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*Tomasz Stepniewski\**

## **Conflict as a Strategic Imperative in Putin’s Political Agenda: A Fundamental Component of Russia’s Strategic Framework**

### **Abstract**

This paper delves into the nuanced motivations underpinning Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, centered on preserving stability for Putin’s regime. Examining the intricate interplay between domestic and foreign concerns, the invasion emerged as a pivotal strategy to bolster domestic support and reinforce Russian leadership. Post-2012, Putin, in consolidating power through internal policies and external assertiveness, responded to catalysts – opposition protests in 2012 and Ukraine’s “Revolution of Dignity” in 2014. State-controlled media played a crucial role in shaping narratives, framing the invasion as a defense against alleged Western “imperialist” threats. The paper scrutinises Putin’s strategic evolution, highlighting the convergence of historical events, opposition dynamics, and media narratives in shaping the rationale behind Russia’s impactful incursion into Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, Putin’s Russia, Central Europe, EU Eastern Neighbourhood, Security

### **Introduction**

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2014 was influenced by various factors, with one of the primary motivations being the preservation of stability for Vladimir Putin’s regime. Undoubtedly, the Russian incursion into Ukraine sought to garner domestic support and fortify the

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leadership of the state. Russia's foreign policy, historically intertwined with its domestic affairs, has intermittently evolved into a tool for mass mobilisation during certain periods of Russian history.

Since reclaiming the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has sought to consolidate his position domestically through restrictive internal policies and assertive external strategies. Two key factors prompted Putin to fortify his power and propagate the so-called "Russian world" doctrine in the post-Soviet space in a more radical and uncompromising manner. The first factor was the opposition protests in 2012, a citizen-led response to the presidential elections perceived as having been rigged in Putin's favour. Concerns about a potential recurrence of the Orange Revolution in Moscow, even though the Russian protests were unsuccessful, justified Putin's fears. The second factor was the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine in 2014, termed by the Russian media as another "coup," resulting in the removal of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, who subsequently sought refuge in Russia.

Simultaneously, state-controlled Russian media propagated narratives emphasising the need to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine, while underscoring the perceived threat of the West and its "imperialist" policies. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin has framed his actions as an attempt to shield ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from alleged "fascism" and "hybrid warfare" orchestrated by the West. The Kremlin portrayed Ukraine as a Western tool seeking to undermine Russia. Through this narrative, the Kremlin effectively galvanised Russian society around the war in Ukraine, sustaining support for the government (wider: Stepniewski, 2011; 2016; 2021).

According to Levada Centre polls (Levada-Centre, 2023), Putin's popularity reached an impressive 82% in March 2023, with only 15% of respondents expressing an unfavourable opinion of the president. This marked a notable increase from September 2022 when Putin's popularity stood at 77%, with 21% holding a negative view of his actions. The surge in support occurred after the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkov and the announcement of mobilisation in Russia. Subsequently, Putin's popularity further rose to 79% in October and November, stabilising at 81% in December. The current "patriotic surge" mirrors the boost in ratings Putin experienced after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the preceding years, from 2020 to 2021, his popularity fluctuated between 61% and 69%, only surpassing the 70% mark when rhetoric intensifying confrontation with the West emerged in early 2022.

In this context, it is evident that Putin's neo-totalitarianism has gained strength through the war in Ukraine and the accompanying propaganda.

The Kremlin strategically utilised the conflict to consolidate power within Russia and enhance its influence over the Russian populace.

### **The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the New International Situation of the Russian Federation and Other Post-Soviet States**

To gain a more profound comprehension of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Serhii Plokyh's book, "The Last Empire", proves to be an invaluable resource, providing intricate insights into the multifaceted factors that led to the demise of the Soviet Union, thereby reshaping the trajectory of global history (see: Plokyh, 2015). Plokyh meticulously underscores the profound economic challenges that besieged the Soviet Union, serving as a pivotal backdrop to its eventual dissolution. The inherent inefficiencies embedded in the planned economy, exacerbated by an overly bureaucratic apparatus and stagnating industrial sectors, rendered the Soviet economic model increasingly unsustainable. Plokyh's narrative accentuates the structural weaknesses inherent in the Soviet system, struggling to adapt to the intricacies of the global economic landscape.

