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Russia's War in Ukraine—The Domestic, Neighborhood and Foreign Policy Nexus

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Abstract

Russia's military intervention will change Russia itself and its relations towards post-Soviet countries. It will undermine Putin's great power ambitions and role as a hegemon in its post-Soviet neighborhood. Further securitization and isolation will weaken Russia's ability to modernize. This will further fuel the disintegration of the post-Soviet space and weaken Russia's role in a multipolar world.

The End of Imperial Russia

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine is a turning point that not only puts an end to the European security order negotiated after the end of the Cold War but will also fundamentally change post-Soviet Russia itself. Russian President Vladimir Putin's goals of ousting the United States from Europe, securing zones of influence, and creating buffer zones around Russia are crystallized in the breakup of Ukraine as a state. Ultimately, this is about destroying a state that is closely connected to Russia historically, culturally, politically, and socially. This has implications for Russia's identity as an empire, its role in the post-Soviet region and challenges the *Russkii Mir* concept, Vladimir Putin's imperial project. The Russian army is bombing cities where people speak Russian, have (partly) Russian roots and feel (or felt) close to Russia. It undermines Putin's great power ambitions, which are based on Russia's role as the hegemon in the post-Soviet region. Russian leadership is not protecting "its people" but destroying them. Putin's Russia is losing any legitimacy as the patron of the Russian-speaking world. This has consequences for how other post-Soviet countries will see Russia, meaning it appears even more as a threat to their sovereignty, way of life and physical survival.

A Sovereign and Isolated Russia

Simultaneously, Russia itself is undergoing fundamental changes, with long-term domestic consequences. It is becoming more isolated, repressive, rather totalitarian, and backward and less able to modernize. Since Putin became president in 2000, the basis for welfare was Russia's integration into the global economy and the export of resources. As a reaction to Russia's invasion, Western countries decided on the most comprehensive economic sanctions for such a large state as Russia, only comparable with those toward Iran and North Korea. The isolation from the global economic and financial system calls Russia's economic model into question and will fundamentally change the Russian way of life. The consequence will be a Russia that seeks to control its locality by

military means: a mobilization regime, both internally and externally. For the Putin system, it means that it will have fewer resources to distribute internally. However, corruption and access to resources are crucial for loyalty to the political system and Putin himself. The president must decide who obtains what from fewer resources. The vulnerability of the elite has already increased in recent years, and no one is safe in the system, not even close allies of President Putin. It will result in cleansing from state and society all actors who are not loyal to the system, particularly the more liberal part.

Already because of Western sanctions against Russia after 2014, there was a trend toward more sovereignty in Russia. Limiting Russia's foreign debt to less than 20 percent of GDP, growing foreign reserves to €550 billion by the outbreak of war, and reducing spending policies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to a conservative amount less than 3 percent of the GDP were all linked to the goal of making Russia less vulnerable to foreign influence. At the same time, after the mass demonstrations in large Russian cities in 2011/12, the state started to increasingly control the internet and tried to create a sovereign Runet. All this was about preparing for a major conflict with the West. This policy rendered the liberal economic elites increasingly less able to act independently or to counteract the president regarding a sustainable economic policy. Instead, they became vicarious agents of the regime, securing the economic resilience of the state in preparation for a conflict with the West. Those liberal elites who stay in the system, such as Central Bank President Elvira Nabiullina, will now have to manage the deficit and the decoupling of the Russian economy, banking and financial sector from the global system. It seems to be the case that the elite is adapting to the situation rather than challenging the president.

Securitization and Militarization of Politics and Society

All of this is accompanied by the further securitization and militarization of state and society in Russia. In-

ingly, military and security actors with security thinking will further dominate Russian politics, and they will come close to their goal of a Russia less vulnerable to external influence and more inclined toward autarky. This trend started with Putin's third term as president in 2012 and accelerated with the Western sanctions that came after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. It will now become the main pattern of Russian politics. Western sanctions, despite their importance to put the regime under pressure to stop the war in Ukraine, help to further isolate Russia, consolidate the society around Putin and to reinforce the security logic in Russian politics. This will also be the trend with a policy that brings Russian officials' money back to Russia to restrict their travel activities and to render the economy independent of foreign influence.

The Russian National Guard, formed in 2016 with up to 400,000 troops headed by Putin's close ally Victor Solotov, will be ready to resist any internal uprising. Their soldiers earn higher salaries than those in the military or other security forces, and they will be ready to protect Putin and his close allies. Therefore, a Belarus scenario is likely for Russia, where funding for the security forces will remain, while for the rest of the country, it will decline. The main role of the national guard is to repress those parts of society who do not agree with the policies that have led to the decline of Russia and Russian welfare. Cleansing the system of liberal elites is a logical step, as we have seen with the actions against economic advisor Anatoly Chubais, who left the country recently. Putin will try to keep the liberal elites in key economic positions, but they will have to adapt to the new situation and will have to help manage the deficit and soften the impact of sanctions. They have no say in the key decisions of the regime; their main task is to reduce the impact of the decisions of others on Russian state and society. At the same time, they will be under close monitoring by the security elites if they make any mistake or show a sign of disloyalty. Their room to maneuver will shrink even further, and Siloviki will put them under further attacks.

