

**NATO Expansion or Putin's Psyche?  
The Insignificance of Military Insecurity to Russia's War in Ukraine**

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Abstract

A prominent account of both U.S.-Russian discord and Moscow's annexation of Crimea attributes these developments primarily to a fear of encirclement and perception of military threat from the West. However, this perspective unjustifiably privileges one causal factor—NATO expansion—when in fact close to a dozen others have contributed to these developments to an equal or greater extent. Much more central are Western criticism of Russia's political system and Moscow's desire to reintegrate as much of the former Soviet Union as possible as a means of preserving great power status and Russia's traditional culture and identity. Anger over the disregard shown to the Kremlin's desires and the thwarting of its plans lies at the core of Russian aggression against Ukraine, not fear. Overall, Cold War 2.0 is the product of ideational factors and the psychological idiosyncrasies of its powerful president more than of systemic pressures.

Keywords

Russian-American relations; Putin; Crimea; NATO expansion

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“[A]lready today, if one takes into account a great many factors including not only military factors but also our history, geography, and the state of Russian society, then one can confidently state that we are stronger today than any potential aggressor. Any.”—Vladimir Putin, December 2016<sup>1</sup>

Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its ensuing military support of separatists in eastern Ukraine marked the onset of a more confrontational relationship between Russia and the West than had existed at any point since Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985. Some have argued against viewing the mutual recriminations, diplomatic expulsions, and economic sanctions of the last six years as a return to the Cold War. In this regard, with only half of the population of the Soviet Union, Russia’s status is far from that of a superpower. However, Moscow’s revival of Cold War practices (such as military incursions into NATO airspace and non-compliance with arms control treaties), not to mention a buildup of American military forces in eastern Europe, had already placed such a sanguine perspective in doubt. Moreover, Russia’s interference in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 seems to have convinced most of the American political elite that Russia under Putin represents an anti-democratic adversary that is hostile to the liberal international order.

Even though most policymakers were caught off-guard by Russia’s actions in Ukraine, a prominent body of opinion maintains that they should not have been surprised since Western policy itself over the previous two decades is to blame for Russia’s conduct. By incorporating most of the USSR’s Eastern European satellites and even three of its constituent republics into its military alliance system, these critics allege, the West effectively treated Russia like a defeated power instead of a partner in the creation of a new security order. Making matters worse, NATO’s stated intent to invite Ukraine to join sometime in the future threatened to deprive Russia of a prized buffer against invasion from the West. In the face of this deteriorating security environment, a military response from Moscow was only to be expected.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rasshirennoe zasedanie kollegii Ministerstva oborony” [Expanded Session of the Collegium of the Ministry of Defense], December 22, 2016, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53571> (date of access: May 30, 2017).

Explanations of Russia's actions that are based in apprehension over the prospect of future Western aggression are potentially valid and certainly worthy of testing. As the tests conducted in this article demonstrate, however, such explanations suffer from at least three sets of empirical problems. First, factors at every level of analysis—international, domestic, and (perhaps especially) individual—have played significant roles in generating both Russian estrangement from the West and Moscow's recent conduct, and there is no clear reason to regard NATO expansion as the most important among them. Moreover, even among factors at the level of the international system, several Western policies and actions (including non-military ones) have angered and alarmed Russian elites to an equal or greater extent than has NATO expansion.

A second problem with security-based explanations is that they do not correspond to what Russian policymakers themselves say about their reasons and motives. In this regard, I can find no evidence that Kremlin leaders believed that a NATO invasion through Ukraine—or any kind of large-scale conventional military aggression against the Russian Federation—is likely or even possible in the foreseeable future; in fact, Putin has explicitly asserted that such scenarios are inconceivable. Moreover, the president has seemingly never described Ukraine's importance in terms of its function as a security buffer. Among the plausible motives that Putin has advanced, three stand out: Moscow's desire for Eurasian integration, a perceived need to signal Russia's resolve to defend its declared interests, and his desire to punish the West for disrespectful behavior toward Russia.

And third, the validity of security-based explanations is seriously called into question by the fact that NATO *actually* expanded to the borders of the Russian Federation in both 1999 and 2004, yet that expansion failed to generate a military reaction in either instance. Nor does NATO expansion track well with the ups and downs of Western-Russian relations since 1991. In particular, Washington and Moscow enjoyed a very amicable and cooperative relationship precisely during the years when the alliance was in the process of incorporating Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

The preceding propositions will be demonstrated by means of a detailed and holistic examination of both Western-Russian relations and the attitudes toward the West possessed by Russia's leaders since 1991, especially its paramount post-communist leader, Vladimir Putin. Rather than imposing a theoretical framework on the analysis from the start, I proceed inductively in search of those events and developments that Russian leaders and elites themselves stress. In essence, one of my central goals is to understand the world as Russia's commanders-in-chief have understood it.<sup>2</sup> Evidence is drawn from a variety of both primary and secondary sources, but I rely most heavily on interviews with and speeches given by the president. In this regard, attention to Putin's worldview, attitudes, and even psychological idiosyncrasies is highly appropriate in an analysis of the sources of Russian foreign policy since, as has been widely noted, Russia has evolved into a "one-man regime" in which policymaking "remains the prerogative of one person alone."<sup>3</sup> (In fact, Putin made the decision to seize Crimea without any public debate, without seeking any advice or consent from either house of parliament, and after consulting with only a handful of trusted aides.<sup>4</sup>)

This article proceeds as follows. First, it presents the dominant security-based explanation in greater depth and then discusses several logical inconsistencies from which it suffers. Second, it provides an overview of important developments in Western-Russian relations between the collapse of communism and the initiation of military hostilities against Ukraine, focusing on what I find to be the major sources of Moscow's anger and estrangement. These two-plus decades are divided into three periods: the Yeltsin era, Putin's first two presidential

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<sup>2</sup> This article will thereby contribute to the growing literature on the role played by leaders' beliefs and personal characteristics in decisions to undertake military interventions or fight wars. For a recent example, see Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kotkin, "The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin: Russia's Nightmare Dressed Like a Daydream," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (March/April 2015), pp. 141 and 153. See also Dmitri Trenin, *Russia's Breakout from the Post-Cold War System: The Drivers of Putin's Course* (Carnegie Moscow Center, December 2014), pp. 7 and 20, which states: "Russia's political system is clearly czarist, and Putin is the leader closest to a present-day absolute monarch."

<sup>4</sup> Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), pp. 460-62.

terms and the start of his tenure as prime minister, and the end of that tenure combined with the initial years of his third presidential term Third, it integrates its findings into a comprehensive explanation of Moscow's decision to annex Crimea.<sup>5</sup> The concluding section summarizes my findings as they relate to both security concerns and Vladimir Putin's personality and evolving belief system.

### **Blaming the West: Arguments and Logical Problems with Security-based Explanations**

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 immediately rekindled the debate over the wisdom of NATO expansion that raged so fiercely in the 1990s. At that time, leading members of the Clinton administration advocated for the enlargement of the alliance by arguing that it would help to consolidate democracy in countries recently emergent from communism and especially that it would give new members incentives to overcome the territorial disputes that lace East Central Europe's history, thereby promoting peace in the region.<sup>6</sup> More hawkish elements of the political spectrum supported expansion for the additional reason that extending NATO's deterrent shield would serve to prevent Russia's reconquest of these states in the future.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, opponents of expansion maintained that moving the West's military infrastructure toward Russia's borders would undermine democracy in Russia, create an obstacle to Russian-American cooperation in the realms of arms control and nuclear non-proliferation,

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<sup>5</sup> Other works that similarly integrate variables at multiple levels of analysis into a comprehensive explanation include Elias Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 19 (2017), pp. 228-253; and Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Fall 2020), pp. 95-139. The findings of my article substantially deviate from the overall thrust of Götz' analyses (which nonetheless make many important contributions). In contrast, my findings are consistent with the general thrust of McFaul's analyses even as they advance many arguments that differ from his in their specifics.

<sup>6</sup> For two prominent examples, see Richard Holbrooke, "America, a European Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (March/April 1995), pp. 38-51; and Strobe Talbott, "Russia Has Nothing to Fear," *New York Times*, February 18, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Premature Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 67-82.

and provoke Russian bellicosity toward buffer states located between Russia and an expanding NATO.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty years later, many of the advocates of the latter position claimed intellectual victory. For instance, shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, former U.S. Ambassador to the USSR Jack Matlock opined: “Americans, heritors of the Monroe Doctrine, should have understood that Russia would be hypersensitive to foreign-dominated military alliances approaching or touching its borders.”<sup>9</sup> Richard Sakwa similarly stresses that by “threaten[ing] to encircle Russia from the south and west, . . . enlargement generated fears and insecurities typical of a security dilemma.”<sup>10</sup> A security-based interpretation is forcefully advanced by John Mearsheimer, who maintains that “Putin’s actions should be easy to comprehend” since they constitute “Geopolitics 101.” “A huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself,” he writes, “Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow’s mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine.”<sup>11</sup> The prospect of Ukraine’s entry into NATO, he continues, “scares [Russia’s leaders], as it would scare anyone in Russia’s shoes, and fearful great powers often pursue aggressive policies.”<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding this point of view’s seemingly solid footing in geopolitical theory, logical deduction raises questions about the continued relevance of Ukraine as an unaligned buffer state in at least four ways. First, offensive conventional military operations against the

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<sup>8</sup> See, perhaps most notably, George Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Matlock, “The U.S. Has Treated Russia Like a Loser since the End of the Cold War,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Sakwa, “Back to the Wall: Myths and Mistakes that Once Again Divide Europe,” *Russian Politics*, Vol. 1 (2016), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 77-89, at 82.

<sup>12</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (November/December 2014), p. 176.

Russian Federation would require a substantial amount of military hardware, yet the 1990s and 2000s witnessed major demobilization and demilitarization throughout Europe. In other words, NATO has not possessed the capability to undertake such operations even had its leaders desired to do so.<sup>13</sup> Second, even after the many arms control treaties reached over the last three decades that have reduced Russian and American stockpiles to less than 2000 warheads each, Moscow still possesses one of the two largest nuclear arsenals in the world and extremely robust second-strike capability.<sup>14</sup> This unquestioned ability to annihilate an enemy's major cities should provide Russian leaders with confidence in their ability to deter an attack on the homeland from any great power.<sup>15</sup> Putin's awareness of both the strength of Russia's conventional capabilities and the efficacy of its nuclear deterrent constitutes the basis of his remarks to military officers in 2016 to the effect that Russia is "stronger than any potential aggressor."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, at his annual press conference for journalists held a day later, the president made clear that he regards a military attack on Russia by the United States in particular as inconceivable. After acknowledging the veracity of Obama administration claims that "the armed forces of the United States are the most powerful in the world," he adds that "the Russian Federation today is stronger than any potential—pay attention to this!—aggressor. This is a very important point, one that I made for a reason. What is an aggressor? It is someone who potentially could attack the Russian Federation. It follows that we are stronger than any potential aggressor, an assertion that I can repeat right now." Putin concludes these remarks by explaining that Russia's considerable invulnerability

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<sup>13</sup> This argument is advanced, and exact figures provided, in Steven Sestanovich, "Could It Have Been Otherwise?" *The American Interest*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (May/June 2015). Developing this line of argument further, Kimberly Marten points out that NATO would have faced great difficulty even defending the Baltic states against Russian attack. See her "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia," *International Politics*, published online April 16, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy beyond Putin*, Adelphi Paper 390 (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007), pp. 69-70.

<sup>15</sup> On the basis of such reasoning, some argued in the early 1990s that the U.S. should facilitate Ukraine's retention of nuclear weapons as a means of ensuring its security against future Russian aggression. See, in particular, John Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1994), pp. 50-66.

