed, which soon led to bloody clashes with the police and resulted in a surprisingly fast political meltdown. Yanukovich fled his country on February 22, 2014.

There are various theories as to whether the Kremlin actually supported the sitting government in Ukraine up to

its last moment. One much-discussed leak suggested that Moscow had decided to act in Ukraine even before it was all over for the supposedly Russia-backed Yanukovich.<sup>8</sup> Nothing of the kind has ever been publicly recognized, of course. Officially, Russia supported Yanukovich. On Russian television, the February revolution was not called anything but a “color revolution” and a Western-led regime change.<sup>9</sup>

The Kremlin went into emergency mode. The fact that the United States and the EU recognized the Ukrainian interim government and promised it financial aid was presented in Russia as the ultimate breach of trust by the West. The Kremlin declared international treaties concerning Ukraine, including the Budapest memorandum to the 1994 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity, as null and void. Russian special forces without insignia neutralized the Ukrainian military in Crimea; an interim government conducted a snap referendum about joining Russia; and on March 18, 2014, an accession treaty with Russia was signed. The whole process took less than a month.

Putin said at the time that Russia had the moral right to respond to the population of Crimea’s nearly universally expressed willingness to join Russia. He could not discuss this with anyone in Ukraine because there was no legitimate executive authority, nobody to talk to.<sup>10</sup> A documentary that aired one year after the annexation of Crimea reinforced the message. Moscow needed Crimea so badly that it was ready to put its nuclear forces on alert to ensure it. The situation was so dramatic that Russia actually had to go and save Yanukovich’s life, Putin was shown as saying in that documentary.<sup>11</sup>



International reaction to the annexation is well known. US Secretary of State John Kerry described Moscow's intervention in Crimea as an "incredible act of aggression," and EU leadership called it an "unprovoked violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." A handful of regimes, including Nicaragua and North Korea, supported the Russian move, while most countries expressed concern over the escalation of violence in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> But domestically, the annexation of Crimea—or Crimea's reunification with Russia, as it was officially called—proved a resounding success. In fact, it exerted a mesmerizing effect on the Russian population. According to different polls, the move was immediately supported by more than 90 percent of those polled.<sup>13</sup>

As someone who was born in Russia and spent most of his adult life there, I can vouch for the fact that Crimea had never carried a religious or historic significance of such proportions. The Russian people universally supported the annexation not because of Crimea itself, but because of something else. It was a moment when a *derzhava* completely eclipsed a nation in the Russian mind.

It was understood that if Moscow had not come up with a quick and forceful response to the West, Russia would have been seen as weak. Crimea was that forceful response. "Russian society holds aggression in high regard," as a Levada-Center sociologist put it. "That is why the bold reactive moves by the Russian authorities, from the annexation of Crimea to countersanctions, had only increased their sympathies for the leader."<sup>14</sup> But there probably was something even more significant. "Today, the Russians have made their choice," the late sociologist

Boris Dubin said in one of his last talks in 2014. "Very quickly, in just a few weeks, about three-quarters of the population of a country that went through such wars has sanctioned a war. A statement has been made: we agree to war if the chief declares it."<sup>15</sup>

### **Cost vs. Benefit**

Thinking about Crimea in terms of costs and benefits is not a straightforward affair. The costs involved have been understood differently at different levels of Russia's ruling structures and in Russian society in general. The Kremlin did try, although unsuccessfully, to justify its calculations with some number-crunching, but the Russian population did not really come to terms with the economic and political costs of Putin's decision.

Putin made his decision when oil prices were hovering comfortably above \$100 a barrel and Russia's reserves were swelling with cash. A series of meetings was held in February 2014, during which Putin was told that Russia had enough foreign currency reserves to annex Crimea and withstand any sanctions that might follow. "For Putin, the reserves that Russia has accumulated over the past fourteen years equal political power," Alexei Kudrin, who ran Russia's finances from 2000 to 2011, said in a March 2015 interview. The Russian Central Bank's foreign reserves stood at \$500 billion at the time of the decision. At the time of this writing in September 2015, they have fallen to \$366 billion because of the fall in the value of the ruble.<sup>16</sup>

The Ministry of Finance was not consulted during the decision-making process. “As to the possible costs [of the Crimea move], I can tell you: no, they did not ask us,” First Deputy Finance Minister Tatiana Nesterenko said in an interview with *Forbes Woman* magazine. One would expect a professional like Nesterenko to be critical about the Kremlin’s failure to reach out to the ministry at such an important political junction. But contrary to that expectation, she spelled out an attitude toward the Kremlin that is common among the Russian population and in large measure is the reason behind Putin’s amazing approval rating: “We only know what we know. We don’t know what kind of information the First Person [the president] had. I always hold on to biblical truths: and they tell us that there is a man that takes up a certain mission. He has all the information and he takes all the responsibility. I am not even discussing this.”<sup>17</sup>

Just like Nesterenko, Russians delegate all the important decisions to the higher authorities. The Russian public usually gives an overwhelming “no” to a question of whether you think you can influence political processes in Russia.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, they assume omniscience on the part of the Kremlin and recognize its unique mission. On the other hand, they disclaim any responsibility for those decisions. For the majority of Russians, the Kremlin giveth and the Kremlin taketh away. “The Russian public has readily bought the propaganda message that it received Crimea as a free gift,” says Vladimir Magun, a sociologist with the Russian Academy of Sciences. “It’s like shopping in a store with no price tags.”<sup>19</sup> In terms of this comparison, a disappointment awaits us at the exit: stores that do not display price tags usually are very expensive.

But whenever a question includes a rational assessment of one's situation and an explicit cost-benefit analysis, society starts to look a lot less monolithic. The majority of Russians are not ready to extend financial support to their country's newly acquired region. In a DW-Trend poll, 67 percent of respondents said that they would not be prepared to give up part of their incomes to increase Russia's economic aid to Crimea.<sup>20</sup> According to a Levada poll, about a half of the respondents were not prepared to cover the Crimean bill.<sup>21</sup>

Sharply divisive official rhetoric and the war imagery evoked by state-owned media certainly played a role in inducing the Russians to buy into the Crimean adventure. But there is another, less obvious factor at work. The annexation of Crimea with its implicit consequences of increased security concerns and defense spending favors what might be called Russia's Soviet industrial core. It promises to restore the purpose and well-being of those regions, which depend on heavy machinery and defense manufacturing facilities that can only be supported by the state budget. Russia still has dozens of millions of people who live in one-company towns that produce guns and tanks.

The post-Soviet economic expansion apparently did not go deep enough. The economy failed to provide Russians with the prospects for the future that would keep them busy doing something creative rather than something destructive. The Russian public is less integrated in the global economy, less enfranchised, and less indebted than an average Western society. According to the professional services firm Deloitte, Russia's mortgage debt is 20 times lower, on average, than that of the EU. Russia's own National Agency for Financial Studies also reports that

only 2 percent of Russians are prepared to take on a mortgage, owing largely to the uncertainty that plagues the market. For Western societies—that do not depend on defense manufacturing; that have large service economies; that are weighed down by credits, contracts, and other obligations—conflict is extremely costly, so they tend to resist it and even turn on leaders who suggest it. Ordinary Russians, by contrast, are much less immune to conflict. They are willing to pin their hopes on a single charismatic figure, not only because they have fewer promising alternatives but also because they face fewer constraints in doing so.<sup>22</sup> It is easier to get carried away when not much is keeping you anchored.