Furthermore, Plokyh delves into the pivotal role of nationalism and ethnic tensions as potent catalysts for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Various nationalities within the Soviet Union, long suppressed beneath a veneer of internationalism, began to assert their distinct identities. Plokyh's exploration, encompassing events such as the struggle for Baltic independence and the upsurge of nationalism in Ukraine, unveils the intricate tapestry of ethnic aspirations that eroded the unity of the Soviet state. Plokyh critically examines the reforms initiated by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, particularly perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness). Although these reforms aimed to revitalise the Soviet system, they inadvertently expedited its unravelling. Plokyh elucidates how Gorbachev's attempts at political openness opened a Pandora's box of social and political forces that ultimately contributed to the disintegration of the centralised Soviet authority.

Navigating the intricate political struggles within the Soviet leadership, Plokyh highlights the emergence of Boris Yeltsin as a pivotal figure. Yeltsin's ascendancy marked a paradigm shift in power dynamics, challenging the traditional hierarchies of the Soviet state. Plokyh's examination of Yeltsin's role in the dissolution process underscores the agency of key political actors in shaping the course of events. Serhii Plokyh's "The Last Empire" provides a nuanced understanding of the collapse of the Soviet Union, intricately weaving

together economic, ethnic, and political threads that unravelled the once-mighty superpower. Through Plokhy's analytical lens, this book illuminates the complexity of historical forces that converged to reshape the geopolitical landscape, leaving an indelible mark on the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century world order.

In summary, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a seismic shift in the geopolitical landscape, leading to the emergence of independent states on the post-Soviet terrain. This dissolution was a culmination of various internal and external factors, including economic inefficiencies, political stagnation, and nationalist movements within the constituent republics. The policies of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, such as perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), aimed at revitalising the Soviet system, inadvertently catalysed the unraveling of the centralised control that had characterised the Soviet state. The Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – were among the first to declare independence, triggering a cascade effect as other republics swiftly followed suit. The Belavezha Accords, signed by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in December 1991, formalised the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The emergence of these new states brought forth significant challenges, including the need to construct national identities, establish governance structures, and navigate complex economic transitions.

The post-Soviet landscape witnessed the birth of 15 independent countries, each grappling with the complexities of nation-building. These states faced the formidable task of developing their political, economic, and social systems while navigating the legacies of Soviet rule. The newly independent nations embarked on diverse trajectories, with some embracing market-oriented reforms and democratic governance, while others faced protracted periods of political instability and economic hardship. The dissolution also engendered geopolitical tensions, particularly in regions such as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, where territorial disputes and ethnic conflicts erupted. The transition to independence brought about complex relationships with Russia, the successor state to the Soviet Union, ranging from cooperative partnerships to contested assertions of influence. The post-Soviet era thus represents a dynamic and evolving chapter in global history, marked by the resilience and challenges faced by the newly sovereign nations in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse.

## **Russia's Endeavour to Revise the International Order**

The geopolitical landscape, after the collapse of the bipolar system, has witnessed a transformative reconfiguration catalysed by the international revisionism undertaken by the Russian Federation. As posited by Adam D. Rotfeld, the dispersal and polycentrism of power relations in international affairs have become discernible features in this evolving paradigm. Prevailing rules and norms, originating from an antiquated international context, no longer adequately capture the nuanced contemporary state of affairs (Rotfeld, 2014). This necessitates a recalibration of these norms to accommodate emerging powers, thereby addressing the inherent incongruities in the extant international framework. This transformative milieu has engendered a conspicuous vacuum, serving as a focal point for nascent powers seeking to assert themselves on the global stage. Consequently, Russia has embarked on a unilateral endeavour to redefine parameters within the international arena, exemplified by its proposition of two treaties to the United States and NATO in December 2021. These proposals, met with rejection by the Western powers, aimed to delineate Russia's "natural sphere of influence" under international law. The coercive elements of these propositions sought to dissuade NATO expansion eastward, while concurrently categorising NATO members into distinct, "old" and "new" groups, notably including Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland. Despite the Kremlin's ostensible adherence to international legal instruments, the underlying motivations were fundamentally instrumental, viewing the system of international law as a procedural framework devoid of inherent axiology or substantive significance. This apparent, "new game without rules" illustrates Russia's endeavour to subject Ukraine to the principles of the so-called "Russian world".