<sup>16</sup> See the epigraph.

derives from a wide array of factors, not the least of which is “the modernization of the Armed Forces, both its conventional component and its nuclear triad.”<sup>17</sup>

A third problem with a security-based explanation is that Crimea does not lie on a logical Western invasion route, and the eastern portion of Ukraine represented by the secessionist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk constitutes only 9% of the Ukrainian territory that does lie on one.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the remaining 91% remains available to be utilized as a launching platform by a Western invader. And fourth, just as the brutality of Stalinism in the 1930s led many Ukrainians to view Nazi armies as liberators, so too have Moscow’s actions since February 2014 quite predictably served to alienate and even frighten much of Ukraine’s population, thereby inclining it to seek Western allies for protection against Russia. (In this regard, in an obvious effort to remove obstacles to NATO membership, in 2014 the Ukrainian Rada revoked a law that had been passed in 2010 affirming the country’s non-aligned status.) In other words, an expansionist West bent on conquest would now enjoy greater access to the Ukrainian invasion route as a result of Russia’s actions, not less.

Notwithstanding these four logical problems with security-based explanations of the conflict in Ukraine, this article will evaluate their merits empirically. In the process, it will demonstrate that in many other ways as well, there is more wrong with explanations that revolve around military insecurity generated by NATO expansion than there is right about them.

### **The Yeltsin Era (1992-1999)**

#### *Initial Attitudes toward the West and NATO Intervention in Bosnia*

Western-Russian relations following the collapse of communism began with a level of amity and cooperation that few could have imagined just a half-decade earlier. In that

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<sup>17</sup> “Bol’shaya press-konferentsiya Vladimira Putina” [Vladimir Putin’s Major Press Conference], December 23, 2016, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53573> (date of access: May 29, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ukraine without Crimea encompasses 577,547 sq. km.; Donetsk and Lugansk encompass 26,517 and 26,684 sq. km., respectively.



environment of revolutionary upheaval, Russia's elected leaders openly discussed the country's dire need to learn from foreign experience and adopt the best of what the world had to offer. President Boris Yeltsin led the way in this regard. In an interview given in late 1991, he expressed his aspiration that Russia "proceed along a civilized path, the path along which France, Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, Spain, and other countries have been and still are proceeding."<sup>19</sup> Yeltsin intended this revolution to encompass foreign policy as well. "Russia was embarking upon a peaceful, democratic, non-imperial path of development," he writes in his memoirs. "She was choosing a new global strategy. She was discarding her traditional image as the 'Lord of Half the Earth,' rejecting armed confrontation with Western civilization...."<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the Kremlin acted on these ideas in its relations with Washington—for instance, by proposing huge cuts in nuclear arms that resulted in the signing of START II in January 1993.<sup>21</sup> In turn, Washington took steps to reciprocate the cooperation it received from the Kremlin. For instance, the G-7 countries pledged \$24 billion in multilateral aid to Russia in 1992 and raised that figure to \$43 billion in 1993.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most notably in light of future events, the White House pressured Ukraine to transfer its nuclear arsenal to Russia, in the process refusing Kiev's requests for security guarantees of the kind provided by NATO membership in return for denuclearization.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the firm commitment of Kremlin leaders to a pro-Western orientation and these notable achievements in the bilateral relationship, however, the public expression of Westernizing sentiments became increasingly unpopular over time. Beginning as early as 1992, the Russian foreign policy community launched a barrage of criticism of the Yeltsin

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Timothy Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 218.

<sup>20</sup> Boris Yeltsin, *Zapiski prezidenta* [Diary of the President] (Moscow: Ogonyok, 1994), p. 151.

<sup>21</sup> James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2003), pp. 56-58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81 and 92.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56 and 169-70; and Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 79-80.

administration for insufficiently protecting Russian national interests.<sup>24</sup> According to these critics, the results of the cooperative, pro-Western policies pursued by Gorbachev and then accelerated by Yeltsin—results that included the West’s protests against the sale of high-technology items to India and Iran and its failure to deliver economic aid in anywhere near promised dimensions—represented small compensation for the loss of territory and international standing. Echoing another widely-held sentiment, even Russia’s pro-Western foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, complained that “the problem of the rights of fellow Russians in the ‘near abroad’ is a real issue. Almost everyone has relatives and friends who are suffering from one form or another of discrimination or who have become refugees. But no one hears the voice of the West raised in their defense.”<sup>25</sup> Due to such sentiments and pressures, the Kremlin’s “Westernist course began to lose its momentum toward the end of 1992.”<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, throughout these years support for the Serbs in Yugoslavia’s various civil wars became such a popular cause in nationalist quarters that the Yeltsin administration had little choice but to follow along.<sup>27</sup> As Evgenii Bazhanov writes, “The desire [among Russian elites] to be a Great Power even takes the form of a long-forgotten Pan Slavism and Orthodox solidarity. After a full seventy years of bickering with the USSR, the Serbs have suddenly become for many Russian politicians ‘a close relative’ to a greater extent than, for example, Ukrainians.”<sup>28</sup> In this

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<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Leon Aron documents “disenchantment with America” even among Russian liberals over the course of that year. See his “A Different Dance: From Tango to Minuet,” *The National Interest*, No. 39 (Spring 1995), pp. 27-37.

<sup>25</sup> Andrei Kozyrev, “The Lagging Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (May-June 1994), pp. 69-70.

<sup>26</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Second Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 69. Margot Light similarly dates the end of “a consistently pro-Western line in Russian foreign policy” to May 1992 and the complete triumph of Pragmatic Nationalist over Liberal Westernizing views to April 1993. See her “Foreign Policy Thinking,” in Neil Malcolm, Alex Pravda, Roy Allison, and Margot Light, eds., *Internal Factors in Russian Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 33, 35, and 83.

<sup>27</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, pp. 72-78, 121-24, and chap. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Evgenii Bazhanov, “Kogda rodina ne v opasnosti” [When the Motherland is Not in Danger], *Novoe vremya*, No. 31 (August 1995), p. 36.

context, Operation “Deliberate Force”—“a large-scale air campaign against Bosnian Serb military installations” undertaken by NATO in August 1995 with the intent “to coerce the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table”—unsurprisingly inflamed Russian outrage.<sup>29</sup> In response, even the Yeltsin government condemned NATO’s intervention in the following hyperbolic terms:

As a result of [NATO’s bomb and rocket strikes], innocent civilians are dying, including the most defenseless among them—children....In this way, the survival of the present generation of Bosnian Serbs is put in doubt, and it is practically threatened with genocide. The Russian Government resolutely protests against the harsh, one-sided use of the military power of NATO in Bosnia against the Serb population. We cannot remain indifferent to the tragic fate of the children of our brother-Slavs.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps even more important than concern for their “brother Slavs” was that, due to both Russia’s and Serbia’s shared ethno-religious affiliation and their common role as the core nation of multinational states, Russians worried about what NATO’s growing norm of “humanitarian interventionism” might mean for them one day. In the words of Victor Kuvardin, Senior Researcher at the Gorbachev Foundation: “When we Russians witnessed the massive bombing to which NATO subjected the Serbs, we realized that the same thing could be done to us very easily.”<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the extreme nationalist political party that emerged victorious in the parliamentary elections of 1993, similarly declared: “NATO pilots are using the Orthodox Serbs as practice for their military skills....There will be another 22 June [the date of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941], when American soldiers will land on our air fields.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> James Headley, *Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin* (London: Hurst & Company, 2008), p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 233-34.

<sup>31</sup> Comments made at a public seminar at the Harvard Russian Institute of International Affairs, Moscow, September 24, 1995. The author was the resident director of the Institute at the time.

<sup>32</sup> *OMRI Special Report*, December 15, 1995.

### *NATO Expansion*

Western governments further stoked Russian threat-perceptions by beginning the process of enlarging the transatlantic alliance to include the USSR's Eastern European allies. U.S. support for enlargement was announced as early as July 1994 when Bill Clinton informed Polish lawmakers that "NATO expansion is no longer a question of whether, but when and how."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Brussels issued a study in September 1995 that detailed the prerequisites for the inclusion of new states and in essence gave a green light to expansion.<sup>34</sup> As a result, NATO expansion joined the list of irritants in Russia's relations with the West.

It is important to note, however, that pro-Western and anti-Western Russians opposed NATO expansion for very different reasons. On the basis of surveys of Russian foreign policy elites, both military and civilian, William Zimmerman finds that whether respondents agreed that Russia should "follow its own unique path" or alternatively "take the path of other developed countries...familiarizing itself with the achievements of Western civilization" constituted "the major divide" between those who perceived a threat to Russia from the United States, NATO expansion, or NATO intervention in a European country to mute ethnic conflict and those who did not.<sup>35</sup> Consistent with this finding, high-ranking nationalist policymakers interpreted the prospect of NATO enlargement as a conventional threat to national security. For instance, Lt. General Leonid Ivashov, the head of Defense Ministry's Department of International Military Cooperation, described the "imminent danger" represented by NATO expansion as follows: "the capabilities of the countries that are the first echelon candidates for admission to the alliance (the Visegrad group) will add to the already incomparable combat power of the bloc....In addition, NATO will acquire 285 airfields, including in the immediate proximity to the borders of Russia,

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<sup>33</sup> *RFE/RL Daily Report*, July 8, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> See "NATO Rationalizes Its Eastward Enlargement," *Transition*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> William Zimmerman, *The Russian People and Foreign Policy: Russian Elite and Mass Perspectives, 1993-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 178-182.

Belarus, and Ukraine.”<sup>36</sup> Defense Minister Igor Rodionov similarly opined that “the main problem [for Russia] in the West is NATO’s expansion to the east, which will alter the military-strategic balance in Europe.”<sup>37</sup>

In contrast (and again consistent with Zimmerman’s findings), the pro-Western liberals in power regarded NATO expansion primarily, if not solely, as an obstacle to their ability to prevail in future electoral struggles. In 1992, Foreign Minister Kozyrev had asserted that the Yeltsin leadership, having “completely and unequivocally broken away from communism,” could not even imagine “NATO as Russia’s adversary.”<sup>38</sup> Echoing this assertion, three years later he told a visiting group of American scholars:

If NATO includes Eastern Europe against Russia, this will create a Weimer situation for Russia. It will be the end of Russian democracy. Zhirinovsky will be able to say about the democrats: “You see, they are stupid. The West will never accept us.” This will help him in parliamentary and presidential elections.... We need to buy time in order to acquaint Russian society and the military with NATO, show that it is friendly and our friend.<sup>39</sup>

Russia’s president communicated the same message to Bill Clinton at a summit held in May 1995. “If you can’t postpone until 2000,” Yeltsin pleaded with his good friend “Bill,” “then at least until we get through our elections so that, between now and then, there’s only a theoretical discussion about enlargement. I’ve got to tell you, my position heading into 1996 is not exactly

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<sup>36</sup> Lt. Gen. L.G. Ivashov, “On NATO’s Eastward Expansion,” *Military Thought=Voennaya Mysl’*, No. 6 (1996), p. 47. For an expression of his fervently anti-Western views, see Leonid Ivashov, “Rossiya mozhet snova stat’ sverkhderzhavoi: No dlya etogo nuzhno dolgo i uporno rabotat’” [Russia Can Become a Superpower Again: But It will Require Long and Persistent Work], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 7, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Excerpts from his remarks were printed in *Krasnaya zvezda*, July 25, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Andrei Kozyrev, “Russia: A Chance for Survival,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 14-15.