Russians do not seem to have acquired an attachment to all the worldly goods that they were exposed to during the fat decade that ended in 2014. They can easily switch back to a survival mode. The Gardeners of Russia, a nongovernmental organization, reported that in 2015 Russians bought 50 percent more vegetable seeds than flower seeds. This fact is highly illustrative: 65 percent of Russians own little garden plots. Tinkering with them is both a national pastime and an insurance against external shocks. Growing flowers is about self-expression; growing potatoes is about survival. Switching from the former to the latter is not that difficult.<sup>23</sup>

The Russians, post-Crimea, exhibit strong feelings about matters of international politics that are far from their daily lives. Yet at the same time, they seem to have very little emotion about the fact that they can hardly influence domestic matters such as quality of health care or education. It is as if they are watching a movie, cheering for the hero and booing the bad guy, without realizing that the

action is happening all around them in real life and in the end they themselves will be billed for all the ruined cars and burnt real estate.

### **Politics vs. Prosperity**

It took a business professor to notice and spell out a major spiritual divide that has been running through the Russian ruling elite for years. Invited to Russia in the mid-2000s to evaluate Russia's economic competitiveness, Michael Porter concluded that the disagreements within the Moscow political elites were not technical. "These differences in opinion go beyond the usual policy disagreements that are present in many governments," he wrote in a 2007 report, "and strike to the heart of the goals of the nation itself." Porter continued: "Is the goal politics or prosperity for citizens? There is no clear mechanism to resolve these incompatible aspirations. Instead, conflicting signals threaten to cancel each other out and, even worse, create a high level of uncertainty about future policies."<sup>24</sup>

While the elites were divided, the nation at large had a more clearly defined resolve. Ten years ago, when Porter and his team were in Moscow, Russian public attitudes were actually leaning toward peaceful nation-building rather than fear mongering. In a 2005 poll conducted by Levada, 62 percent of respondents said that they would prefer to live in a nation with higher living standards, while 36 percent chose national "greatness" ("a great *derzhava* that is respected and feared") as a priority.<sup>25</sup> But the peaceful mode did not hold: the ranks of *derzhava*

supporters started to grow following the 2008 war with Georgia. In due course, anti-American, anti-Western sentiment went on to reach its second peak in a decade (the first peak was associated with the NATO campaign in Kosovo in 1999).<sup>26</sup> Still, those polled do not seem to be able to make a final choice. The public is divided: a 2015 Levada poll suggests that 47 percent support a *derzhava*, while 49 percent would choose a nation whose primary concern is its citizens' well-being.<sup>27</sup> Given the intensity of the information offensive, it is a sign of relative sanity that only half of Russians are choosing sovereign and military greatness over well-being.

Russians appear to be undecided about their grand choice. President Putin has resolved the issue for them, or so it seems. He has decided to tip the balance in favor of ambitious expansionist politics rather than domestic development. The public clearly likes the idea of proving Russia's military might to the world, but it does not want to invest in it. Probably, the people sense that the jingoist agenda created and maintained by the state-run media is not honest. People know that it will go away as soon as the Kremlin comes up with something else.

Despite being attractive to certain strata of the population, the idea of defending the Russian-speaking populations of the former Soviet Union does not seem to take off as a national idea. It is too openly instrumental, being used by the Kremlin to offset the domestic economic agenda, and this fact fails to escape the public's perception. Many Russians seem to like the big illusion of nationalist expansion that is being created for them on their television screens, but they still sense that this is an illusion.

The official story of the annexation of Crimea changes from one official documentary to the next. The instability of the story provokes the suspicion that the reasons given are phony. It is a project that many Russians like, but they know that it is a Kremlin project. Neither its ultimate goal nor its real logic is clear. The public was not consulted when the Kremlin started its Ukrainian project; the public will not be consulted when the Kremlin decides to shut it down. Everyone in Russia understands this. That is why, even though they support the patriotic rhetoric, they have quietly switched from growing flowers to growing potatoes. The Russian people know that, ultimately, they themselves are responsible for their survival. They are good at it, and that is why they seem to agree to take a deep sigh and postpone their developmental projects indefinitely.

The Kremlin is busy solving its own problems, while ordinary Russians are left to solve theirs. This kind of relationship between the czars and ordinary folks is ancient. The historian Geoffrey Hosking thinks that the Russian authorities for centuries have been so busy building an empire that the people were prevented from creating a nation. Attempts to form a nation would always get in the way of lofty imperial goals.<sup>28</sup> This is why the values of individual well-being are hard to defend in Russia. It is also why there are so many people in Russia who, by default, prefer to be a *derzhava* rather than a nation.

A more immediate set of factors is also at work in today's Russia. Russia is a torn country. It 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. 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. The good news is that this is not the only constituency that exists in Russia.

The choice between "greatness" on the world stage and domestic prosperity is a false one. Russia will be both a formidable world power and a flourishing economy as soon as it learns to take into account the interests of all social groups, including those disgruntled urbanites who recently have been forced to hunker down and wait for better times.

## Notes

1. In the late 1800s, Friedrich Nietzsche used the term *ressentiment* to describe a slave's envy and hatred of his master. In the 1990s, sociologist Liah Greenfeld used *ressentiment* to refer to a political elite's feelings of disappointment with a model country that they want to emulate. William Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
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CHAPTER **4**

## **A Small, Victorious War?**

### *The Symbolic Politics of Vladimir Putin*

ELIZABETH A. WOOD

In late October 2014, Russian president Vladimir Putin opened the eleventh Valdai Club meetings in Sochi under the banner “The World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules?” That banner in many ways symbolizes the problem that Putin, as the leader of Russia, has struggled with in his own image-making: namely a tension between the lawful hero who pronounces the “dictatorship of law” and the tough guy who appears to break rules without fear. In the Crimean situation Putin has attempted to play both the Russian hero who returned Crimea to the motherland and the renegade who flaunts Western rules. Putin has also

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sought explicitly to restore what he sees as the proper “world order,” one that is multipolar and not dominated by the United States. The contradiction and the challenge of Putin’s efforts in this direction lie in the fact that he has sought both to make up new rules and to play without rules, while taking others to task for not abiding by the established rules.