The genesis of the Ukrainian crisis in the autumn of 2013, marked by the Euromaidan protests (or the "Revolution of Dignity"), heralded geopolitical transformations in Eastern Europe and indirectly led to an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. To comprehend the roots of the Ukrainian crisis fully, an examination of the evolution in Russia's foreign policy and its conceptualisation of international relations in recent years is imperative. According to Richard Sakwa, Russia's foreign policy has undergone a discernible shift toward revisionism, resulting in the confrontation witnessed in Ukraine – a confrontation that, as of 2023, has evolved into a broader standoff between Russia and the United States, extending across the Western sphere (Sakwa, 2015). Sakwa identifies four primary factors contributing to this shift in Russia's policy. Firstly, there

was a gradual deterioration of relations with the European Union. Secondly, the progressive dismantling of the pan-European security system deprived Russia of its role as an autonomous partner in cooperation with the West. Thirdly, Russia, alongside rising powers like China, contested American assertions of “exceptionalism” and global leadership. Lastly, Russian revisionism was catalysed by the perceived manipulation of democracy promotion, distinct from the practical implementation of democratic principles. According to Sakwa, Russia contends that the West uses the promotion of democracy as a pretext to advance its strategic objectives. The discord between Russia and the European Union encompasses various domains, such as competition for influence in the immediate neighbourhood, considerations related to energy security, economic cooperation norms, and issues pertaining to democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. The positioning of Ukraine within the competition among superpowers for the future power balance in this region remains a salient point of inquiry. Moreover, the extent to which Russia’s revisionist actions, in collaboration with other powers such as China, through conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, have contributed to the emergence of a post-unipolar international order is a facet that warrants scholarly consideration.

Expanding upon this analysis, several key themes emerge in understanding the dynamics of Russia’s revisionist stance and its repercussions on the international order. These include the impact on regional security, the role of energy geopolitics in shaping alliances and conflicts, the influence of historical narratives on foreign policy decisions, and the evolving strategies of the West in responding to Russia’s revisionism. Each of these dimensions provides a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

### **The Significance of Ukraine in Shaping the International Positioning of the Russian Federation**

The significance of Ukraine in shaping the international positioning of the Russian Federation is underscored by the primary objective of the geostrategic agenda pursued by the Russian Federation under President Putin’s administration – namely, the restoration of influence in its peripheries, which had been diminished following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Over a span of three decades since the USSR’s dissolution, Russia has persistently sought to maintain a dominant role in Eastern Europe and the broader Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This pursuit involves diverse means, including military power, exemplified by the Georgian-Russian conflict in August 2008 and the prolonged conflict

with Ukraine since 2014. The overarching ambition guiding these actions is the reintegration of the post-Soviet space and the consolidation of Russia's leadership in the region. This superpower status is envisioned to confer exclusive control over the post-Soviet sphere, positioning Russia as a pivotal global power within the envisioned multipolar international order. Consequently, Eastern Europe emerges as the natural operational domain for Russia, symbolising the historical sphere of vital interests, exclusive influence, and the focal point of the Kremlin's reintegration policy.

Moreover, the Russian Federation advocates a distinct definition of integration, deviating from the Western paradigm. This involves a comprehensive reinstatement of Russian dominance in the CIS region, accompanied by the deepening of strategic dependencies, particularly in economics and regional security. This approach markedly differs from the bottom-up integration observed within the European Union, characterised by shared values, voluntary participation, and reciprocal multilateral benefits. The pronounced emphasis on the post-Soviet space in Russia's foreign policy is rooted not only in geopolitical considerations but also in cultural and historical factors, shared security interests, economic ties, and the imperative to attend to the Russian diaspora. Prestige considerations further underscore Russia's aspiration to serve as a bridge between Asia and Europe. Eastern Europe, as a constant element of Russia's cultural identity, reflects the conviction among Russians regarding the indivisibility of designated territories, encompassing Great, Little, and White Russia, and Transcaucasia – a cultural ecumene distinct from its Western counterpart. The significance of this region thus permeates the core of Russian identity in its evolving spatial context. Ukraine and Belarus, positioned as Russia's natural buffer between the East and the West, are perceived as guarantors of its superpower status, constituting integral components of Greater Russia from linguistic, ethnocultural, and historical perspectives. Consequently, Russia's policy towards the so-called "near abroad" perpetuates the steadfast belief that the independence of these nations is a transient phenomenon.