Putin's attack on the "fifth column" of all people inside of Russia whom he defines as alien or enemies of the country is entering the next stage after 2014.¹ It is a war against all Russian people who do not agree with the invasion of Ukraine and further isolation of Russia. In this regard, it resembles the Soviet Union of the 1930s more than that of the 1980s. One month after the war in Ukraine started, approximately 240,000 Russians have left the country. This is the best educated and progressive part of society, many of whom specialize in areas such as culture, art, the IT sector and the

business community. According to the Russian Association for Electronic Communication, up to 70,000 IT experts left the country in March 2022. More will follow. This brain drain has a major impact on the Russian economy and society. This will lead to the dominance of the more conservative and nationalistic part of society, which is willing to accept more isolationist measures. Along this line, the approval rating of President Putin has grown to more than 70 percent (according to state polling agencies), and a huge wave of patriotism is going through the country with more than 80 percent of support for the war according to Levanda Center. At the same time, the appetite for protest is low; what protests exist are rather isolated, and there is no functional opposition anymore, which could have set an alternative paradigm to Putin's "special operation".

Division of Europe

The war in Ukraine will permanently weaken Russia militarily and economically and isolate it internationally. As a result, Moscow will be more heavily reliant on itself and other post-Soviet countries without being able to make attractive economic, political, or social propositions. It is to be expected that Russia will depend more on China technologically and will have to offer China discounted prices for natural resources. The weaker and more isolated Russia becomes, the more aggressively the regime might react at home and in its neighborhood. With the current Western sanctions, the Eurasian Economic Union and its institutions are under pressure, and none of the other member states will have an interest in coming under Western sanctions. This puts the functioning of the institution and its future into question. Russian President Putin's goal of economically integrating post-Soviet states is becoming even less likely. At the same time, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) can increase its importance and might become a key instrument of Russia and other authoritarian states to keep their ruling elites in power. As we have seen in Kazakhstan with the reaction to mass demonstration in January 2022, Russia and other CSTO members are willing to intervene to stop any kind of social uprising. At the same time, any post-Soviet country will be very wary after the war in Ukraine about inviting Russian troops into their country.

With the goal of securing its traditional sphere of influence through military means, Russian leadership has successfully alienated other post-Soviet countries and societies. Possible steps to integrate disputed regions such as South Ossetia or Transnistria into the Russian state, as it is again now discussed, will further change Moscow's relations with their mother states. With the

1 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996>

war in Ukraine, Russian leadership shifted to a different paradigm of politics toward post-Soviet countries. A new iron curtain creates countries that again lose their sovereignty. Outside of NATO territory, there are no security guarantees anymore in Europe. Every country can become a victim of a Russian military attack. This will further fuel the disintegration of the post-Soviet space because Russia is not able to economically integrate former Soviet states and it lacks the soft power to

attract new members. Russia's weakness and aggressive policy will therefore create gray zones of instability, from which more people will have an interest to escape. This policy has negative effects on Russia itself, where a military and security logic will further drive its economic policies and the relations between state and society. All this will further isolate Russia globally and weaken its role in a multipolar world. The pattern of the decline of the Soviet Union seems destined to repeat.

About the Author

Dr *Stefan Meister* is head of the Program for International Order and Democracy at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin. Before, he was director of the South Caucasus office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. His research focuses on Russian foreign, domestic and security policy, Russia's policy towards post-Soviet countries, Russian disinformation and the interaction of Russia and China regionally and globally.

ANALYSIS

The Planned War

By Heiko Pleines (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

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Abstract

In retrospect, it is clear that a close circle around Russian President Vladimir Putin has been systematically preparing for the current war in Ukraine for years. It is not clear from the outside when exactly the decision to attack Ukraine was made. However, during his first term in office, Putin made it clear that he was concerned with restoring Russia's national greatness and that, from his point of view, Ukraine belonged to Russia, and by 2014 at the latest, Russia began to prepare for an escalating conflict with the West. At the time, it was not apparent that Putin would be prepared to start a war of aggression, and there was no evidence of such plans. A new assessment of Russia's preparations for the current war is therefore not intended to be smarter in retrospect but to enable a better understanding of Russian politics.

Speeches

Experts who studied Putin's speeches and his discernible political position behind them emphasized early on the importance Putin attached to strengthening the state and national unity. In this sense, economic policy, social policy and the modernization of the country were understood from the outset not as ends in themselves but as means to strengthen the nation. Already in 2001, Archie Brown highlighted that Putin stated, "I was a pure and utterly successful product of Soviet patriotic education".

In Putin's State of the Nation Address in April 2005, he made the much-quoted statement: "Above all, we must admit that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people it has become a real drama." At the

same time, the Russian government began to establish a unified view of Russian history, culminating in the creation of a "Commission under the President of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russian Interests" in 2009.

At the NATO summit in 2008, Putin declared that Ukraine was "not a real country". In April 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, in the popular televised presidential "hotline" session with callers from across the country, he explained that parts of Ukraine are actually part of Russia, not Ukraine. In Putin's enumeration, these parts, increasingly referred to in Russia as "New Russia," include five Ukrainian regions all the way to Ukraine's western border.

The last step toward a claim on the whole of Ukraine was made in Putin's essay, "On the Historical Unity of