<sup>39</sup> Private meeting with Kozyrev, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, January 20, 1995. Two decades later, Kozyrev reaffirmed this view of NATO: “I think my outlook of the world and my assessment of the NATO alliance is very different from [one that blames NATO expansion for Russia’s actions against Ukraine], because I don’t think that NATO is an enemy of Russia in the first place.” “Russia’s Former Foreign Minister Discusses Putin’s Motivations in Ukraine,” *PBS Newshour*, May 5, 2014.

brilliant.”<sup>40</sup> Even some centrist politicians—such as Kozyrev’s successor as foreign minister, Evgenii Primakov—were of the opinion that “the expansion of NATO is not a military problem; it is a psychological one.”<sup>41</sup>

Clinton and the other leaders of the alliance did wait until after Russia’s crucial presidential election of 1996 but proceeded to issue formal invitations to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary a year later. Notwithstanding the objections of virtually all segments of Russia’s political spectrum, no Russian military response or even substantial rearmament program followed.<sup>42</sup> Quite to the contrary, the Yeltsin administration signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act in May 1997 and thereby conveyed its overarching desire not to allow expansion to undermine Russia’s broader integration into Western institutions.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Kosovo War*

A more serious impediment to amicable Western-Russian relations appeared at the very end of the decade when, in response to mass violence and ethnic cleansing committed by Serbian forces against the Albanian majority of Kosovo, NATO conducted an extensive bombing campaign against Yugoslavia for the purpose of coercing Slobodan Milošević’s regime to withdraw all of its forces from the region. Over the course of the previous six months, the Yeltsin administration had repeatedly expressed its adamant disapproval of any such use of force

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 174.

<sup>42</sup> In this regard, Kimberly Marten observes that “annual military data provided by Russia to other state participants in the OSCE, under the 1999 Vienna confidence-building agreement, shows a steep drop in troops and equipment deployed in Russia’s Western and Southern Military Districts (that is, along or toward NATO borders) from 2000 to 2010 (even after Putin’s 2007 Munich speech), and a continued but less precipitous decline from 2010 to 2014....” From these trends she infers “that Russian planners did not consider NATO’s enlargement to be a military threat.” See her “Reconsidering NATO Expansion: a Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s,” *European Journal of International Security*, Vol. 3, part 2 (2018), p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, p. 208; Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, chap. 9.

by NATO.<sup>44</sup> When the war commenced, the entire Russian political establishment once again launched a vociferous campaign of diplomatic support of their “brother-Slavs.” In a television address on the eve of the war, Yeltsin called the coming events “a tragic and dramatic step” constituting “a blow to the entire international community” (a view also held by Putin at the time).<sup>45</sup> As Andrei Tsygankov comments, “Russia’s official reaction was harsh: it accused the alliance of violating UN jurisdiction and the Helsinki act on the preservation of sovereignty, suspended its participation in the Founding Act agreement, withdrew its military mission from Brussels, and ordered NATO representatives to leave Russia.”<sup>46</sup> The Communist speaker of the Russian Duma, Gennady Seleznev, even branded NATO “a terrorist organization” and called for “lawyers across the world to stage a public Nuremberg trial of the fascist organization named NATO.”<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding this wave of anger and pressure to defend Yugoslavia, however, Kremlin actions never went beyond diplomatic gestures. Moreover, Yeltsin’s personal representative to the negotiations between NATO and Belgrade played a constructive and even crucial role in the diplomacy that coerced Belgrade into full compliance with NATO’s peace terms.<sup>48</sup> The alliance’s 78-day-long bombing campaign, however, inflicted serious damage on Russian views about its pacific nature. The following November, for instance, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Anatolii Kvashin pointed to “Kosovo and Iraq” as evidence of NATO’s “growing readiness” to use armed force, adding that “one may expect that other territories, including former Soviet territories, will be no exception.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Moscow’s

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<sup>44</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, p. 300.

<sup>45</sup> “Teleobrashchenie prezidenta Rossii Borisa El’tsina 24 marta 1999 goda v svyazi s ugrozoi NATO nanesti udar po Yugoslavii” [Television Address of President Boris Yeltsin of March 24, 1999, in Connection with NATO’s Threat to Attack Yugoslavia], *Kommersant-Daily*, March 25, 1999; and N. Gevorkyan, A. Kolesnikov, and N. Timakova, *Ot pervogo litsa: razgovory s Vladimirom Putinyim* [First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin] (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, p. 174

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *RFE/RL Newslines*, May 19, 1999.

<sup>48</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, Chap. 10; and Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, Chap. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 16, 1999.

lingering outrage over the Kosovo War is evidenced by the attention it receives in Putin's speech justifying the annexation of Crimea a full fifteen years later. "Our Western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their actual policies, but by the principle that might makes right," he states. "They do as they please: now here and now there, they use force against sovereign states.... This was the case in Yugoslavia; we remember the events of 1999 very well. It was hard to believe—I couldn't believe my own eyes—but at the end of the twentieth century, one of Europe's capitals, Belgrade, was subjected to missile attacks that went on for several weeks, and after that came the real intervention."<sup>50</sup>

#### *Summary of 1992-1999*

Several aspects of the history recounted above cast significant doubt on the validity of the proposition that military insecurity arising from NATO's eastward expansion represents the primary source of either Moscow's general estrangement from the West or its recent aggression against Ukraine. First, the Yeltsin administration's pro-Western course received extensive pushback from much of the Russian elite as early as 1992—well before Western leaders launched a public discussion of the possibility of NATO expansion.<sup>51</sup> Second, as is displayed in Table 1, Moscow's sense of common purpose with Western governments became increasingly attenuated over the course of the decade due in part to NATO expansion but to an even greater extent to the interaction of Western military actions in the Balkans with Russia's support for its ethno-religious kin.

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<sup>50</sup> "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii" [Address by the President of the Russian Federation], March 18, 2014, available at [www.news.kremlin.ru/20603](http://www.news.kremlin.ru/20603) (date of access: May 30, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Making the same point, Marten traces the political rise of anti-Western hardliners all the way back to 1990, a time not only before NATO began to contemplate expansion but even when the Warsaw Pact still existed. "Reconsidering NATO Expansion," pp. 148-49.



Table 1. Major Sources of Russian Estrangement from the West, 1992-2014

1992-1999

1. Russia's Patronage of the Serbs
2. NATO's Intervention in Bosnia
3. Growth of NATO's Military Power due to Expansion
4. The Kosovo War

2000-2010

5. Criticism of Russia's De-democratization
6. Putin's "Thin Skin"
7. Moscow's Desire to Reintegrate the Former Soviet Union
8. The Kremlin's Antipathy to Revolutionary Change
9. U.S. and EU Democracy Promotion and the Color Revolutions
10. Misperceptions of American Policy

2011-2014

11. Mass Protests in Russia
  12. Putin's Civilizationist and Socially Conservative Worldview
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Third, NATO expansion stoked security fears primarily among elites who possessed an anti-Western orientation to begin with; even though the liberal reformers in power opposed said expansion, they understood perfectly well that it did not portend any future invasion of Russian territory. And fourth, even though expansion brought, in Mearsheimer's apt description, "a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently"<sup>52</sup> all the way to the borders of the former Soviet Union (as well as those of Russia's exclave of Kaliningrad), the Kremlin nonetheless continued to manifest a cooperative stance toward the U.S. and NATO (as evidenced by both the NATO-Russia Founding Act and Moscow's role in ending the Kosovo War). Equally noteworthy, the Yeltsin administration also continued to accept the sometimes arbitrary and often unfavorable borders inherited from the USSR and to manifest little more than benign neglect of discontented ethnic Russians left outside those borders.<sup>53</sup> With Yeltsin at the helm of

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<sup>52</sup> Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," p. 82.

<sup>53</sup> Charles King and Neil Melvin, "Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia," *International Security* Vol. 24, No. 3 (1999/2000), pp. 108-138, especially

state, several of the post-Soviet countries, Ukraine included, were able to repeatedly impede Russia's efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space and still retain their territorial integrity.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Putin Era 1.0 (2000-2010)**

#### *Putin's Initial Pro-Western Orientation*

The prospects for amicable Russian-American relations did not improve when Yeltsin departed the Kremlin on New Year's Eve of 2000 in favor of an heir who—in stark contrast to Yeltsin's staunch anti-communism—possesses a rather high level of Soviet patriotism. Putin's value system became obvious during the first year of his presidency when he lent his support to the replacement of Russia's post-communist national anthem with the old Soviet anthem (albeit with new lyrics).<sup>55</sup> Again in contrast to Yeltsin, Russia's new president viewed the policies that ended the Cold War critically. In his view, Mikhail Gorbachev was guilty of “unilateral disarmament.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the daughter of Putin's political mentor, Kseniya Sobchak, reports that Putin strongly disliked the U.S. even before he arrived in Moscow in 1996. “Anti-American attitudes were absolutely inherent to him,” she recalls. “My father and he even argued about this frequently.”<sup>57</sup>

However, Putin's attitudes as a whole upon assuming the presidency actually reflected a preponderance of pro-Western (or at least pro-European) impulses. For instance, notwithstanding the fact that NATO had just completed the first round of its expansion just months earlier, Putin referred to the states of the North Atlantic community positively, pledging that “Russia should be and will be an integral part of the civilized world and in this context we will cooperate with

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123-24; and David W. Rivera, “Engagement, Containment, and the International Politics of Eurasia,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 81-106.

<sup>54</sup> On Ukrainian resistance to such integration, see Rivera, “Engagement, Containment, and the International Politics of Eurasia,” pp. 91-92, 94, and 98-99.

<sup>55</sup> *RFE/RL Newslines*, December 5, 2000. Yeltsin opposed the change.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Peter Truscott, *Putin's Progress: A Biography of Russia's Enigmatic President, Vladimir Putin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> “15 let s Putinyam” [15 Years with Putin], *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, available at <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/putin15/> (date of access: January 20, 2015).

NATO.”<sup>58</sup> In a series of interviews with journalists conducted during his first election campaign, Putin adamantly rejected the core premise of Russian nationalist thought that maintains that Russia’s development must proceed along its own “unique path.” To the contrary, he declared, “we are a part of Western European culture. In fact, we derive our worth precisely from this. Wherever our people might happen to live—in the Far East or in the south—we are Europeans.”<sup>59</sup> In September 2001, Putin took the unprecedented step of addressing the German Bundestag *in German*. When pressed to defend that action a year later, he stated that he was “quite sure of a common history that unites Russia and Germany. We have no right to forget it. Moreover, it is high time to recall it....because we consider ourselves a European nation in the first place and would like to live according to common rules and build a bright future together with Europe and the civilized world.”<sup>60</sup>

The confluence of Russia’s own struggle against Islamic extremism and the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> provided an opportunity for Putin’s initial (and admittedly only partial) pro-Western leanings to manifest themselves in deeds. Along with various forms of intelligence-sharing and logistical support, Putin gave Moscow’s consent—over the objections of Russia’s defense minister and military brass—to the establishment of American military bases in Central Asia in the run-up to the U.S. war against the Taliban. In a November 2001 interview, Putin defended this decision by describing concerns about the security implications of an American presence in the former Soviet Union as outmoded Cold War thinking. “You know, what used to be important in our former frame of reference to a significant degree makes less and less sense today,” he stated. “If Russia is becoming a full-fledged member of the international community, then it should not and will not fear the development of relations among its neighbors and other

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in *RFE/RL Newslines*, August 16, 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Gevorkyan et al., *Ot pervogo litsa*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>60</sup> “Putin Wants Powerful Russia Its Citizens to Be Proud of,” *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, October 9, 2002. I have substituted “bright future” for “future perspective” in order to improve the accuracy of this translation.

states, including those between the Central Asian states and the United States.”<sup>61</sup> Demonstrating that the war in Afghanistan was no aberration, Putin gave similar consent to the deployment of U.S. troops to Georgia on an anti-terrorist mission the following March.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, Putin’s desire for integration with Europe was so strong that NATO’s second round of expansion—which included seven post-communist states and three former Soviet republics and brought the alliance squarely to Russia’s borders—failed to alter his views or derail his plans for partnership with the West. Those seven states received Membership Action Plans in 1999, yet at the NATO summit in May 2002, Moscow eagerly upgraded its participation in the alliance’s decision-making via the creation of the NATO-Russia Council.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, at his annual press conference the following month, Putin explicitly rejected the notion that expansion posed a security threat to Russia. “I think that it would be absolutely unsound from both a tactical and a strategic point of view to try to create obstacles to Estonia’s admission into NATO,” he stated. “If that’s what Estonia wants to do, then let it join if it thinks that doing so will be beneficial. I don’t see any sort of tragedy here.”<sup>64</sup>

Even nine months after the second round of NATO expansion had been completed, Putin still described both Russian-American relations and his personal relationship with George Bush, a major proponent of enlargement, in glowing terms. “I am satisfied with how our relations with the United States as a whole are developing,” he declared in December 2004. “We are indisputable partners in the resolution of a series of the most serious modern-day problems, first and foremost in our joint struggle against terrorism. In this realm I would even describe our

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<sup>61</sup> “Stenograficheskiy otchet o vstreche s shef-korrespondentami moskovskikh byuro vedushchikh amerikanskikh sredstv massovoi informatsii” [Transcript of Meeting with the Moscow Bureau Chiefs of Leading American News Outlets], November 10, 2001, available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/21394> (date of access: August 2, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Marcus Warren, “US Troops in Georgia Welcomed by Putin,” *The Telegraph*, March 2, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 76.