### **War as an Inherent Element of Vladimir Putin's Project**

The contemporary Russian regime, rather than primarily relying on ideology, is in the process of transforming its propaganda patterns into a cohesive ideological platform. As Sergei Medvedev aptly noted, "In general, war is the basic ontology of Russian society, the optics of Russians." This perspective frames the centuries-long conflict between the repressive colonial state and a population perceived by authorities as



an inexhaustible natural resource, forming the new foundation of Russian identity (Medvedev, 2022).

Under Putin's leadership, war has evolved into a personified Russian concept that lacks a permanent canonical status but is intuitively grasped by the authorities and at least a segment of the population. Aggressive Russian nationalism, coupled with imperialism, Russian messianism, and the notion of a so-called "special way", has been strategically employed to justify Russia's role as a superpower and cultivate a sense of Russian superiority.

Arguably, war and imperialism have been integral components of Putin's vision for the Russian state from its inception. Rooted in the internal dynamics of Putin's system, this imperial drive simultaneously revitalises the enduring patriarchal model of the Russian state. The current manifestation of empire is evident in the seemingly purposeless concept of expansion, serving not only to demonstrate Russia's power but, above all, to maintain the stability of the regime. According to Wladislav Surkov, the export of social entropy to foreign territories is crucial for sustaining this stability. He notes, "the Russian state, with its austere and passive political interior, has survived for centuries only because of its constant striving to transcend its own borders (...) continuous expansion is not just one of the ideas, but the true essence of our historical existence" (Surkov 2021).

The pursuit of expansion and annexation of territories is not in opposition to, but rather supported by, mental isolationism. A characteristic manifestation of this isolationism is the metaphysical concept of "Russian space", as pointed out by Nikolai Plotnikov (Plotnikov, 2023, p. 8; see also: Fridrichová, 2023). Recent trends show a departure from referring to Russia as an empire, with authorities leaning towards describing it as a separate civilisation. In 2012, Vladimir Putin propagated the idea that Russia is "a state form of civilisation in which ethnic groups do not matter, and affiliation is defined by common culture and values". This shared culture revolves around "maintaining the dominance of Russian culture", which purportedly faces opposition from "hostile forces", according to Mr Putin.

### **History as a Source and Justification for the Russian War in Ukraine**

In 1995, Russian historian Alexander Yanov introduced the concept of the "Weimar" syndrome in the context of Russia (Yanov, 1995). Three decades ago, he critiqued the Western approach to post-Soviet Russia, emphasising its focus on introducing a free market without a corresponding plan for democracy. Yanov's warning of a potential "Weimar Russia" highlighted

the risk of Russian revanchism, characterised by authoritarianism, anti-Western sentiment, and an anti-democratic stance, potentially giving rise to an aggressive, so-called “red-brown” state amalgamating communist and fascist forces. Present-day Russian society not only harbors post-Soviet resentment, but also manifests the sacralisation of power and the state in mass consciousness, forming the foundation upon which the Putin regime consolidates its rule. In this context, Joseph Stalin becomes a symbol of a potent state and a societal model where individuality yields to the interests of the state.

The concept of power holds particular significance in Russian society, providing the government with a tool to justify its actions. During the initial phase of his rule, Vladimir Putin sought to portray Russia as a superpower, shaping his interpretation of Russian history to emphasise the necessity of forceful modernisation for the restoration of its superpower status. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been framed by Russian media and authorities as an unavoidable response to perceived threats to Russia’s security and interests, employing historical analogies and symbolism. Putin described the invasion as a “historical mission”, drawing parallels with the Soviet Union’s role in World War II to evoke national pride and purpose. The defense of Russian citizens in Ukraine was presented as an imperative rooted in a shared ethnic identity and common heritage between Russia and Ukraine.

Russian media further utilised historical references and symbols to depict the invasion of Ukraine. State television RT, for instance, characterised the intervention as the “liberation” of Ukraine, drawing comparisons with the Soviet Union’s liberation of Europe from Nazi Germany. Under Putin’s rule, a militaristic cult gained momentum, extending beyond political propaganda to become a significant aspect of mass culture. The notion of the “religion of victory” found a place in the collective imagination, framing the war as a return to a battlefield where Soviet values confronted the Nazi threat. This cult provided a consistent template for explaining the meaning and goals of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

According to Andrei Kolesnikov, the regime transformed from the cult of victory in 1945 to a cult centered on war itself, with roots and explanations deeply entwined in history. Historical circumstances, including the ongoing collapse of the Soviet empire, and government-created myths about the lack of Ukrainian statehood and the West’s purported desire to destroy Russia, contribute to the narrative surrounding the current war (Kolesnikov, 2022).

