ANALYSIS

The Road to Crimea: Putin's Foreign Policy Between Reason of State, Sovereignty and Bio-Politics

By Philipp Casula, Zurich

Abstract

The Crimean Crisis of 2014 has emphasized once more the troubled relations between Putin's Russia and the West. It has also brought to the fore a lack of understanding of Russia's foreign policy in the West. Many observers are oscillating between disbelief and alarm, trying to figure out Russia's conduct in foreign affairs by referring to imperialism, the Cold War, or to an inherently autocratic character of Russian politics. But how special or different are the drivers of Russian foreign policy compared with those of other powers? This paper investigates Russia's foreign policy along three key terms of political history, reason of state, sovereignty, and bio-politics, highlighting what they have meant historically and how they are put into practice by Russia's current regime, especially during the Crimean Crisis.

The Ups and Downs in Russia's Foreign Policy Relationship With the West

On March 2, Secretary of State John Kerry commented on the Russian *de facto* take-over of control in Crimea, declaring that "you just don't in the 21st century behave in a 19th century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext." While Kerry was mocked for this statement, since it was too easily applicable to the U.S. action against Iraq, the remark raises the question of whether, in the 21st century, war has really become an unjustifiable means to an end—at least for the sake of increasing territory, and at least within Europe.

Since the Soviet Union's demise, Russian relations with the West have experienced ups and downs. Since Putin's third term, they have steadily deteriorated and reached a nadir with the Crimean Crisis of 2014. However, there has never been an unreservedly pro-Western course in the Russian Federation's foreign policy, at least not since the mid-1990s. It was only during Andrey Kozyrev's tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs that Russia adopted a clear pro-Western stance, aimed at maximum integration within Western organizations and institutions. During this period, between 1992 and 1996, Russia largely ignored the other former republics of the USSR and followed a path of political, economic, and cultural isolationism in the post-Soviet space.[1] Kozyrev advocated the ideas of "returning to civilization" and integration with Europe in a "common European home" (a Gorbachevian theme). However, this orientation had already started to lose momentum by 1993, with opposition to this course emerging within the Yeltsin team itself. Things finally changed when Yevgeny Primakov took over the helm at Smolenskaya square in 1996. He is the most well-known representative of the so-called statist tradition of foreign policy. From the beginning of his tenure, Primakov sought to establish a relationship with the West on an equal footing. His aim was to restore a balance of power, and for Russia to be recognized as a great power. This trend continued when Vladimir Putin assumed the Russian presidency in 1999. Relations briefly improved in 2001 in the context of the "war on terror", when Russia and the U.S. closely collaborated on security issues. Moscow politically and logistically supported NATO's engagement in Afghanistan. Generally, however, relations followed a long downward trend, marked by NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia (1999), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (2003), the 2004 dual enlargement of the EU and NATO, the Orange Revolution (2004/05), the planning of a NATO missile defense system (2002/2007), and the intervention in Libya (2011). In the Kremlin, these events were all perceived as manifestations of the West creeping closer to Russia's borders or as meddling into the affairs of sovereign states irrespective of Moscow's explicit dissent. The anti-Western turn in the mid-2000s culminated in Putin's well-known speech at the Munich Security Conference (2007). The aforementioned issues figured again in Putin's speech on March 18, 2014, in which he commented on the Crimean Crisis.

Apart from the conclusion of the new START agreement in 2010, the "reset" of U.S.–Russia relations under Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev soon stalled, and relations between Russia and the West in general and the U.S. in particular have remained strained during Putin's third term. Disagreements range from the Syrian civil war to the fate of whistleblower Edward Snowden. At the same time and despite being Russia's biggest trading partner, relations with the EU have stagnated (for instance, the "Partnership for Modernization"). The Crimean Crisis is to be interpreted with these developments in mind.