Scholars and policymakers have debated whether the taking of Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine represent a master strategy (perhaps to take over all the territory of the former Soviet Union) or an improvisation in response to the unrest in Kyiv in late 2013 and early 2014. Putin himself has gone to great lengths—including participating in a special documentary film entitled *Crimea: A Path to the Homeland* (2015)—to claim that his actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine came spontaneously in response to President Viktor Yanukovich’s flight from Kyiv on February 22. Obviously, the change in power in Kyiv gave Russia both a motive and an opportunity to seize Crimea. The motive arose from the Kremlin’s fear that the new Ukrainian government might deny Russia access to its own Black Sea Fleet (or might join NATO, which could also threaten the Russian fleet); the opportunity arose from the fact that the new government in Kyiv was disorganized and lacking in control over its own politics and its military. In short, the situation created a power vacuum in Ukraine that gave Russia a good moment to strike.

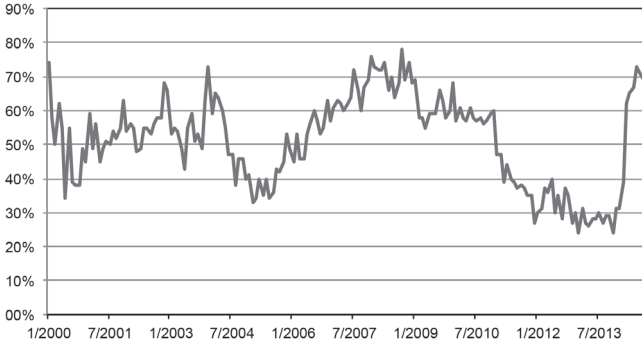
Yet Putin’s own creation and manipulation of images of himself as national leader also played a significant role in bringing about the crisis. Since Putin first came to power as prime minister in August 1999, he has relied extensively

on a broad “scenario of power” based on appearances of personal, masculine strength; on the ritual obeisance of others; and on a reliance on power for its own sake.<sup>1</sup> This scenario or script did not “cause” the decision to intervene in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Most likely, there was a broad contingency plan in place in case the Black Sea Fleet and Crimea were ever threatened. But it gave rise to a temptation to try to take Crimea as a heroic act. Successful saber-rattling had led to rises in Putin’s popularity ratings on three prior occasions: in September 1999, when he spoke crudely about hunting down and killing Chechen terrorists; in December 2003, after the arrest of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky; and September 2008, after the war with Georgia (see figure 4.1). Although research indicates that Putin’s long-term popularity trends are linked to the economic prosperity of the 2000s at least as much as to personality issues and specific events, these spikes in popularity correlate with Putin’s aggression toward perceived internal and external enemies.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, this way of ruling has created its own trap. Since 1999, the Putin regime has chosen to focus on image over national ideas, leaving an ideological vacuum that has been filled by various right-wing nationalists.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this Putin-centric imagery has created a situation in which Putin must appear strong and resolute at every moment or risk being attacked as insufficiently presidential, or even a “national traitor” or a coward.<sup>4</sup>

In this situation, Putin is potentially hostage to paramilitary forces as much as to official ones. Over the past fifteen years, he has encouraged the growth of not only his military (through pay raises, military reforms, and the

**Figure 4.1. Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating, January 2000 through September 2014**



Source: Levada-Center, "Indexes," retrieved September 28, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes&>.

creation of new elite units) but also paramilitary forces that operate outside the regular chains of command. One particular example of such forces is the Night Wolves motorcyclists, who have been engaging in patriotic bike shows and also participating in the fighting in both Crimea and eastern Ukraine. As this chapter's discussion of the Night Wolves will show, Putin's scenario of power—the Putin-centrism of the situation—creates a contradiction where he and the paramilitary groups appear to be simultaneously playing by the rules (as social forces that appear to be operating spontaneously) and yet also bending them (through the deployment of informal and nonmilitary combatants in military conflicts).

Although the evidence is not conclusive, this attention to Putin's scenario of power suggests that in the context of anti-Putin protests in 2011 and 2012 and an impending economic downturn (visible a full year before the 2014 sanctions), a "small, victorious war" may have seemed the best solution to the problem of maintaining Putin's dominant image and his leadership in the nation.<sup>5</sup> Yanukovich's departure thus did not *force* Putin to take Crimea, as he has insisted, but rather it *freed* him to do so. In annexing the peninsula, Putin chose to break the rules of international engagement, relying on informal and paramilitary groups as much as on the military. His response as the situation then unfolded was to emphasize his own adept handling of the crisis, his role as savior and protector of Russia. Anyone who did not agree now became a traitor. As Vyacheslav Volodin, deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, famously commented in October 2014, "The attacks against Putin are attacks against Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Putin Scenario of Power**

War and military confrontation have been central to the construction of Putin's persona since he first became prime minister in August 1999. The war in Chechnya and his coarse promise to "rub out the bandits in the outhouse" played a major role in the spike in his popularity that autumn. The public did not yet know whether he would succeed, but they loved the sweep of his ambitions and the harshness of his outlaw-sounding threat. In 2004, when



Chechen terrorists seized a children's school in Beslan in southern Russia, Putin's response was to increase controls over Russia's domestic politics. Beginning in 2005, he created an extended romance with World War II by forming a special committee called *Pobeda* (Victory) to celebrate every military victory in that war. Over the years, the Kremlin has organized commemorations of every event of any significance in the war, especially in round years (the sixtieth, sixty-fifth, and now seventieth anniversaries of the invasion of Russia, the battles of Kursk and Stalingrad, and the like). The word *Pobeda* itself is always spelled with a capital P in Putin's speeches on his official Kremlin website, just as it was in Soviet times.<sup>7</sup> In 2008, Russia celebrated its victory in the Russo-Georgian five-day war, culminating in the "recognition" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although as Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Bobick have shown, this victory was also the beginning of a long siege of these regions, a "frozen conflict" complete with huge amounts of military hardware, barbed-wire fences, and control over local populations.<sup>8</sup>

Noteworthy in this scenario is the tendency to combine contradictory images of Putin: the lawful hero and the macho renegade. To a certain extent a similar contradictory mix of positive and negative characteristics has continued to make Stalin a revered figure among many Russians. In 2006, sociologist Vladimir Petukhov, who serves on the board of directors of the leading polling research center VTsIOM, even wrote an article on Stalin titled "The bad good dictator."<sup>9</sup> Veteran journalist Maria Lipman and sociologist Lev Gudkov have termed this contradiction "the Stalin Puzzle." In October 2008, 50 percent of

respondents in one poll completely or mostly agreed with the statement “Stalin was a wise leader who brought the Soviet Union to might and prosperity.” At the same time, in the same poll, 68 percent completely or mostly agreed with the statement “Stalin was a cruel, inhuman tyrant.”<sup>10</sup> Somehow, in their minds, Stalin could be both.