<sup>64</sup> “Stenograficheskiy otchet o press-konferentsii dlya rossiiskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov” [Transcript of Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists], June 24, 2002, available at [www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21651](http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21651).

relationship as that of not merely partners but allies.” “In my opinion, Bush himself is a very honest and consistent man,” Putin continued. “We don’t always agree, but I completely trust him as a partner, and I know that if we reach an agreement, he will try hard to implement it. I act the same way.”<sup>65</sup>

*Western Criticism of Russia’s De-democratization and Putin’s “Thin Skin”*

However, the balance of pro-Western versus anti-Western impulses in Putin’s thinking began to shift toward the end of his first term. A major source of this change was Western criticism of the pronounced democratic backsliding that had occurred at his direction.<sup>66</sup> During his first months in office, the Kremlin took control of the country’s two major television networks, ORT and the aptly named Independent Television Network (NTV); in due course, several minor networks were taken over as well. The end result was television programming that offered only praise of Kremlin policies. This monopoly over the airwaves was then exploited in the parliamentary election campaign of 2003 to the benefit of United Russia, the president’s party, to such an extent that the observer team sent by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe condemned the elections as “regression in the democratization of this country.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, after a presidential election the following March in which Putin defeated his closest rival by a margin of 71% to 13%, Washington-based Freedom House lowered

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<sup>65</sup> “Press-konferentsiya dlya rossiiskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov” [Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists], December 23, 2004, available at [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru) (date of access: April 25, 2014).

<sup>66</sup> The small number of other analyses that stress this source of discord include: Vladimir Shlapentokh, “The Puzzle of Russian Anti-Americanism: From ‘Below’ or From ‘Above,’” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 5 (July 2011), pp. 875-889; Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016, pp. 109, 119, and 244-45; and Sakwa, “Back to the Wall,” pp. 17-18. Brian Taylor similarly argues that 2003-04 marks a “key break” in Putin’s attitudes and policies, yet he doesn’t include external criticism of Russia’s domestic order among the sources of this break. See *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 11-12 and 175-76.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in RedOrbit News, “Officials Condemn Russia’s Election,” December 8, 2003, available at <http://www.redorbit.com/modules/news/tools.php?tool=print&id=33811> (date of access: January 30, 2006).

Russia's rating for political rights from 5 to 6 and downgraded the country's status to "not free"—scores last received by the Soviet Union in 1989.<sup>68</sup>

Negative judgments of this sort proved to be highly damaging to Western-Russian relations in no small part because, as he has proven time and again, Putin is extremely intolerant of criticism directed at either himself or Russia. For instance, in his capacity as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, Putin attended a conference organized by the European Union in 1994 where the president of Estonia engaged in several "crude attacks on Russia," including by characterizing Russia as an "occupier." Alone among the Russian delegation, Putin immediately "stood and stormed out of the hall."<sup>69</sup> In addition to supporting his political opponents in the 1999 parliamentary election campaign, the aforementioned NTV network also broadcast a weekly political satire, *Kukli* ("Puppets"), which mercilessly lampooned the nation's leading politicians. After the airing of one particularly sharp-tongued episode that portrayed Putin as a homely dwarf, the president reportedly "went mad" with rage. When NTV came under Kremlin control weeks later, the show was cancelled.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, scathing coverage of the president's handling of the sinking of the Kursk submarine in August 2000 on the ORT network—in which the anchorman accused him of repeatedly lying to the public—was immediately followed by the state's prosecution of its owner, Boris Berezovsky.<sup>71</sup> And then again in 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's public criticism of corruption in the oil industry involving Putin's long-time subordinate Igor Sechin immediately drew an angry and threatening response from Putin himself and served as the trigger for his decision to have Khodorkovsky arrested and his oil company

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<sup>68</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2005*, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom\\_in\\_the\\_World\\_2005\\_complete\\_book.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2005_complete_book.pdf). For a quantitative analysis of the full and dramatic extent of de-democratization under Putin, see David Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, "Yeltsin, Putin, and Clinton: Presidential Leadership and Russian Democratization in Comparative Perspective," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 591-610.

<sup>69</sup> As recounted by another member of the delegation in Gevorkyan et al., *Ot pervogo litsa*, p. 95.

<sup>70</sup> Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 57-60.

<sup>71</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), pp. 171-74.

dismantled.<sup>72</sup> After the arrest, Putin remarked: “I have eaten more dirt than I need to from that man.”<sup>73</sup> As Hillary Clinton perceptively notes on the basis of her work as secretary of state, Putin is “thin-skinned and autocratic, resenting criticism and eventually cracking down on dissent and debate....”<sup>74</sup>

Just as Putin possesses little tolerance for criticism from these “oligarchs,” so he regards Western criticism of his highly autocratic regime as illegitimate and intolerable. A telling example of the president’s strong feelings on this score was provided during his December 2004 press conference. In response to a mild question from an American correspondent regarding whether “criticism emanating from Washington regarding your adherence to democracy will play a role in your upcoming meeting with President Bush,” Putin conveyed his considerable irritation at needing to address the matter:

I should say that we too are not thrilled about everything that goes on in the U.S. Do you really think that the U.S. electoral system is devoid of any defects? Is it really the case that I need to remind you how various elections have been conducted in the States? You know, the OSCE commission that monitors elections in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and the U.S. issued the very same complaints about the conduct of elections in the United States. For example, the OSCE complained to election officials in the U.S about lack of access to polling stations by observers. Even voter intimidation took place there as well.<sup>75</sup>

During their subsequent summit in Bratislava, Bush did indeed begin to advance his administration’s “freedom agenda” with Putin. Specifically, Bush reproached him over the state of media freedom and the arrest of political opponents, to which Putin again responded by drawing parallels to allegedly similar situations in the U.S. (“Don’t lecture me about the free press, not after you fired that reporter”—a reference to Dan Rather of CBS News—was one of

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<sup>72</sup> Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, Second Edition (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 77-79. Both the head of security for the Yukos oil company and Putin’s own Economics Minister express agreement with this interpretation in the documentary film, *Khodorkovsky* (Kino Lorber 2012).

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 82.

<sup>74</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), p. 202.

<sup>75</sup> “Press-konferentsiya dlya rossiiskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov.”

Putin's retorts.) Bush later described their conversation as "fairly unpleasant" and akin to "junior high debating."<sup>76</sup>

As is apparent, the combination of Putin's intolerance of criticism and American expressions of concern over the state of Russian democracy represents a little appreciated but nonetheless real source of the deterioration of the two presidents' relationship that occurred over the course of their second presidential terms. Moreover, Putin soon began to impute sinister motives to international concern over the state of Russian democracy. For instance, when the election-monitoring branch of the OSCE canceled its observation mission for Russia's 2007 parliamentary elections due to restrictions placed by Moscow on its size and activities, Putin, erroneously attributing this decision to pressure exerted by the U.S. State Department, angrily commented that "such actions do not have the potential to disrupt elections in Russia; rather, their goal is to delegitimize them. This is patently obvious."<sup>77</sup>

### *The Color Revolutions*

Central goals of Russian foreign policy throughout the 1990s were to retain maximum integration among the former Soviet republics and keep foreign powers out of the security arrangements of those states.<sup>78</sup> These goals received renewed attention during Putin's second presidential term. In July 2004, Putin persuaded Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma to participate in the creation of a Common Economic Space with Russia in lieu of seeking

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), pp. 383-84. Putin expressed anger and irritation at Western criticism even more strenuously during a more recent interview with Megyn Kelly. See "Sunday Night with Megyn Kelly," *NBC*, June 4, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> "Vstrecha s uchastnikami proekta 'Professional'naya komanda strany'" [Meeting with Participants of "The Country's Professional Team"], November 26, 2007, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru) (date of access: January 23, 2009). The sole evidence for this interpretation marshaled by Russian officials was that "the director of the election-monitoring office, Christian Strohal of Austria, visited Washington shortly before the decision to withdraw [from Russia] was announced." Officials of both the U.S. and OSCE denied the allegation. See Clifford Levy, "Putin Accuses U.S. of Trying to Discredit Russian Vote," *New York Times*, November 27, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Rivera, "Engagement, Containment, and the International Politics of Eurasia."



membership in the EU and NATO. In order to preserve a pro-Russian orientation in Kiev into the future, the Kremlin then became heavily involved in Ukraine's presidential election, sending large sums of money and numerous "political technologists" to assist the campaign of Kuchma's hand-picked successor, Viktor Yanukovich. Putin even personally campaigned for Yanukovich, including by inviting him to Moscow to attend his birthday celebration and spending three days in Ukraine during which he held a marathon call-in question-and-answer session live on Ukrainian television.<sup>79</sup> Kremlin correspondent Mikhail Zygar aptly remarks that "[Pro-Western opposition leader Viktor] Yushchenko's main rival in the elections was not Yanukovich, in fact, but Putin, who carried on as if it were his own personal campaign."<sup>80</sup> With the benefit of both this assistance and widespread electoral fraud, Yanukovich won a narrow victory in November.

The Kremlin's plans suffered a major setback, however, when the Ukrainian Supreme Court invalidated the results of that election, thereby fulfilling the central demand of the huge crowds camped out on Maidan Square in central Kiev. After the court issued its decision, Putin expressed his considerable displeasure not with the electoral fraud that had produced Yanukovich's victory but with the fact that street protests bolstered by Western condemnation of rigged elections had brought about political change. Specifically, in his December 2004 press conference, he offered the following alarmist commentary on Ukraine's unfolding Orange Revolution:

[I]n regard to the entire post-Soviet space, I am alarmed first and foremost by attempts to resolve political issues by illegal means....It is very dangerous to create a system of permanent revolutions—a "rose" one here, then some kind of "blue" ones will be thought up somewhere else. One should get used to living according to the law...*and not according to what is politically expedient for people located at some other place and acting on behalf of this or that other nation*....if we embark on a path of permanent revolutions, then nothing good will come from this for these countries and their populations. We will burden the

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<sup>79</sup> Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 131-35.