The dominant narrative, propagated by both the Kremlin and Putin, asserts that Ukraine is an integral part of Russia’s history. Putin has never

accepted Ukraine's independence and, in 2021, openly questioned its legitimacy as an independent state, revealing Russia's imperial ambitions. This narrative contends that Ukraine's independence is a recent construct and advocates for its reunification with Russia to restore historical justice and foster regional stability. Often associated with Russian nationalism, this perspective aligns with the concept of a "Russian world" encompassing all Russian-speaking areas and nations.

In 2014, Aleksandr Dugin outlined the ideology of the new Russia, stating, "Russia will either be Russian, that is, Eurasian, that is, the core of the great Russian world, or it will disappear. But then it's better to let it all go away. There is simply no reason to live in a world without Russia" (Dugin, 2014; Liik, 2022). Four years later, Putin echoed a similar sentiment during a conversation about the nuclear threat, emphasising the centrality of Russia in the world order, asking, "Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?".

## **Conclusions**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has brought about a significant shift in the global perception of Central and Eastern European countries, notably Ukraine, concerning international security. Traditionally, debates tended to sideline smaller European nations such as Ukraine, prioritising the influence of superpowers in shaping global security. France and Germany historically viewed Russia as a security guarantor in Eastern Europe and an essential economic partner. Similarly, the United States prioritised partnerships with key nations including Germany and the UK in European security matters. However, the initiation of aggression against Ukraine altered Western political elites' perspective, recognising Ukraine's vital role in the supply chain, strategic location, and the emerging security challenges posed by Russian neo-imperial ambitions.

Poland has notably risen in importance during this period. Beyond offering substantial support to Ukraine, both in humanitarian aid and military assistance, Poland has elevated its regional profile. This was evident in the resolutions adopted at NATO summits in Madrid (June 2022) and Vilnius (July 2023), where the strategic concept underscored Russia as the primary direct threat, calling for a cessation of aggression against Ukraine by Russia and Belarus (Jankowski, Stępniewski, 2022; Polegkyi, Stępniewski, 2020).

An unmistakable feature of Russia's current war in Ukraine is the lack of a justifiable cause. There was no credible threat to Russia or Putin's

regime. Despite the absence of clear political and economic objectives, domestic policy goals, such as reinforcing Putin's image domestically and enhancing Russia's international standing, are discernible. Putin's speeches have consistently portrayed Russia as a victim, framing the West as an aggressor, indicating a lack of a specific civilisational project beyond negating the West.

In summary, several consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine have emerged: 1) a severe deterioration in Russia-West relations; 2) social and cultural divisions within Russia; 3) the mobilisation of Russian society against the West, maintaining Putin's influence; and 4) an attempt to strengthen Russia's international influence, which backfired by accelerating Western unity, increasing fear among former Soviet states, and diminishing Russia's regional influence. The postmodern totalitarian regime in Russia relies on manipulating symbols and narratives instead of traditional repression or censorship. Internationally, the Kremlin leverages foreign policy to bolster domestic power, blending elements like Stalinism, Orthodoxy, Pan-Slavism, and anti-Americanism. However, the current crisis in Russia stems from its failure to address Soviet-era crimes and reflect on that period. The neo-totalitarian regime lacks a coherent ideology, emphasising the creation of political narratives. Government-controlled media disseminate propaganda, portraying Putin as a defender against Western threats and demonising enemies as the source of problems.

The war in Ukraine has instigated fundamental changes: 1) deepening tensions and a reversal of relations between Russia and the West; 2) the revealing of cultural divisions within Russian society; 3) the Kremlin exploiting the conflict to increase influence and weaken independence domestically; and 4) the simultaneous strengthening and isolating of Russia internationally, particularly in the so-called "global South". In conclusion, Russia's postmodern regime utilises foreign policy to sustain domestic power, yet the absence of a coherent ideology has led to unintended consequences, resulting in increased isolation and internal destabilisation, exemplified by the failed Wagner Group rebellion led by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin.

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