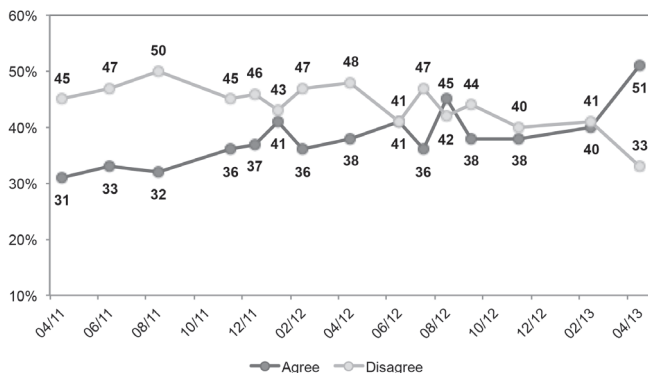
### **Personal Attacks on Vladimir Putin, 2011–12**

In 2011–12, when Russia exploded in protests in both the capital and the smaller provincial cities, Putin’s personal charisma seemed to take a nosedive. The protesters championed free elections (which they had long known were not free), but the slogans on their posters also vilified Putin personally, including his hypermasculine image. Paradoxically, as Marlene Laruelle has shown, the protesters, especially opposition activist Alexei Navalny and his followers, often sought to reconcile nationalist and even xenophobic beliefs with economic liberalism.<sup>11</sup>

The problems that Putin faced in the protests were grave from the perspective of regime maintenance. In December 2011, United Russia, the country’s main “party of power,” received a mere 49 percent of the vote, instead of the 64 percent it had received in 2007.<sup>12</sup> Navalny’s label for United Russia, “the party of thieves and swindlers,” had definitely stuck (figure 4.2). Most important, the protests attacked Putin personally. This is common in political protests worldwide—it is easiest to create *ad hominem* attacks that equate the regime and the leader—but in the Russian case the protesters targeted Putin in personal, demeaning

**Figure 4.2. Popular Opinion about the United Russia Party, 2011–13**

*Do you agree or disagree with the opinion: “United Russia is the party of thieves and swindlers”?*



Source: Levada-Center, in Maksim Glikin and Aleksei Nikol'skii, “Bol'shinstvo rossiian schitaet, chto ‘Edinaia Rossiia’ partiia zhulikov i vorov” [The majority of Russians believe that “United Russia” is a party of thieves and swindlers], *Vedomosti*, April 29, 2013, [http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2013/04/29/partiya\\_dlya\\_bogatyh](http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2013/04/29/partiya_dlya_bogatyh).

ways. Protest posters showed graphically that “Putin” should be the end of the road (with the “t” in his name forming a clear dead end). They denounced Putin as “big snot” and Dmitry Medvedev (who until recently had been Putin’s stand-in as president of Russia) as a “little snot.” The protesters also claimed that they were “for honest amphorae,” a reference to Putin’s 2011 staged publicity stunt in which he had “discovered” ancient amphorae in the Black Sea. Because Putin had mocked the protesters, referring to their white protest ribbons as something worn at an AIDS

rally, they depicted him with condoms around his head, on his lapel, and in his hands, and even made him an image on a condom-shaped balloon with astronaut Yuri Gagarin's famous phrase, "Let's go!"

### **Coming Out Swinging, 2012–13**

In May 2012, when Putin was returned as president of Russia, he and his handlers seem to have decided that he had to come out swinging, to develop and extend the cult of his personality and simultaneously try to harness the protesters' nationalism and xenophobia. Finding a convenient enemy, initially in those who challenged Russia's "values" and then in those who challenged Russia's "sovereignty," would help channel attention away from domestic protests while also pacifying at least some of the nationalism evident in the protests.<sup>13</sup>

In his May 7, 2012, reinauguration speech, Putin laid claim to Russia's status as the "leaders and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia." He went on: "The world has seen Russia risen anew," echoing his 1999 promise "to raise Russia from its knees." He ended his speech by proclaiming that "Russia has a great history and a no less great future. We will work with faith in our hearts, with sincere and pure intentions."<sup>14</sup> This was an appeal to Russians to have faith that their leader was no thief and no swindler.

The conservative onslaught in the Duma began in the summer of 2012 and continued well into 2014. The rest of 2012 and 2013 saw a blizzard of proposed and actual legislation focused on ferreting out Russia's domestic "enemies."

Nongovernmental agencies that received funding from foreign sources were required to register as “foreign agents” (July 2012) and submit to government inspections. Increased supervision and even blacklisting of Internet sites were legislated on the grounds of “protecting” children (June–July 2012). Slander, defined as “knowingly disseminating false information defaming the honor and dignity or undermining the reputation of another person,” became recriminalized that summer as well, even though it had been downgraded to an administrative offense under President Medvedev six months earlier.<sup>15</sup> In September 2012, the government expelled the US Agency for International Development on charges that it was attempting to “influence political processes” and foment protests. October saw a new law on treason, one that defined it broadly as not only any information that could harm the country but also any information passed on to foreign or international organizations that might be used against Russia’s national security interests.<sup>16</sup> From December 2012 through June 2013 came the anti-Magnitsky laws against adoptions of Russian children by American or gay parents, followed by laws against “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” (i.e., homosexuality), insulting religious sentiments, and criticism of the Soviet Red Army in World War II. The legislative onslaught was so intense and prolific that Russian observers began to refer to the Duma as a “printer gone mad” (*vsbesivshiisia printer*).<sup>17</sup>

To understand this “madness,” it is crucial to understand the role of the president himself and the signals he was giving. In September 2012, Putin held a meeting to discuss “patriotic education for youth” but could marshal only a

pale justification for “patriotism” as a core ideology: “However long we may discuss what could serve as a foundation, a strong moral basis for our country, we will not be able to come up with anything better.” This suggests both an instrumental view of patriotism and a quiet desperation in the wake of the antigovernment protests. In this comment, Putin effectively admitted that the problem of a unifying “Russian idea” (Boris Yeltsin’s term) still eluded the leadership. Without being able to define such an idea, the government would strive to revive citizens’ loyalty to the state by a tautological definition of patriotism: loyalty to the state for loyalty’s sake.

Putin’s patriotism is capacious. In it he includes “respect for our history and traditions, the spiritual values of our peoples, our thousand-year culture and unique experience of coexistence of hundreds of ethnic groups and languages in Russia.”<sup>18</sup> The openness of this definition has given Putin room to include contradictory and divided nationalists under one tent. Unfortunately, this breadth of the term “patriotism” has also meant that it functions in much the same way as the Soviet term *partiinost’*: belonging to or showing one’s loyalty to the party. It effectively divides the nation into “us” and “them,” allowing the state (but also, unfortunately, vigilantes) to prosecute or persecute anyone who does not agree with the official line.