<sup>80</sup> Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men*, p. 91.

entire post-Soviet space with a series of never-ending conflicts that will lead to rather serious consequences.<sup>81</sup>

As Putin's remarks suggest, central to the Kremlin's understanding of the Color Revolution phenomenon is the notion that Western states instigate popular uprisings for self-interested purposes, the main one being to reorient these states away from Moscow and toward Brussels and Washington. In addition to this geopolitical frame, the president's comments also reflect his principled and genuine antipathy to revolutionary change. On the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Putin offered the following somber commentary: "We know well the consequences that these great upheavals can bring. Unfortunately, our country went through many such upheavals and their consequences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>82</sup> It is equally clear, however, that the Kremlin's categorical opposition to revolution abroad is rooted in political self-interest as well: namely, concern that such revolutions will inspire similar events in Russia. To quote Angela Stent: "the Kremlin felt threatened by these revolutions....After all, if Ukrainians could take to the streets and overthrow their government, so could Russians."<sup>83</sup>

Whatever the mix of its motives, the seriousness with which the Kremlin viewed the threat of encroaching revolution was soon manifested in a series of measures to inhibit the democratization of the other post-Soviet states and strengthen their existing regimes.<sup>84</sup> Most significant for our purposes is that, as Michael McFaul asserts, "[m]ore than any other issue...the so-called color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine renewed tensions in U.S.-Russia relations and erased the cooperative spirit sparked by September 11."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Press-konferentsiya dlya rossiiskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov"; italics added.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Neil MacFarquhar, "'Revolution? What Revolution?' Kremlin Asks 100 Years Later," *New York Times*, March 11, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 101.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2009); and Jakob Tolstrup, "Studying a Negative External Actor: Russia's Management of Stability and Instability in the 'Near Abroad,'" *Democratization*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2009), pp. 922-944.

<sup>85</sup> Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 68.

*Putin's Anti-Americanism and Gross Misperception: A Vicious Cycle*

Western criticism of his regime and the outbreak of the Color Revolutions, especially Ukraine's, combined to bring Putin's already existing anti-Americanism to the fore. In his thoroughly researched history of Kremlin politics and decision-making, Zygar notes that the outcome of the Orange Revolution represents "the first—and worst—defeat of Vladimir Putin's first decade in office." "The defeat was particularly painful," he continues, "because the Kremlin did not understand its causes. How could Russia's backbreaking efforts have failed to produce the desired result? Only if the enemy—that is, the West—had tried even harder, they concluded."<sup>86</sup> Propelled by this anger, "Putin dropped any pretense of good-natured friendship" at the previously discussed Bratislava summit with George Bush two months later.<sup>87</sup> As Bush's National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, comments, second-term Putin "was different than the man who we had first met" in 2001.<sup>88</sup>

In fact, this "different man" soon began openly to assert that the United States constituted an international outlaw—most notably in his (in)famous speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy of 2007.<sup>89</sup> Before domestic audiences as well, Putin frequently vilified the U.S. whenever the opportunity arose. For instance, during the presentation of a study guide on Russian history for use in high schools, Putin expressed agreement with a comment that "our history is not grounds for self-flagellation" by engaging in the following comparative analysis:

In regard to those problematic chapters in our history—yes, we do have them. But they exist in the history of any state! And we have fewer of them than do some others, and ours are not as horrible as are those of others....we have never utilized nuclear weapons against a civilian population. We have never dumped chemicals

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<sup>86</sup> Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men*, pp. 91 and 95.

<sup>87</sup> Myers, *The New Tsar*, p. 277.

<sup>88</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), p. 366.

<sup>89</sup> "Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoi konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti" [Speech and Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy], February 10, 2007, available at [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru) (date of access: February 9, 2009).

on thousands of kilometers of land or dropped seven times more bombs on a small country than were dropped during the entire Second World War, as was the case in Vietnam.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, Putin's verbal attacks on the U.S. at times reflected a deeply distorted understanding of American politics and intentions (distortions that in turn served to exacerbate his anti-Americanism). For instance, during the same conversation in which he claimed that Bush had personally ordered the firing of Dan Rather, Putin also charged that American presidents "appoint the Electoral College."<sup>91</sup> Putin has also asserted that the U.S. "hung" Saddam Hussein (when in fact popularly-elected Iraqi authorities conducted his trial and carried out his sentence).<sup>92</sup>

One of Putin's more consequential misconceptions, however, is provided by his interpretation of the origins of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008. Even though the Bush administration explicitly and repeatedly warned Georgian leaders not to let themselves be provoked into a military conflict that they obviously could not win,<sup>93</sup> then Prime Minister Putin maintained in an interview with CNN that Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, was encouraged and even sponsored by the White House. "It's not just that the U.S. administration was unable to restrain Georgia's leaders from undertaking this criminal action; the American side actually armed and trained the Georgian Army. What's the point of spending long years in difficult negotiations searching for complicated compromise solutions to interethnic conflicts?" Putin asked rhetorically. "It's easier to arm one of the sides and incite it to kill the other side, and that's the end of it." Elaborating on the motives behind American policy, Putin

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<sup>90</sup> "Stenograficheskiy otchet o vstreche s delegatami Vserossiiskoi konferentsii prepodavatelei gymanitarnykh i obshchestvennykh nauk" [Transcript of a Meeting with Delegates to the All-Russian Conference of Humanities and Social Science Teachers], June 21, 2007, available at <http://archive.kremlin.ru> (date of access: April 21, 2014).

<sup>91</sup> Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 383.

<sup>92</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 173.

<sup>93</sup> Helene Cooper and Thom Shanker, "After Mixed Messages and Unheeded Warnings from the U.S., a Conflict Erupts," *New York Times*, August 13, 2008; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 685-86; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 231-32 and 239; and Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 168 and 170.

explained that the many difficulties confronting the United States (Afghanistan, Iraq, the financial crisis of 2008) created the need for a “small, victorious war” that would “unite the country around certain political forces” and thereby “give an advantage to one of the candidates in the U.S. presidential election contest.” As his sole basis for this outlandish interpretation of events, Putin claimed that Russian military forces had uncovered evidence that American citizens “were located right in the middle of the war zone.”<sup>94</sup>

Putin’s misconceptions regarding American policy provide yet another piece of the explanation of why his friendly relationship with Bush considerably soured over the course of his second presidential term. Putin’s gross misperceptions and angry outbursts also make clear that Kremlin decision-making in regard to war and peace in the post-Soviet space had become infused with an emotional hatred of the United States.<sup>95</sup>

#### *Summary of 2000-2010*

Russia’s relations with the West deteriorated dramatically during the first decade of Putin’s tenure in power for reasons that have even less to do with any potential security threats generated by NATO expansion than was the case in the 1990s. Six causal factors that were much more important are listed in Table 1.<sup>96</sup> First, the West’s persistent expressions of disapproval of

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<sup>94</sup> “Interv’yu V.V. Putina amerikanskoi telekompanii ‘Si-En-En’” [V.V. Putin’s Interview with CNN], August 28, 2008, available at <http://archive/premier.gov.ru/events/news/1697> (date of access: August 14, 2015).

<sup>95</sup> On the central role of emotion in Putin’s foreign-policy decision-making, see Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, chap. 1 and 6.

<sup>96</sup> U.S. criticisms of human rights abuses by the Russian military during the second war in Chechnya, the U.S.’s abrogation of the ABM Treaty in 2001 (as well as subsequent steps toward deployment of such a system in Europe), its invasion of Iraq in 2003, NATO’s granting of independence to Kosovo in 2008, and its military intervention in Libya in 2011 are arguably also worthy of inclusion in this table. Moreover, their inclusion would serve to strengthen one of the central arguments of this article to the effect that the sources of Western-Russian discord are far more numerous than just NATO expansion. However, I have opted to omit all five of these developments from my causal schema since my reading of the evidence leads me to believe that they are of secondary importance in the minds of Kremlin elites. In this regard, Russian protestations about the Iraq War can reasonably be regarded as more propagandistic than sincere. In fact, Putin himself stated the following in October 2003: “In regard to weapons of mass

Russia's de-democratization interacted with Putin's extremely "thin skin" to generate considerable anger in the halls of the Kremlin. Second, Moscow reinvigorated its efforts to reintegrate former Soviet territories and also defined Russia's national interest as requiring the prevention of revolutionary change in surrounding states. As a result, Western democracy-promotion further angered—and even inspired fear in—Russia's rulers. And third, the president's gross misperceptions of U.S. policy (themselves a product of his virulent anti-Americanism) served to magnify his hostility toward the U.S. and NATO even further.

Arguably even more telling is the fact that a positive and cooperative relationship between the Kremlin and the White House continued during and after NATO's second round of expansion that took place between 2002 and 2004. In this regard, Hitler's armies invaded the USSR through the Baltic states just as they did through Ukraine in 1941. Hence, the dictates of geopolitics that allegedly produced Moscow's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 should have also produced analogous aggression against Lithuania, Latvia, and/or Estonia when NATO *actually* expanded to Russia's borders a decade earlier. Moreover, like Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia contain border areas with majority Russian populations possessing ethnic-based grievances. Nonetheless, the Kremlin did not incite these populations to rebellion or seek to incorporate these territories into the Russian Federation, clearly indicating that analyses based in military insecurity or NATO expansion are, at a minimum, highly insufficient.<sup>97</sup>

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destruction, we did not have any disagreements with the U.S. administration. We also were of the opinion that it was perfectly possible that weapons of mass destruction were located on the territory of Iraq. The question, of course, is, where are those weapons now?" President of Russia, "Interv'yu amerikanskoi gazete 'N'yu-Iork Taims'" [Interview Given to *The New York Times*], October 4, 2003, <http://www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2001/10/53439.shtml> (date of access: October 1, 2004).

<sup>97</sup> Mearsheimer attempts to account for the absence of a Russian military reaction to NATO's first two rounds of expansion by arguing that "the Russians were too weak at the time to derail NATO's eastward movement—which, at any rate, did not look so threatening, since none of the new members shared a border with Russia, save for the tiny Baltic countries." ("Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," p. 84.) However, the empirical assertions contained in this explanation are simply inaccurate: 1) Russia was certainly strong enough in 2002 or 2004 to seize territory from one or more of the "tiny" Baltic countries; 2) as was noted above, Poland in fact does share a border with Kaliningrad; and 3) given that the Baltics states together possess

## **The Putin Era 2.0 (2011-2014)**

### *The Eruption of Anti-Putin Protests*

During the presidency of Barack Obama, Wilsonian democracy promotion was de-emphasized and downgraded in comparison with the Bush years, but it was not completely abandoned—including toward Russia. As Obama’s senior adviser on Russian affairs explains, “In parallel [with the “reset” of relations],...we adopted as policy a commitment to criticize human rights abuses and democratic erosion inside Russia....We also encouraged meetings between U.S. government officials and civil society leaders.” Providing backing to these words, the administration also raised spending on “election-related activity” in 2011.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the administration’s commitment to criticize democratic erosion became highly relevant in December of that year when evidence emerged of massive electoral fraud in Russia’s parliamentary elections. Most notably, while attending a conference in neighboring Lithuania, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: “The Russian people, like people everywhere, deserve the right to have their voices heard and their votes counted, and that means they deserve fair, free, transparent elections and leaders who are accountable to them.”<sup>99</sup>

Notwithstanding the rather generic nature of this standard expression of American values, two of the variables highlighted earlier—Putin’s extreme sensitivity to criticism and his fears of revolutionary upheaval—led him to interpret Clinton’s remarks as a call to revolution. As thousands of outraged citizens were taking to the streets to protest both electoral fraud and his prior announcement that he would soon return to the presidency, Putin publicly alleged that these protests had been fomented by Washington. “The first thing that Secretary of State Clinton did,” he stated in impromptu remarks, “was to provide an assessment of the elections by saying that

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29% of the square mileage of Ukraine (and almost three times that of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk as well as six and a half times that of Crimea), the loss of a buffer zone of this size should be consequential from a geopolitical perspective.