1 Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

Reason of State From the 17th Century to Present-Day Russia

I would like to go one step further than John Kerry and argue that Russia's military intervention in Crimea includes elements of a 17th century conception of the state and of the use of its military apparatus. This conception goes by the name of *raison d'état* (reason of state). Reason of state describes, following the famous definition by Giovanni Botero, the knowledge necessary to form, preserve, strengthen and expand the state. The key question of reason of state is how to achieve the state's preservation, expansion, and felicity.[2] In this perspective, the state is the sole principle and aim of governmental ratio, supplanting the centrality held beforehand by the prince. Formerly, it had been all about securing, preserving and increasing the wealth of the sovereign, now it was increasingly the state itself that had to be secured and expanded. The state became the primary lens through which all given institutions and their relations had to be understood. Reason of state means the absolute primacy of the state over all other concerns. In foreign policy, *raison d'état* was concerned with seeking and maintaining a balance of power, using both war and diplomacy as its key instruments to this end. The advent of reason of state also coincides with that of mercantilism, which sought to strengthen the state's power through commerce. This logic has never completely changed: while reason of state originates in the 17th century, it continues to be applied, explicitly or implicitly, by all nation-states, not only by Russia, but, alas, with different degrees of intensity. When the vital interests of a state are at stake, military action can never be considered off the table. It remains the *ultima ratio* in international relations.

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy argue that the state is a "mythic entity" in Russia.[3] They interpret Vladimir Putin as a statist, a *gosudarstvennik* or *derzhavnik*, appointed to serve the Russian state and restore its greatness. He is, from this perspective, by definition not a sovereign, whose only aim is to preserve his own power, but rather an executor of the state's interests. Putin's well-known statement made in 2005 that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", perfectly reflects *raison d'état* thinking. The demise of the USSR meant a weakening of the Russian state, of its institutions and of its reach. Restoring Russia's power has been a clearly stated goal of Putin's tenure, from its very beginning. This does not necessarily mean (military) expansion, but certainly the end of the above-mentioned isolationism *vis-à-vis* the ex-Soviet territory. The Eurasian Economic Union is an expression of such a striving for closer ties and greater integration with its neighboring countries. In view of this statist thinking, two foreign policy tenets of the current leadership come to the fore:

Firstly, a preference for stability over democracy. This holds both for domestic and foreign policy. Hence, Syria's Bashar al-Assad is better than a "radical" and split opposition, Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich better than "fascists" and nationalists. Official Russia abhors any revolutionary scenario. As Boris Kolonitskii commented, "after 23 years apart, Russians and Ukrainians have shaped very different narratives from the same Soviet memories. Soviet culture romanticized and sanctified revolution. (…) The very term revolution has come to carry negative connotations for Russians."[4] Indeed, while Russia's opposition at first managed to mobilize 50,000 Muscovites to protest against the Kremlin's action in Crimea, now even critical voices such as that of Dmitry Bykov, caution against the Maidan protests, and against revolutions in general.[5] The Kremlin seems to be a *status quo* force, whatever the *status quo* is.[6] Unless, of course, change is to the advantage of the Russian state, as the Crimean case exemplifies.

Secondly, Russia's official vision of sovereignty praises the "Westphalian system" that is based on clearly delineated territories and clear spheres of influence that do not interfere with each other. Any tipping of the international balance of power must be avoided. With the West perceived as creeping closer to Russia's borders, even swallowing former satellites, and seen as obstructing the planned Eurasian Economic Union by integrating Ukraine through the recently-signed EU–Ukraine *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement* (DCFTA), the Kremlin has interpreted these actions and events as destabilizing a balance to the disadvantage of Russia and as doing what Hillary Clinton promised in 2012: "let's make no mistake about it [the Eurasian Economic Union]. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it." As if replying to Clinton directly, Putin underlined on March 18, 2014 that "we understand that these actions

2 All following definitions of reason of state, sovereignty, and biopolitics are adapted from: Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Picador, 2009).

3 Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington: Brookings, 2013).