At the end of his speech on patriotic education, Putin again derided “ideology” as such, saying that there had been too much of it in Soviet times but also claiming that “there is nobody who is opposed to it.” The inherent challenge is that if “nobody” opposes such an official idea, then anyone who expresses alternative ideas or questions the patriotism

of the dominant milieu must by definition be a dissident.<sup>19</sup> The threat could not be greater: “We know how the distortion of national, historical, and moral consciousness has led to catastrophe for entire states, to their weakness and ultimate demise, the loss of sovereignty and fratricidal wars.”<sup>20</sup>

Until 2012, Putin had never used the term “conservatism” to mean a desirable political movement. In January 2010, for example, he argued that any political system needs “a certain dose of conservatism,” but here he meant a resistance to change, since he went on to say that “a political system should not wobble like a runny aspic whenever anyone touches it.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, as late as September 2013 he referred to the extremes of the political spectrum as “conservatism” and “ultraliberalism,” and roundly rejected both.<sup>22</sup> He then repeated his distance from conservatism per se in October 2013: “We must not get locked into conservatism, relying on our rich heritage. We must absolutely go forward, forming contemporary cultural standards, taking in new experiences, including, of course, world experience.”<sup>23</sup>

By the end of 2013, however, Putin had changed his dominant rhetoric. In his annual address on December 12, he now lambasted “so-called tolerance” as “sexless and infertile” (*bespolii i besplodnyi*) and fundamentally unnecessary for Russia with “its great history and culture,” its “cooperative, organic life of many nationalities in the framework of a united government.” This, he noted, was “of course, a conservative position.” He tried to qualify this comment by quoting Russian writer Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) to the effect that conservatism does not necessarily prevent a nation from advancing but protects it from going “backwards and down.” Most interestingly,

Putin characterized the movement he sought to avoid as being “toward chaotic darkness” (*k khaoticheskoi t'me*). In other words, as with patriotism, he made it sound as if the choice had been forced on him because it was better than “chaotic darkness”; that is, the proverbial Russian *besporiadok*, or disorder.<sup>24</sup> A week later, on December 19, Putin openly called for a new conservatism and for shielding Russia from foreign values.<sup>25</sup> In January 2014, Russian government sources announced that they were sending all Russian bureaucrats copies of classic Russian conservative authors, and in February they held two special lectures for them on conservatism. Out of the blue, a new ideology was born in a form that many Russian commentators feared was a return to full-fledged Soviet-style orders from above.<sup>26</sup>

What changed between September and December 2013? Why did Putin turn to an all-out conservatism as his central ideology? Here, the obvious answer is that while he had chosen to come out fighting aggressively after the May 2012 inauguration, the Maidan uprising starting in November 2013 had given the authorities grave cause for concern.

## The Maidan Protests

On November 20 and 21, 2013, protesters in Ukraine took over the Maidan in Kyiv to protest corruption and demand dignity and justice. Initially, the protests were provoked by Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's backtracking on signing an Association Agreement with the European



Union (EU), but they became more militant after the regime turned violently on the protesters on November 30. For many of the protesters, the core issue was not only a pull toward the EU, but also an antagonism toward Russia and the history of Soviet domination. “The Soviet Union did not fall in 1991,” protesters announced; “it is falling now!”<sup>27</sup> This movement was in a direction diametrically opposed to Putin’s Russia, where there has been considerable nostalgia for the Soviet Union and especially for recouping some of the territory lost in 1991.

Putin’s response to the Maidan uprising in Kyiv was swift. The day after the first Maidan protests, he decried what he called “threats from our European partners towards Ukraine, up to and including promoting the holding of mass protests.” As in the case of Russia’s domestic protests in 2011, which he adduced to the influence of then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Putin now accused the Europeans of “blackmail,” denying the Ukrainians themselves any agency. For Russia, Ukraine’s fate still resided firmly within the zone of Russian influence.<sup>28</sup>

Putin’s earliest speeches following the outbreak of the Maidan emphasized the economic harm that would come to Ukraine and to Russia if Ukraine joined a free trade agreement with the EU (see William Pomeranz’s chapter in this volume).<sup>29</sup> Journalists, however, questioned the economic benefits that he claimed Russia was now bringing to Ukraine: a \$15 billion loan to the Ukrainian government; lower gas prices, especially in return for continuing to keep the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine; and special loans to Ukrainian businesses. One question they asked was whether he was trying to buy Ukraine’s acquiescence in joining

the Russia-dominated customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan.<sup>30</sup>

Putin was also ambivalent that winter (December 2013 through late January 2014) about Ukrainian's independence as a state. Officially, he claimed to EU leaders that Russia would never intervene; that the Ukrainians should be able to decide for themselves.<sup>31</sup> Yet in this period he also referred to Ukraine as a "fraternal people and a fraternal country" (*bratskii narod bratskaia strana*). On numerous occasions between 2007 and 2014, Putin had made it clear that he viewed the Russian language and the Russian world (*russkii mir*) in just such fraternal terms. In 2007, for example, in an address to the Duma, he formally introduced the concept of *russkii mir*, the Russian world, by saying, "Russian is the language of an historic brotherhood of peoples, a language truly of international communication... also the living space [*zhivoe prostranstvo*] for the many-millioned Russian world which, of course, is significantly broader than Russia itself."<sup>32</sup> The challenge, as historical linguist Michael Gorham has shown, is that Putin has paradoxically sought to develop a fundamentally *transnational* notion—the Russian world, the world of Russian compatriots—for nationalist, state-building purposes.<sup>33</sup>

## The Sochi Olympics

The 2014 Sochi Olympics are rarely discussed in conjunction with the invasion and annexation of Crimea, even though the invasion began before the Olympics had even finished. Yet the two seem to be integrally related on

at least three levels: their symbolic position; the recurring problem of criticism of Putin and his government; and the opportunity for troop and security buildup.

Putin himself tells the story of finding out that Ukraine's President Yanukovich had fled as if it were a chance event that precipitated both Yanukovich's rescue (February 22–23) and the invasion of Crimea three days later (February 26–27). To most observers, it would appear that the Crimean/Ukrainian events merely upstaged the end of the Olympics. But what if the Olympics were a useful cover, a distraction for a move into Crimea and eastern Ukraine that had come to seem increasingly necessary?

The Sochi Olympics were quintessentially Putin's project: his success story, his personal control, his inspections, his glory for Russia. But they were also maligned by both the Russian and the foreign press on the grounds of corruption, costs, delays, environmental damage, the displacement of local people, bad hotels, and the shooting of wild dogs. Foreign athletes threatened to boycott the Olympics over the issue of gay and lesbian rights. In 2013, Putin criticized and subsequently dismissed Akhmed Bilalov, the vice-president of Russia's Olympic Committee. Putin's actions against Bilalov may have been intended to deflect some of the barbs and complaints, but the overall sheen of the Olympics was tarnished by reports about the mismanagement of Sochi.<sup>34</sup>

If, as some have argued, Sochi was a calculated risk undertaken to symbolically display Russian glory, then the criticisms by both foreigners and Russians must have been galling.<sup>35</sup> At the close of the Sochi Olympics, Putin complained that while the International Olympic Committee

(IOC) had provided constructive criticism, other criticisms had been motivated by geopolitics: "They used the Olympic project to achieve their own aims in the area of anti-Russian propaganda."<sup>36</sup> In December 2014, Putin again complained of the "unprecedented and clearly orchestrated attempts to discredit our efforts to organise and host the Olympics."<sup>37</sup>

But there was also an important contrast between Sochi and Crimea. The Sochi Olympics were a long moment of quintessentially playing by the rules, rules set by the IOC and agreed on through elaborate, regular procedures covering everything from drug-testing to refereeing standards. The invasion of Crimea, by contrast, was a quintessential break with rules. No invasion was declared; in fact, the troops were sent in with uniforms stripped of any insignia so they could not be identified, and soldiers wore masks so that no one could recognize them or ask them who they were. Only after the takeover was successful and the invasion "legitimized" by the referendum of March 16 did Putin admit that the troops in Crimea were Russian troops.