<sup>98</sup> McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, pp. 117 and 119.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 209.

they were unfair and unjust, even though she had not yet received the OSCE report. She set the tone for some of our political figures within the country, she sent a signal. They heard the signal and with the support of the State Department, they began their active work.”<sup>100</sup>

In apparent retaliation for these perceived hostile acts, the Kremlin then launched a campaign of physical harassment and intimidation of U.S. embassy personnel and, in particular, newly appointed Ambassador McFaul.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the Kremlin undertook yet further measures to prevent the occurrence of any kind of Color Revolution in Russia. In particular, the State Duma passed a law requiring Russian NGOs that receive foreign funding to register and publicly identify themselves as “foreign agents.” As Lyudmila Alexeeva, the chairwoman of the Moscow Helsinki Group, explains, for Russians such a label “can only be understood as marking a traitor and a spy.”<sup>102</sup> The Kremlin has justified such legislation under the overarching banner of the “nationalization of the elite,” a project to which Putin devoted his first “State of the Nation” address after returning to the presidency. “Direct or indirect foreign interference in our domestic political processes is unacceptable,” the president declared. “Anyone who receives money from abroad for his political activities—and thereby undoubtedly serves foreign national interests—cannot be a politician in the Russian Federation.” Moreover, Putin’s address expresses alarm not only about political actors receiving money from abroad but also about government officials even *holding* it there as well. “What kind of trust can one have in a bureaucrat or politician who speaks high-sounding words about the welfare of Russia but who seeks to spirit away his assets and income abroad?” the president asks rhetorically. His solution to this alleged problem is then given in the form of new legislation imposing “limitations on the rights of bureaucrats and politicians to hold foreign bank accounts, stocks, and bonds.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Chairs a Meeting of the Russian Popular Front’s Coordinating Council,” December 8, 2011, available at <http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/17330> (date of access: June 16, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, chap. 16.

<sup>102</sup> Lyudmila Alexeeva, “Backtracking in Russia,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2012.

<sup>103</sup> “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomy Sobraniyu” [The President’s Address to the Federal Assembly], December 12, 2012, <http://news.kremlin.ru> (date of access: December 16, 2013).



A relatively benign interpretation of Putin's campaign to create a "nationally oriented elite" is provided by Viatcheslav Morozov, who maintains that "the aim [of measures to establish tougher control over individuals holding public office] is to make the bureaucracy less vulnerable to instruments like the 'Magnitsky list'....[T]he Kremlin really appears to be trying to sever any threads Western manipulators could pull to influence domestic political outcomes."<sup>104</sup> In contrast, a less benign interpretation of the campaign is provided by Alexeeva. In her view, the authorities "mean to send a signal across the country that we should all re-grow our forgotten Soviet instincts of fear and wariness of foreigners—and that includes 'foreign' ideas about freedom and democracy...."<sup>105</sup>

#### *Russia as a Bastion of Traditional Values*

Putin's third presidential term (2012-18) was also marked by the Kremlin's propagation of a worldview that stresses Russia's status as a distinct civilization centered around the Orthodox faith. As Dmitri Trenin observes, Putin "spent far less time on foreign visits and much more time traveling in Russia" during his four years as prime minister and "confessed to reading much on Russia's history." Already a person who openly professed his faith (even as an active-duty KGB officer), Putin "reportedly became close with Father Tikhon Shevkunov, head of a monastery in central Moscow and a prominent Orthodox Christian intellectual." At the end of these physical and spiritual travels, Trenin concludes, Putin returned to the presidency "imbued with a sense of history and a mandate from God. The renowned pragmatist and self-avowed public servant, a country manager, had turned into a missionary."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Viatcheslav Morozov, "Nationalization of the Elites' and Its Impact on Russian Foreign Policy," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 251, June 2013, p. 3. In 2012, the U.S. government imposed sanctions on several dozen Russian officials who were found to have been involved in the arrest, torture, and ultimate death in prison of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer for an American investment fund that had experienced the theft of assets by those very same officials.

<sup>105</sup> Alexeeva, "Backtracking in Russia."

<sup>106</sup> Trenin, *Russia's Breakout from the Post-Cold War System*, p. 9. On Putin's profession of his faith to his superior officer while serving in East Germany in the late 1980s, see Myers, *The New Tsar*, p. 42.

In the fall of 2013, the new missionary Putin gave a major address to the Valdai International Discussion Club on the topic of Russian national identity. In that address, he declares: “Russia’s development has always taken the form of a ‘blossoming complexity,’ a state-civilization, that is held together by the Russian people, the Russian language, Russian culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church as well as Russia’s other traditional religions.” Furthermore, Putin asserts that the conceptualizations of sexuality and the family prescribed by these faiths are under attack from European social liberalism. After stating that “all nations are confronting the necessity to develop new strategies to preserve their identity,” the president explains that

Another serious challenge to Russia’s identity is linked to events taking place in the world....We can see how many Euro-Atlantic countries have set out on a path of rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with belief in Satan....People in many European countries are embarrassed and afraid to talk about their religious affiliations. Holidays are even abolished or called something different; in the process their very essence—the moral foundation of these holidays—is shamefully concealed. And this model is being aggressively forced upon everyone, upon the entire world.

Leaving no doubt about where he stands, Putin concludes by affirming his conviction that such practices represent “a direct route to degradation and primitivism, as well as to a profound demographic and moral crisis.”<sup>107</sup> Summarizing what she calls the “Putin doctrine,” Lilia Shevtsova comments that “Putin appears to truly believe that the West poses a threat not only on

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<sup>107</sup> “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [Meeting of the International Discussion Club “Valdai”], September 19, 2013, available at <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/19243> (date of access: March 9, 2014). Putin repeated this message in his annual presidential address to the Federal Assembly just three months later. See “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomy Sobraniyu” [Address to the Federal Assembly], December 12, 2013, available at <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/19825> (date of access: December 7, 2014).

the state level (the level of Russia's external interests) but also on the level of society and the Russian way of life."<sup>108</sup>

Such concerns also lie at the heart of what Stent calls Putin's "number one foreign policy priority" of 2013-14: the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) encompassing as much of the former Soviet Union as possible.<sup>109</sup> On the one hand, as Andrej Krickovic correctly observes, "Russia sees the post-Soviet region as the key to building up its economic capabilities, and thus preserving its status as a great power."<sup>110</sup> In addition, like most Russian elites, Putin views Russia shorn of the territories it conquered under the Tsars as an unnatural entity and historical injustice. In this regard, his 2012 presidential campaign made a point of conveying his dismay over the dissolution of the USSR. For instance, in response to a question from a pensioner expressing nostalgia for the Soviet Union, Putin recounted the following episode: "I had just returned from [five years stationed in East Germany] and I was shocked to see what was going on in the country. One day I went to a car repair shop to replace a flat tire and the mechanics asked me, 'are you for the Union or for Russia?' I couldn't believe my ears. I said to them: 'Is there really a difference? They just have different names. The USSR is Russia, a large Russia.'"<sup>111</sup>

Putin's Valdai address, on the other hand, makes clear that the motives behind the EEU go beyond economic growth, geopolitics, and imperial nostalgia. After asserting that "close integration with our neighbors is our absolute priority," the president explains that "[t]he future Eurasian Economic Union...is not just a collection of mutually beneficial agreements. The Eurasian Union is a project aimed at preserving the identity of nations, the identity of the historic Eurasian area, in a new century and a new world."<sup>112</sup> Alexander Lukin elaborates on the contents

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<sup>108</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, "The Maidan and Beyond: The Russia Factor," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 2014), p. 76.

<sup>109</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 262.

<sup>110</sup> Andrej Krickovic, "Imperial Nostalgia or Prudent Geopolitics: Russia's Efforts to Reintegrate the Post-Soviet Space," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (2014), p. 513.

<sup>111</sup> "Osobaya zabota" [Special Concern], *Vesti nedeli*, November 20, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> "Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai,'" p. 8.

of the identity that the Eurasian Union is intended to preserve. “[T]aking post-Soviet integration to a new level raises the question of what deeper values would lie at its foundation,” he writes. “If the countries of Europe united to champion the values of democracy, human rights, and economic cooperation, then a Eurasian Union must stand for its own ideals, too.” A core element of the Kremlin’s answer to this question, according to Lukin, is morality derived from religion: “Religious traditionalists see euthanasia, homosexuality, and other practices that the New Testament repeatedly condemns as representing not progress but a regression to pagan times. Viewed through this lens, Western society is more than imperfect; it is the very center of sin.”<sup>113</sup> Dmitry Adamsky draws the same connection. Since 2010, he writes, “Putin’s religious-ideological-philosophical views seem to have matured and become integrated into his geopolitical vision and policy choices....Faith and religion have manifested themselves on the battlefields and shaped the foreign policy course, both in Ukraine and in the Middle East.”<sup>114</sup>

#### *Summary of 2011-2014*

Whereas Western-Russian relations soured during both the 1990s and the first decade of Putin’s rule due to the interaction of various Western policies with Russia’s domestic evolution and foreign-policy preferences, the main additional drivers of Russian estrangement to appear during the first two years of Putin’s third term were internal to Russia. As is displayed in Table 1, mass anti-government protests heightened the Kremlin’s long-standing fears that an American-directed “color revolution” might spread to Russia. In addition, the president’s conversion to a worldview that conceptualizes Russia as a distinct civilization, one that is ethically and spiritually superior to that of the West, put a definitive end to Moscow’s efforts to

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<sup>113</sup> Alexander Lukin, “What the Kremlin is Thinking: Putin’s Vision for Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (July/August 2014), pp. 91-92. See also his “Eurasian Integration and the Clash of Values,” *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (June-July 2014), p. 54, where he describes economic considerations as “secondary” to this cultural agenda in the motivation behind the creation of the Eurasian Union.

<sup>114</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, “Russian Orthodox Church and Nuclear Command and Control: A Hypothesis,” *Security Studies*, 28:5 (2019), 1010-1039, at 1020.

join Western clubs and integrate with the “civilized world,” as Putin himself used to call the states that comprise NATO.

### **Kremlin Policy and Putin’s Psyche Intersect in Ukraine**

#### *Regional Integration, Preserving Russia’s Culture, and Opposing Color Revolutions*

Several of the items on the Kremlin’s policy agenda that have been discussed above combined with a longstanding feature of Putin’s personality to produce Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine that began in February 2014. This diverse array of factors has shaped both the formulation of Moscow’s goals and its willingness to bear the costs of such a policy.

In regard to its goals, the Putin government quite naturally regards Ukraine, the second most populous and second largest economy among the former Soviet republics, as crucial to the achievement of the geopolitical and cultural goals embodied in its project for Eurasian integration.<sup>115</sup> In fact, on the basis of interviews with foreign policy experts in Moscow, Tsygankov even asserts that “[m]any in the Kremlin perceive the connection to Ukraine as the last pillar of Russia’s stability and power that could not be undermined if Russia were to survive and preserve its sovereignty, independence, and authentic political culture.”<sup>116</sup> Hence, as was the case a decade earlier, Moscow became heavily involved in Ukrainian politics in 2013 in an effort to convince Kiev to halt its steps toward integration with the EU. In addition to frequent visits by the president, “Russia imposed trade sanctions on Ukraine, first by cutting off imports of confectionary products, fruit, vegetables and poultry....For several days the next month, the Russian authorities applied extensive customs checks to all Ukrainian imports, all but totally blocking them.” In addition, Moscow promised to purchase \$15 billion worth of Ukrainian

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<sup>115</sup> See Fiona Hill, “How Putin’s World View Shapes Russian Foreign Policy,” pp. 51-52 in David Cadier and Margot Light, eds., *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>116</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand: The Sources of Russia’s Ukraine Policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2015), p. 288.

government bonds and to cut the price of natural gas by a third.<sup>117</sup> Such inducements proved effective. As Trenin writes, “Yanukovich’s suspension of the EU association process in the fall of 2013 was hailed by many commentators as a major victory over the EU and the West; it would result in the emerging Eurasian Union, with Ukraine as part of it, reaching a critical mass of 200 million residents.”<sup>118</sup>

The Maidan protests of 2013-14, President Yanukovich’s flight from the capital, and his ouster by parliament in February, however, transformed Moscow’s victory into defeat. Moreover, Russian policymakers sincerely regard Ukraine’s mini-revolution as yet another Western effort to bring friendly forces to power in a neighboring state. In a speech given in April 2014, Foreign Minister Lavrov characterized these events as “an attempt by the U.S. and E.U. to bring about the latest ‘color revolution,’ an operation to achieve an unconstitutional change of regime.”<sup>119</sup> Putin’s characterizations are even more accusatory. Fielding questions from journalists in Minsk, for instance, he asserts that “the European Union wanted to conclude the much-discussed [Association] agreements with Ukraine on terms that in my view would have been unfavorable to Ukraine. The previous leadership attempted to fight, to resist this. However, the Western community, as we all know, went down a different path, a violent path—the path of an anti-constitutional coup, an armed seizure of power....”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 118 and 121.