In invading Crimea, Putin chose to abandon the building of monumental glory through domestic projects such as Sochi in favor of territorial gains outside the official Russian state. The two projects may have seemed similar at the time. Both involved heroic victory, glory to the nation, and glory to the ruler. Yet Putin was able to abandon the compromised Sochi project—he barely participated in the Olympic closing ceremonies—in favor of the more successful project in Crimea. Perhaps projecting glory as a modern nation, through the Olympics, was not sufficient to actually unite the nation. Perhaps Putin and his handlers perceived that Sochi had not garnered the

domestic and international approval and goodwill that they had sought. Or perhaps Russia's conservative, isolationist turn offset the original vision of the Olympics as an international, supermodern event designed to attract foreigners to Russia.<sup>38</sup> We will never know the real reason for Putin's turn away from Sochi, but the international community has seen the two projects in completely different lights, with significant consequences for Russia's international standing.

### **The Invasion of Crimea and the Story of the Night Wolves**

Western observers were initially nonplused by the takeover and then annexation of Crimea because of the predominance of confusing reports. Putin himself was giving contradictory information. From the start, he could name the exact number of troops: "There are several dozen C-300 units, several dozen air-defense missile systems, 22,000 service members, and a lot more." However, when asked who the troops were, given that they looked and sounded like Russian service members, Putin responded with his now-famous comment, claiming that he had no idea of their nationality: "Why don't you take a look at the post-Soviet states? There are many uniforms there that are similar. You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform."<sup>39</sup>

Since the invasion, military experts have provided in-depth discussion of the combat aspects of the takeover, which included a wide range of forces, most of them newly

organized “special forces” created in 2012, converging on the Crimean Peninsula and seizing control within a week.<sup>40</sup> Much less studied has been the role of paramilitary forces, including the so-called Night Wolves motorcyclists and various Cossack groups, especially Crimean and Kuban. These groups played an especially strong role in establishing checkpoints on the main roads into Sevastopol and on the Isthmus of Perekop between Crimea and the mainland.<sup>41</sup> But they also had a strong personal connection to Vladimir Putin, especially the Night Wolves.

Putin first officially came into personal contact with the Night Wolves on July 7, 2009, on the same morning that he held a tense, standoffish meeting with President Barack Obama on the latter’s first and only visit to Moscow. Before and during that visit, Obama made it clear that he had come to visit Dmitry Medvedev, then president of Russia. The two presidents held a five-hour official meeting in the Kremlin on July 6, at the conclusion of which they announced that they were creating a “Bilateral Presidential Commission.” Medvedev, Obama made clear, was his presidential “counterpart”; relations with Putin (now the prime minister) came across as almost an afterthought.<sup>42</sup> Even worse from the perspective of the prime minister’s cult of personality, Obama had snubbed Putin the week before in referring to his own “very good relationship” with Medvedev, while chiding Putin for “having one foot in the old ways”—namely, in Cold War relations.

On the morning of July 7, Putin hosted Obama at an informal breakfast at his official residence in Novo-Ogaryovo, and used the occasion to criticize the past eight years of American foreign policy under George W. Bush.

Immediately afterward, Putin changed his attire from suit-and-tie to black turtleneck and black jacket, and drove half an hour to the western suburbs of Moscow to meet with the Night Wolves and their leader, Alexander Zaldostanov, known as “The Surgeon.” According to Zaldostanov’s reminiscences of that meeting, Putin greeted him informally from the very beginning, using the familiar form of address that the bikers themselves usually use: “Hi, Sasha” (*Zdravstvui*, Sasha).<sup>43</sup> Official Russian television gave almost no coverage of Obama’s visit on July 6 and 7. Instead, they showed the first meeting between the two men in black, the Surgeon and Mr. Putin.<sup>44</sup>

During that first visit, Putin personally handed Zaldostanov and the bikers a Russian flag to take on the road with them to Sevastopol, where they were headed for the opening of their thirteenth international “bike show.”<sup>45</sup> In previous years the gathering of bikers had been held in Kaliningrad on Russia’s western frontier, but this year, for the first time, it was being held in Sevastopol. From that moment on, the two men in black met frequently. Zaldostanov brought Putin letters and souvenirs from Sevastopol; Putin encouraged Zaldostanov to create pro-Russian shows in Crimea. In 2010, 2011, and 2012, Putin rode with the bikers himself, first in Sevastopol, then in Novorossiisk (not far from Crimea on the Black Sea), and then again in Sevastopol. In March 2013, he gave Zaldostanov a medal for “active work in the patriotic education of youth, search work [to find the remains of World War II soldiers], and immortalizing the memory of slain defenders of the fatherland.”<sup>46</sup> Throughout his many meetings Putin referred to the bikers as “brothers.”<sup>47</sup>

Putin's connection to the Night Wolves suggests his ambivalence about rules. The Night Wolves were established from the beginning as an all-male gang, one that explicitly excluded women. As Alexander Benish, the group's second-in-command, explained in fall 2014: "Everyone is free to join—except for women. 'No woman, no cry.' Years ago when it was founded, the club was a kind of symbol of virility, of what it means to be a man."<sup>48</sup> The group attracted bikers who preferred to stay outside or on the edges of the law. They listened to heavy rock music and rejected all "establishment" laws and politics.

Although they were founded as a nearly outlaw group in 1989, the Night Wolves (who now prefer to be called "motorcyclists" instead of "bikers") have grown to become the darlings of the Kremlin, if one can say that of such a macho group. They received more funding than any other philanthropic group in 2013 and 2014.<sup>49</sup> On the most basic level, their involvement in the Crimean takeover lent apparent "plausible deniability" to it because their checkpoints and sieges of important buildings were apparently *not* the work of the Kremlin. Yet the Kremlin had clearly directly and indirectly sponsored the group for years, so it is difficult to believe that they had acted without the Kremlin's direct approval or even initiative. As one British journalist reported, the bikers' headquarters in Crimea supplied the so-called Crimean Defense Force with truckloads of "humanitarian" supplies that included uniforms and radios. Snipers in uniform guarded the roof of the bikers' compound as they helped the defense troops load their materials.<sup>50</sup> This kind of mixing of formal and informal structures raises serious questions about the strength of the



state if we think of it as having a legitimate monopoly on the use of force (as Max Weber explained almost one hundred years ago).

Putin's affinity for this group of men in black leather also shows the return of Putin to the tough guy image, the rough-spoken leader who threatens to shoot terrorists in the outhouse and criticizes his own compatriots for "chewing snot" and not doing anything. After the Crimean invasion was over, Alexander Zaldostanov, by some accounts, was the first person to receive one of the medals "For the Liberation of Sevastopol and Crimea."<sup>51</sup>

### **Crimea and the President's New Performance**

Once Yanukovich had fled Ukraine on February 22, 2014, Putin stopped speaking about trade issues and focused on the change in power in Kyiv. In a March 4 speech, he stated that no one could doubt that this was "an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power," and added:

What was the purpose of all those illegal, unconstitutional actions, why did they [the opposition] have to create this chaos in the country? Armed and masked militants are still roaming the streets of Kiev. [...] Did they wish to humiliate someone and show their power?<sup>52</sup>

Putin tried to claim that "we always act legitimately," but at the same time he invoked the need to protect others whom he characterized as "being persecuted, destroyed,

and humiliated.” At four different moments in the conversation, he referred to the takeover as “unconstitutional,” armed, and leading the country into chaos. He made it clear that he was convinced that the West was behind it all:

What motivates our partners? *They* supported an unconstitutional armed take-over, declared these people legitimate and are trying to support them. [...] And it is not the first time our Western partners are doing this in Ukraine. I sometimes get the feeling that somewhere across that huge puddle, in America, people sit in a lab and conduct experiments, as if with rats, without actually understanding the consequences of what they are doing. Why did they need to do this? Who can explain this? There is no explanation at all for it.<sup>53</sup>

The “Western partners” were thus clearly completely irrational, as well as in violation of international law to support an unconstitutional armed takeover.

The capture of Crimea and the referendum for Crimea to join the Russian Republic gave Putin a chance to give one of his most historic performances in his speech to the Russian Federation Council, the Russian State Duma, and “representatives of Russian society” on March 18. Here he returned to a high register of symbols, of history and pride, of “warriors’ glory” and “unmatched valor.” He claimed that “in their hearts and in their consciousness,” the Crimean people “always were and will be” a part of Russia. With his accent on timelessness, Putin appealed to the mythic. He

appealed to the transhistorical in “truth and justice” and his “unshakeable conviction.” All other forces, including time and circumstances, were “powerless” before it. In this speech, Putin also found numerous ways to invoke the sacred. “God will be the judge,” he said, of the Bolsheviks who incorporated significant Russian territories into Ukraine in the 1920s. He named six cities and spoke of their holiness, including Khersones, where the tenth-century Prince Vladimir was allegedly baptized and accepted Christianity for the whole nation of Rus’. (He ignored the fact that that nation, as much as it could be called one, was then centered in what is today Kyiv.) The graves of the Russian soldiers in Sevastopol also became symbols of holiness and martyrdom since their courage and manliness—both words are *muzhestvo* in Russian—enabled the taking of Crimea “under [the wing of] the Russian state.”

Repeatedly, he stressed the deep wound of the separation of Crimea from its Russian “homeland.” Looking to right the injustices of the past, Putin claimed that Crimea and the Crimeans had been handed over to Ukraine in 1954 “like a sack of potatoes.” This had been an injustice for Russia as well, as the country had had to “hang its head and swallow this insult.” Nonetheless, the Russian people could never make their peace with “this outrageous historical injustice.” For Putin and his listeners, this injustice obviously became a deeply emotional issue: “All this we understood very well and felt this in our hearts, in our souls.”<sup>54</sup> In this Manichean, sacralized worldview, the Russians (and Crimeans) were victims, so enemies had to be found. The main organizers of the “coup d’etat” in Kyiv were “nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-

Semites.” They had “unleashed terror, murders, pogroms.” Moreover, those imposing sanctions and threatening that internal disorders would break out in Russia were “provoking” those disorders, working as a “fifth column” and “national traitors.”<sup>55</sup> On the other side of this Manichean divide of good and evil was the “courage/manliness [*muzhestvo*], worthiness, and bravery” of the inhabitants of Crimea and Sevastopol.

In this speech, Putin thus found his stride, combining conservative values based on an imagined glory of Russia with courage (or manliness) and overcoming insults and humiliation. Whereas Putin had had virtually no ideology in his first two terms in office (2000–8), he now had developed an ideology of patriotic conservatism and national glory. By the time of his December 2014 address to the Federal Assembly, Crimea had in his mind become equivalent to the “Temple Mount in Jerusalem.”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In this ideological light, Crimea was a gift bestowed on the nation by its ruler. The victorious Putin had become the protector of the nation from dark forces seeking, as he said in 2004, to “tear off a fat piece” from Russia’s territory.<sup>57</sup>

Supporters of the movement to take back Crimea, known in Russian by the slogan “Crimea Is Ours,” have come to believe in the “return” of Crimea as part of an epic “gathering of the Russian lands.” The historic connotations of this phrase date to Ivan the Great (the grandfather of Ivan the Terrible) who ruled from 1440 to 1505 and styled himself

“Grand Prince of All the Rus.” For opponents, however, the annexation of Crimea means a breakdown in international rule of law. Andrei Zubov, professor of history and political science at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, was fired from his job in March 2014 for saying that the annexation of Crimea will mean not the growth of Russia, but rather “the destruction of the system of international treaties, economic chaos and political dictatorship.”<sup>58</sup>

Although Putin’s claims of “gathering the Russian lands” are a post hoc justification (they do not appear until March 2014), Putin himself has long been interested in and attracted to transhistorical and transnational phenomena. In 2011, for example, he wrote of the idea of the Eurasian Union: “We suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world.”<sup>59</sup> Because he has spoken relatively little of the importance of *national* boundaries, it is possible that respecting and safeguarding the international rules concerning national boundaries may not be his first priority.

Is this then a world without rules, or a world with new rules? Ultimately, it is a world in which the image and will of the national leader, Vladimir Putin, dominates. His reliance, in turn, on a combination of the mythic (World War II as the victory of all victories), the extralegal (wiping out Chechens in the outhouse), and the paramilitary (the Night Wolves) has created a situation where the temptation to seize a neighboring territory became overwhelming. In 2012, he came out “swinging,” ready to use any and all means to reunite the country. Once the main events of the Sochi Olympics were over, or perhaps even before they had formally closed, he and his advisers gave their atten-

tion to his next “achievement”: the taking back of Crimea. The prestige of the leader and the stability of the country required a feat that would simultaneously show Russian might and the leader’s dominance.

In spring 2015, the Cossacks created a bust of Putin as Roman emperor, claiming that they “wanted to immortalize Vladimir Putin as a conqueror and statesman who returned Crimea to Russia.”<sup>60</sup> Here is the ultimate mythologization of the Russian leader who has seemingly created a small, victorious war—never mind that he is bogged down in a long, dangerous, and messy one next door in eastern Ukraine.

The primacy of Putin’s image and ruler-centrism in this story makes it difficult to know what Western governments can do to deescalate and ultimately resolve the situation on the ground. 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. Putin clearly does not want to be just a “regional power,” as Obama has called him, but rather an equal power that is due equal respect. The challenge, however, is that the other “regional powers,” the EU and the United States, both expect the Russian power to act within the limits of state sovereignty.