<sup>118</sup> Trenin, *Russia’s Breakout from the Post-Cold War System*, p. 18.

<sup>119</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na otkrytii Global’nogo universitetskogo foruma” [Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov at the Opening of the Global University Forum], April 24, 2014, available at [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru) (date of access: May 27, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> “Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam zasedaniya Vysshego Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soveta” [Answers to Journalists’ Questions after a Meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council], Minsk, April 29, 2014, available at [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru) (date of access: May 2, 2015).

Russia's military operation to seize Crimea (which began immediately after President Yanukovich's ouster<sup>121</sup>), subsequent incitement of separatism in eastern Ukraine, and eventual military participation in that conflict represent the Putin government's response to these perceived violent machinations by the West. They have primarily been designed to signal the Kremlin's severe displeasure with European and American policies toward both Ukraine and Russia. The candid explanations and justifications that Putin has offered at numerous fora make this abundantly clear.

Most notably, in his address to the nation announcing the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation in March 2014, Putin bases his defense of Russia's actions on the history of the West's treatment of post-communist Russia. After castigating the U.S. and Europe for the Kosovo War, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Libyan War, the Color Revolutions, and the Arab Spring, he adds the West's deployment of "an army of militants" in Ukraine to his list of offenses and then expounds on its meaning as follows:

We understand what is going on. We understand that these actions are directed against both Ukraine and Russia as well as against Eurasian integration. And this is at a time when Russia was sincerely striving for dialogue with our colleagues in the West. We are constantly proposing cooperation on all key issues;...we want our relationship to be equal, open and honest. But we have not seen any reciprocal steps. On the contrary, time after time we have been deceived, decisions have been made behind our back, and we have been presented with *fait accompli*. That was the case with the expansion of NATO to the east, with the stationing of military infrastructure near our borders. We were constantly told the same thing over and over again: "Well, this doesn't concern you." Easy for them to say that doesn't concern us. That was the case with the deployment of missile-defense systems....That was the case with endless delays in negotiations over visa issues, and with promises of fair competition and free access to global markets.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The Ukrainian parliament removed Yanukovich from office on February 22. Putin convened a meeting with his chief of staff and the heads of three of Russia's security agencies that very evening, at the end of which he issued the following instruction: "The latest developments in Ukraine force us to begin work on returning Crimea to Russia." "Crimea. The Way Home. Documentary by Andrey Kondrashev," *Rossiia 24*, March 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgI> (date of access: March 21, 2019).

<sup>122</sup> "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii."

A notable feature of these remarks is that Putin describes NATO expansion not as any kind of tangible threat to Russia's territorial integrity or the lives of its citizens but rather—like issues related to the ability of Russian tourists to obtain visas and of manufacturers to export goods—as yet another realm in which Moscow's wishes and desires have been ignored.

A few sentences later the president sums up how Western policy is ultimately to blame for Ukraine's dismemberment:

[Our Western partners] knew perfectly well, after all, that millions of Russians live in both Ukraine and Crimea. They must have lost all feel for politics and awareness of limits not to foresee the full consequences of their actions. Russia found itself in a place from which it could not retreat. *If you bend a spring all the way to its limit, it will at some point snap back forcefully.* One must always remember this. Today it is imperative...to accept an obvious fact: Russia is an independent and active participant in international affairs. Like other countries, it has national interests that must be taken into account and respected.<sup>123</sup>

By analogizing Russia to a spring that has been bent to its physical limits, Putin is communicating as clearly as he can that the annexation of Crimea was meant as both a retaliatory blow and a signal of Russia's resolve not to allow business-as-usual to continue in the future.

### *Protecting Russia's Credibility and Punishing Disrespect*

In this regard, Putin undoubtedly also felt that Russia's—as well as his own personal—credibility were at stake since on at least two prior occasions he had warned Western officials that pursuing integration with Ukraine would have unpleasant consequences. The most well-known of these warnings occurred at NATO's summit in Bucharest in 2008. Zygar describes Putin's animated (and implicitly threatening) admonition as follows: “According to witnesses, at a meeting behind closed doors Putin flew into a rage on the topic of Ukraine. ‘Ukraine is not

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.; italics added. In a speech given to foreign-policy specialists a month later, Foreign Minister Lavrov similarly stresses the previous twenty-five years of Western mistreatment of Russia and employs the same analogy of Russia to a bent spring. See “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vstreche s chlenami Rossiiskogo soveta po mezhdunarodnym delam” [Speech by S.V. Lavrov to Members of the Russian Council on International Affairs], Moscow, June 4, 2014.



even a country,' he told Bush. 'Part of it lies in Eastern Europe, and the other, more significant part was given by us as a gift!' He finished his short speech with these words: 'If Ukraine joins NATO, it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions. It will simply fall apart.'"<sup>124</sup> In addition, the president had issued the same warning in slightly more veiled form two years earlier. In a conversation with Condoleeza Rice in October 2006, he described Western pursuit of political-military integration with either Ukraine or Georgia as "playing with fire" (a prediction that he could make with confidence since he himself intended to serve as the arsonist).<sup>125</sup>

Even beyond the strategic goals of signaling Russia's displeasure and resolve and enhancing its credibility in the future, a feature of Putin's psychological make-up also contributed to his motivation: namely, a lifelong compulsion to engage in violence toward anyone he considers to be behaving in a rude or insulting manner. This character trait can be traced back to his childhood. Putin's closest friend in elementary school (an individual with whom he shared a desk in the early grades), Viktor Borisenko, has provided a vivid portrait of the rambunctious future president in numerous interviews. In addition to recounting risky adventures together (such as running on rooftops and jumping from balconies into windows, etc.)<sup>126</sup>, Borisenko reports that "[e]ven though he was short, he would fight with anyone....If, let's say, someone insulted him in some way, then Volodka would instantly jump on the big guy, scratch him, bite him, rip out clumps of his hair, you name it....If he began to fight, he would work himself up into a frenzy."<sup>127</sup> Putin himself describes his boyhood persona as a "hooligan" and "punk."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men*, pp. 142-43.

<sup>125</sup> Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 172-73

<sup>126</sup> Aleksandr Elisov, "Po sledam prezidenta" [On the President's Trail], *Moskovskii komsomolets*, August 1, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Artyom Kruglov, "Вовочка," *Путинизм как он есть #11*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEQwbJvOCwg&list=PLU5ERRTOxFWQVteyeU5f-b2R5xWq6Vun4&index=12> (date of access: August 4, 2020).

<sup>128</sup> Gevorkyan et al., *Ot pervogo litsa*, p. 19.

Such behavior continued into adolescence. One telling episode from eighth grade has been recounted by another childhood friend: “we were standing at a tram stop, waiting....Two huge drunken men got off [a tram] and started trying to pick a fight with somebody. They were cursing and pushing people around. Vovka calmly handed his bag over to me, and then I saw that he has just sent one of the men flying into a snowbank, face-first....A couple of seconds later [the second man] was lying there next to his buddy.” Putin’s friend then sums up the meaning of this episode as follows: “If there is anything I can say about Vovka, it’s that he never lets bastards and rascals who insult people and bug them get away with it.”<sup>129</sup> Moreover, even after fulfilling his childhood dream of becoming a KGB officer immediately upon graduation from college, Putin continued to mete out street justice when the need arose. In fact, his best friend in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sergei Roldugin, recounts *two* such episodes in Putin’s official “autobiography.” The first of them directly parallels the tram-stop story recounted above.<sup>130</sup> The second episode took place when Putin was in his early thirties and in the middle of elite training for his first foreign assignment. “Once he came up from Moscow for a couple of days and managed to break his arm,” Roldugin recalls. “Someone was bothering him on the metro, so he slugged the jerk. The result was a broken arm. Judo doesn’t teach you how to attack someone, after all.”<sup>131</sup> All of these episodes make clear why in a 2003 interview with Japanese television Putin described himself as “choleric, that is, a person who is rather easily excitable, who is explosive,” as well as why he similarly described himself as “hot-blooded” in a heated conversation with George Bush in the midst of the Russo-Georgian War.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, p. 50. Both “Volodka” and “Vovka” are diminutive forms of “Vladimir.”

<sup>130</sup> Gevorkyan et al., *Ot pervogo litsa*, p. 46.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. Putin practiced judo extensively in his youth, even becoming the city champion of Leningrad in 1976.

<sup>132</sup> “Москва. Кремль. Путин.” [Moscow. Kremlin. Putin.], September 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnmOkNKc3-A>; and quoted in George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 435. It is noteworthy that on the basis of completely different facts about Putin’s upbringing and life history and utilizing a cross-national, large-N methodology, the Leader Risk Index created by Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis “accurately

In his Crimea speech, Putin himself makes clear that he views the events leading up to Yanukovich's ouster as analogous to those that frequently provoked him into action in his youth and early adulthood. Almost immediately after issuing the aforementioned complaints about visas and trade, he asserts that Western states "constantly seek to back us into a corner because we have independent positions, because we defend them, and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And in the case of Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line; they have behaved rudely, irresponsibly, and unprofessionally."<sup>133</sup> Moreover, at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum a month later, Putin emphasizes this aspect of his motivation even more forcefully. Asked by the British moderator about the motives behind Moscow's actions, he adds the EU's negotiating posture regarding Ukraine's accession agreement to his list of complaints about the West's treatment of Russia:

I'll give you a quick overview of the genesis of what has transpired. Ukraine was supposed to sign an association agreement with the EU. In a completely modern and diplomatic manner, we demonstrated that the document as developed, at a minimum, does not correspond to Russian interests in light of our close cooperation with the Ukrainian economy.... We demonstrated on the basis of hard numbers that this document will cause great harm. We proposed—I want to stress this, want to make sure that you hear this—in an absolutely civilized manner to hold discussions with you on these issues and to try to find some solutions.

Then Putin gets to the heart of the matter from his perspective: "What response did we get? That this doesn't concern us. Forgive me, I don't want to offend anyone, but it has been a long time since I have encountered such snobbism."<sup>134</sup> As Myers perceptively notes about the president's

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categorizes Vladimir Putin as in the top 10 percent of leaders most likely to start armed conflicts." See *Why Leaders Fight*, p. 75.

<sup>133</sup> "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii." On how perceived "provocations" of this sort will often elicit "outraged reactions that spur rash, aggressive responses," see Todd Hall, "On Provocation: Outrage, International Relations, and the Franco-Prussian War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1-28.