## Notes

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3. Wood, "Hypermasculinity"; Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* (March 20, 2015); and Brian Whitmore, "Russia's Silent Majority," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 7, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-silent-majority/25161615.html>.
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8. Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Michael S. Bobick, "The Empire Strikes Back," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 405–13.
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- Peace, 2013), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/03/01/stalin-puzzle-deciphering-post-soviet-public-opinion/fmz8>.
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  24. "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," President of Russia official website, December 12, 2013, <http://www.eng.kremlin.ru/news/6402> (official English translation) and <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/19825> (in Russian)
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30. "News Conference of Vladimir Putin," December 19, 2013.
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57. Maria Lipman also makes the point about Crimea as Putin's gift in "Putin's 'Besieged Fortress' and Its Ideological Arms," in *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, ed. Maria Lipman and Nikolai Petrov (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 110–36. Putin's quote in 2004 was "The weak get beaten. Some want to tear off a fat piece from us; others help them"; "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina," President of Russia official website, September 4, 2004, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2004/09/76320.shtml>.
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## Conclusion

WILLIAM E. POMERANZ

This book began with a simple question: what motivated Russia to pursue its fateful policies in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014? In concentrating on the Russian perspective, the authors did not seek to minimize the role of the other major players in the story, particularly Ukraine and the European Union (EU). Nevertheless, it was Russia's response that transformed a regional dispute into a truly global crisis, and therefore called out for a more detailed examination.

In retrospect, while the Russia-Ukraine conflict was long predicted, it still arrived on the international stage largely without warning. The EU may have been playing with fire by offering a free trade agreement to Ukraine, but as William Pomeranz argues, all sides initially seemed willing to keep the discussions within the broad parameters of a trade negotiation. Vladimir Putin clearly understood the challenge presented by the Association Agreement, but his objections were voiced primarily in economic, not military, terms. It was only when President Viktor Yanukovich

discovered on February 21 that his security forces had abandoned him that he decided to flee—and that the Kremlin realized that it had another color revolution on its hands, one that required an immediate response.

Russia without Ukraine has caused serious intellectual angst since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each chapter in this collection confronts the deeper historical roots of the crisis and how ideas of Russian nationalism, statehood, and exceptionalism have been nurtured even as the Russian leaders sought to integrate into global institutions over the past two decades. Wayne Merry argues that Russia and the EU possessed alternative understandings of state sovereignty that strongly increased the likelihood of confrontation, yet the war in Ukraine was by no means inevitable. Instead, the book identifies the specific choices that were made by the individual players that ultimately culminated in revolution, annexation, and war.

In particular, each chapter identifies an area where Vladimir Putin made a conscious decision to abandon what broadly can be described as the post-Cold War consensus. Putin chose great power status over shared sovereignty, a zero-sum over a win-win attitude toward trade, a strong state over economic prosperity, and symbolic over democratic politics. While no author suggests that the world is necessarily returning to a Cold War–style confrontation between Russia and the West, each chapter provides critical insights into how the great experiment of the 1990s to integrate Russia into Western institutions has come to an end.

Policymakers will now have to navigate this “post” post-Cold War world and come up with a strategy that selectively engages and contains Russia at the same time. On

the one hand, as Elizabeth Wood demonstrates, Putin has not been overly ideological, but picks and chooses his positions as the situation warrants. This suggests that there will be opportunities for engagement going forward, particularly in those areas and regions (for instance, Iran and Syria) that play upon Russia's desire to be considered a major power. On the other hand, Putin has demonstrated an intellectual streak that rejects the standard pragmatism of most Western politicians, most notably, that one's political viability starts with economic success. Putin consistently has made decisions during this crisis that antagonize Russia's long-standing trade partners while undermining the prospects for sustained economic growth, in the clear belief that the Russian people will accept any financial pain in order to remain a great power. From a Western perspective, Putin remains an unpredictable leader—a ruler who does not believe in rules, as Wood notes—which only adds to the uncertainty as to how best to engage with him going forward.

Yet Putin's seemingly erratic stance makes more sense if policymakers understand the close interaction between Russian domestic politics and foreign policy. This linkage was particularly on display during the Ukraine crisis. Putin was by no means the first Russian leader to conclude that a foreign adventure might buy some domestic tranquility or at least provide cover for a political crackdown. Putin returned to power in 2012 in desperate need of an image overhaul. The 2014 Sochi Olympics and global integration did not do the trick, so Putin quickly changed direction and instead used Crimea to restore his popularity and dominant position within Russia's political hierarchy. But



according to Maxim Trudolyubov, even after such a great personal triumph, the Russian people remain divided as to whether to pursue international greatness or domestic prosperity.

Russia's deepening economic troubles in the aftermath of Crimea means that this intellectual divide—and the stability of Putin's regime—will continue to be tested for the foreseeable future. Putin's heroic narrative has yet to be debunked, as confirmed by his high public opinion ratings, but, as the authors argue, this popularity has come at a significant cost. Russia's ability to influence developments inside Ukraine, other than through military pressure, has effectively disappeared. Moreover, cracks in the Eurasian Economic Union have already called into question its ability to compete with the other major trading blocs and powers. Russia clearly now has less money to throw at a protracted crisis in Ukraine than when it started, and the fact that Russia has been accumulating sanctions—while other countries are busy shedding them—further limits its options.

The origins of the Russian-Ukraine crisis illuminate how the major parties have arrived at the current predicament. They do not, unfortunately, identify a good road map for a path forward. Many of the options that existed at the beginning of the crisis have now been foreclosed. Trade, for example, was supposed to build bridges among nations, but the major parties to the dispute are now busy pursuing sanctions, import substitution programs, embargoes, and other trade barriers that will take years to dismantle. Moreover, an economic dispute has been transformed into a military confrontation with major security implications,

meaning that a different and more intractable cast of characters are presiding over the discussions. (Generals and security officials are by nature more heavy-handed than economists, trade lawyers, and accountants.) The Minsk II process remains the only game in town, but its flaws have been on permanent display since the cease-fire was negotiated in February 2015.

What policymakers must be prepared for is the unexpected. At crucial stages of this crisis, unforeseen events have pushed developments in new and unanticipated directions. Putin's decision to annex Crimea caught the United States and the EU completely by surprise. The Western response initially was fairly muted until Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down in July 2014 by a missile fired in rebel-controlled territory, thereby leading to a much tougher sanctions regime than anyone originally anticipated. Yet while the sanctions themselves posed certain problems for Russia, it was the sudden and dramatic drop in energy prices since June 2014 that sent the Russian economy into free fall and significantly weakened Putin's hand.

The situation on the ground remains extremely fluid, where any seemingly trivial matter could lead to a major escalation of tensions. This book identifies the critical decisions that have shaped Russia's global outlook both in the run-up to the Ukraine crisis and in its aftermath. Finding a way out of the crisis remains the chapter that has yet to be written.



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