<sup>134</sup> "Peterburgskii mezhdunarodnyi ekonomicheskii forum" [Petersburg International Economic Forum], May 23, 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21080> (date of access: June 19, 2017). Putin repeats this complaint about rude behavior on the part of the

decision to annex Crimea, “It was as if the political upheaval in Ukraine affected Putin deeply and personally, like a taunt on the schoolyard that forced him to lash out.”<sup>135</sup>

### *Indifference to Western Opprobrium and Sanctions*

In regard to the costs involved in annexing Crimea, the Kremlin has felt so free to undertake military action against Ukraine because it has abandoned the goal of political and cultural integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Rather, Moscow’s ultimate objectives are, as have seen, to preserve Russia’s (purportedly unique and more socially conservative) cultural identity and to constitute the core of a re-assembled federation of Eurasian states. European and American opprobrium regarding Russia’s annexation of Crimea (as well as subsequent intervention in eastern Ukraine) do not pose a threat to either of those objectives. As Myers again correctly notes, “Putin had not miscalculated in his actions against Crimea and later in eastern Ukraine. He simply no longer cared how the West would respond.”<sup>136</sup> Moreover, Putin’s concerns over the bureaucracy’s vulnerability to external manipulation also contributed to his indifference to the West’s reaction. In fact, as Russian news anchors have themselves pointedly noted, Western economic sanctions and travel bans against high-placed government officials actually serve to promote the Kremlin’s project of “nationalizing the elite.”<sup>137</sup>

### *Summary of the Sources of Russian Aggression*

As displayed in Figure 1, eight factors located at multiple levels of analysis jointly propelled the Kremlin to launch a military operation to annex Crimea in late February 2014.

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European Union in his Major Press Conference of 2016 (cited above). Similarly, on the basis of complaints issued by Putin during a closed-door meeting in May 2014, a “senior European official” comments that “Putin’s sense of personal affront in the discussions about Ukraine was very clear.” Quoted in Hill, “How Putin’s World View Shapes Russian Foreign Policy,” p. 54.

<sup>135</sup> Myers, *The New Tsar*, p. 474.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>137</sup> “Sanktsii ES i SShA pomogut Rossii ‘natsionalizirovat’ elity” [EU and US Sanctions Will Help Russia “Nationalize” the Elite], *Vesti*, March 18, 2014, available at [www.vesti.ru](http://www.vesti.ru).

First, at the level of the international system, the EU's Association negotiations with Ukraine threatened to undermine two core items—Moscow's desire to re-integrate the post-Soviet space and its mission to preserve Russia's traditional culture—on the Kremlin's policy agenda. Second, another system-level development, President Yanukovich's removal from office, thwarted Moscow's decade-long effort to prevent popular revolutions in neighboring states. Third, the Kremlin's indifference to Western opprobrium and sanctions eliminated its reluctance to respond to Yanukovich's removal by military means. Fourth, Yanukovich's departure also led Putin to perceive the need to signal Moscow's resolve and preserve his credibility in future strategic interactions. Fifth and also at the individual level of analysis, the EU's exclusion of Russia from the negotiating table activated Putin's proclivity to react with violence to rude or disrespectful behavior (a trait he has possessed since childhood). Overall, the primary purpose of the annexation of Crimea was to send the message that if foreign powers are going to ignore Moscow's wishes and behave so brazenly on the territory of the former Soviet Union (an area where the Kremlin has openly claimed "privileged interests"<sup>138</sup>) and if local actors are going to cooperate with them, then Russia will take its pound of flesh (in the form of the weakening of the Ukrainian state, territory, coastline, accompanying claims on underwater resources, and especially access to a valued naval base in perpetuity) in return.<sup>139</sup>

[Figure 1 around here]

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<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, p. 109.

<sup>139</sup> In this regard, Daniel Treisman attributes the annexation of Crimea to the Kremlin's fear that Ukraine would break its lease of port facilities at Sevastopol, thereby forcing Russia to relocate its Black Sea Fleet. Since the strategic value of Crimea for projecting naval power into the Black Sea is indisputable, it is certainly plausible that this fear represented an important, even if secondary, consideration in the Russian leadership's decision-making. At a minimum, the naval base increased the value of possessing Crimea, thereby contributing to Putin's motivation for seizing the peninsula as an act of punishment of Ukraine. See Treisman, "Crimea: Anatomy of a Decision," in Daniel Treisman, ed., *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2018), pp. 277-297.

In contrast, the Kremlin's own explanations of its motives and justifications of its actions provide no support for the notion that fear of invasion or concern about encirclement played any role in its calculations.<sup>140</sup> In this regard, just three months earlier Putin, after bragging about the deployment of new weapons systems that technologically outstripped foreign analogues, had issued the following confident declaration: "No one should entertain any illusions about possibly attaining military superiority over Russia. We will never allow that to occur.... Our military doctrine combined with various promising new weapon systems that are being added and will continue to be added to our forces allow us, without any question, to guarantee the security of the Russian state."<sup>141</sup> More recently, Putin defiantly replied to a question about Russia's security fears as follows: "We don't fear anything at all. A country with territory like ours, defense capabilities like ours, a population that is prepared to defend its independence, its sovereignty like ours—such a country is not to be found everywhere....[T]his gives us confidence in our ability to feel secure."<sup>142</sup> Rather than as a security threat, both the president's key speeches and his impromptu remarks frame Western policy toward Ukraine as a source of irritation for reasons related to respect and influence.<sup>143</sup> *Anger over the disregard shown to its desires and the thwarting of its plans lies at the core of Russian aggression against Ukraine, not fear.*<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> In "What the Kremlin Is Thinking," Lukin similarly fails to attribute to the Kremlin any concerns about invasion from the West or Ukraine serving as a security buffer.

<sup>141</sup> "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'noy Sobotraniiyu" (2013).

<sup>142</sup> "Заседание дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»" [Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club], October 18, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848> (date of access: January 13, 2019).

<sup>143</sup> On the importance of respect to Putin, see Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, pp. 30-35 and 173-79. On the general point that loss of status and influence (and resulting blows to national pride) were the primary drivers of Western-Russian conflict throughout the post-communist period, see also Marten, "NATO Enlargement."

<sup>144</sup> Gerard Toal similarly stresses emotions—in particular, "righteous indignation mixed with feelings of protection, pride, and glory"—in his interpretation of the Kremlin's motives but views that indignation as arising primarily from a larger Russian attachment to the territories and peoples being contested as opposed to Putin's general feelings about disrespectful behavior. As is hopefully clear, I certainly do not dispute the validity of Toal's insightful analyses. Rather, my interpretation complements them by stressing yet other sources of Kremlin anger. See his *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially pp. 32-33 and chap. 6.

## Conclusions

A prominent body of opinion lays the blame for both recent discord in Western-Russian relations and Moscow's military aggression against Ukraine squarely on Western policymakers. Their central mistake over the last twenty-plus years, according to this point of view, has been NATO's policy of accepting new members from among the Soviet Union's former satellites and even constituent republics, thereby generating feelings of military vulnerability among Russian elites. Ukraine's integration into Western military structures, the argument continues, would mean the loss of a buffer against invasion that Moscow quite naturally regards as unacceptable. The analyses presented above of both the sources of Russian estrangement from the West and the motives behind the Kremlin's policies toward Ukraine, however, cast serious doubt on any interpretation that centers solely or even primarily on military insecurity of any kind. This is the case for at least five sets of reasons.

First, security-based explanations privilege one causal factor (NATO expansion) when in fact a multitude of variables both internal and external to Russia constitute major contributors to either Russia's alienation from the West (twelve by my count; see Table 1) or its aggression against Ukraine (eight make my list; see Figure 1). In this regard, other Western policies that have greatly angered and estranged Russia's rulers include: NATO's anti-Serbian military intervention in Bosnia; its aerial bombardment of Yugoslavia and subsequent occupation of Kosovo; regular criticism of flaws in Russia's putatively democratic institutions; and the promotion of democratic change in other post-Soviet states (as well as the Middle East). Moreover, the violence and aggression committed against Russia's fellow Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans have probably stoked Russian fears and apprehensions of Western military power to a greater extent than has the mere inclusion of various small states into an avowedly defensive alliance system.

Second, explanations of the annexation of Crimea based in military insecurity do not correspond to what Russian policymakers themselves say about their motives. Instead of

preserving Ukraine as a security buffer or escaping from any kind of perceived encirclement, their public and seemingly sincere justifications have emphasized the following non-security-related objectives: preventing popular revolutions in neighboring states; preventing Russia's traditional Orthodox identity and conservative social values from being eroded by Western atheism and moral decadence; the reintegration of as much of the former Soviet Union as possible as a means of both preserving Russia's great power status and safeguarding its culture; and signaling to a disrespectful West Moscow's severe displeasure with its conduct and resolve not to allow its desires to be ignored in the future. In this regard, security-based interpretations ignore the extent to which the non-ideological pragmatist of Putin's initial years in office has evolved into a civilizationist with a historic mission to fulfill.

Third, security-based explanations poorly account for the timing of either Western-Russian discord or Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Western-Russian relations began to sour at the very start of the post-communist period—that is, well before NATO began publicly to debate expansion. Even more tellingly, NATO's intent to expand was announced as early as 1994 and expansion was certified diplomatically in 1997. Nonetheless, in the face of nearly identical circumstances and security threats as existed in 2014, the Westernizing liberal democrats who dominated policymaking in the 1990s—and even Putin himself during the first half-dozen years of his presidency—made very different foreign-policy choices than have Russia's rulers more recently. Contrary to the alleged laws of geopolitics, it is clearly the case that Russia's reaction to the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 would have been very different had Boris Yeltsin still been Russia's commander-in-chief.<sup>145</sup>

Fourth, security-based explanations generally portray Kremlin decision-making as the product of cold, passionless, and rational calculations on a geopolitical chessboard, yet Putin's personality and individual psychology have played a role in generating both Western-Russian

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<sup>145</sup> In this regard, former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev has strongly condemned the Kremlin's actions against Ukraine and has called for Western mobilization to “restor[e] its territorial integrity [and] rein in the Kremlin's aggressive impulses.” See his “Russia's Coming Regime Change,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2015.



discord and Moscow's bellicose reaction to the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 in at least three ways. As his frequent expressions of irritation and anger make clear, the president's extreme intolerance of criticism has been a source of diplomatic conflict with both the U.S. and Europe. In addition, his emotional anti-Americanism has frequently led him to misinterpret Western conduct as far more malign and hostile than it actually is. And finally, the president's proclivity to react with violence to rude behavior contributed to his decision strike back at the West by annexing Crimea. In this regard, Putin himself stresses that the EU's refusal to include Russia in its accession negotiations with Ukraine—its “snobbism”—represents the “genesis” of Ukraine's loss of Crimea. If his sense of personal affront did not play a sizeable role in his decision to seize Ukrainian territory, then it is difficult to understand why he himself would repeatedly state that it did. After all, rudeness and snobbism are not widely recognized as genuine threats to national security.

Fifth and finally, interpretations of Russian aggression as driven primarily by military insecurity falter when it comes to connecting means to ends: Crimea does not lie on a logical Western invasion route; and the quite predictable impact of Russia's conduct on Ukrainian public opinion and threat-perceptions has been to worsen Russia's long-term security along its Western border, not enhance it. In addition, there is the very issue of whether a major conventional invasion of Russia from a very demilitarized Europe—not to mention in the nuclear age—is even conceivable. Due to its possession of a large nuclear arsenal and second-strike capability, Russian security against anything remotely comparable to the Napoleonic or Nazi invasions would seem to be guaranteed well into the future—something that Putin clearly understands and openly acknowledges.

In sum, the view that Russia's seizure of Crimea and incitement of separatism in Donetsk and Lugansk were primarily designed to preserve Ukraine as a buffer state or allow Russia to escape a perceived encirclement does not withstand scrutiny from many angles. Interpretations that employ such metaphors create fundamental misunderstandings of the motives behind Kremlin policy. In this regard, due to Russia's long tradition of autocratic rule, its leaders enjoy

high levels of discretion to ignore genuine threats to the homeland—or to create them unnecessarily. And indeed, in a system with weak or non-existent institutional constraints, Vladimir Putin's beliefs, emotions, and psychological idiosyncrasies have played much larger roles in generating Western-Russian discord and shaping the international politics of Eurasia than have systemic pressures.

Figure 1. The Sources of Russian Aggression against Ukraine by Level of Analysis