4 Boris Kolonitskii, "Why Russians Back Putin on Ukraine", *New York Times* (international edition), 12/03/2014.

5 Dmitry Bykov, "Ukrainian euphoria, patriotic ecstasy on Crimea and the spirit of the second revolution," *Sobesednik* 11 (2014), available at: <http://sobesednik.ru/dmitriy-bykov/20140325-dmitriy-bykov-ukrainskaya-eyforiya-patrioticheskiyekstaz-kr>

6 Artemy Magun, "Commentary on Russia and Ukraine", *Telospress,* 11/03/2014, available at: <http://www.telospress.com/commentary-on-russia-and-ukraine>

were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West. (…) But we saw no reciprocal steps." Ultimately, the Eurasian Union and the DCFTA can be seen as quasi-mercantilist means to facilitate economic exchange and strengthen Russia and the EU respectively.

Sovereignty from Machiavelli to Putin

The second key term through which I will analyze Russian foreign policy, is even older than that of reason of state. Sovereignty is the key political term of the 16th century. Barack Obama alluded to sovereignty in his Brussels speech of March 26, when he described "a more traditional view of power" according to which "ordinary men and women (…) surrender their rights to an all-powerful sovereign." Indeed, and in contrast to *raison d'état*, sovereignty is concerned with the prince and his relation to territory. The traditional concern associated to sovereignty is that of conquering territories or holding on to conquered territory: How can territory be demarcated, fixed, secured, or enlarged? The traditional tools of sovereignty are laws. Sovereignty is circular in the sense that the only goal it proposes is an orderly, lawful society. The public good ultimately is obedience to the law. What characterizes the goal of sovereignty is nothing else than submission to this law. In an odd way, the Putin regime has indeed fulfilled the promise of installing a "dictatorship of law", with loyal courts sentencing opponents in politicized trials. This is the domestic concern of sovereignty.

On the foreign policy side, the key danger is dispossession: hence, sovereignty is not only concerned with fending off internal enemies, but likewise external ones in order to keep and secure territory. Thus, the two aspects of sovereignty which should be highlighted are "law" and "territory". Regarding Russia, the key question is *what territory* is perceived by the Russian leadership as relevant for Russia. Is it just the territory of the Russian Federation in its current borders? Until recently, respect for the Belavezha Accords of 1991 has been a cornerstone of Russia's policies in the near abroad.

"Sovereign democracy" was for quite a while a key notion used by Russian political leaders to describe the Russian system, until the term was dismissed by Medvedev in 2006. However, while the term was put aside, its meaning and significance were not. The insistence on sovereignty meant two things: firstly, that Russia's political system should be considered as a democracy *sui generis*. Secondly, it meant that no country has the right to interfere into the internal affairs of any other country. Two additional points are especially important in this respect:

One, as aptly summarized by Vladimir Putin, is that "Russia is an independent, active participant of international life, and it has, like other countries, national interests, which you have to take into account and to respect." According to this rationale, Russia is not any other country but a great power with clear spheres of influence. This is in line with the classic precepts of sovereignty in terms of a territory, which has to be defended and preserved; in terms of Russian territory itself, and in terms of spheres of influence.

Two, is the insistence on law: Putin has repeatedly accused the West of violating international law and the sovereignty of other states, mentioning, of course, Iraq: "Our approach is different", Putin stressed on March 4, "we proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law." And again, on March 18, Putin condemned Russia's "Western partners", stressing that they "prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. (…) They act as they please: here and there, they use force against sovereign states (…) To make this aggression look legitimate, they force the necessary resolutions from international organizations, and if for some reason this does not work, they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall." Accordingly, for Russia, Yanukovich is still the legitimate president, because he has not been deposed constitutionally. This *de jure* perspective precludes seeing him as delegitimized *de facto*. However, it is *raison d'état* which explains what is more important when the concern for the state is at odds with the concern for law: reason of state prescribes that law can and must be broken if this serves the state's interests. The key here is "necessity", which justifies the means.

Bio-Politics and the Compatriots abroad

Finally, an element of Russian foreign policy which has steadily gained importance is the concern Russia displays for its "compatriots" (*sootechestvenniki*), or in other words, the community of ethnic Russians in the Near Abroad, broadly conceived. Already under Yeltsin, efforts have been undertaken to develop a strategy towards this group and, in 1999, Federal Law 99-FZ "On state policy toward compatriots living abroad" was passed. The law offers multiple and vague definitions, institutionalizing ambiguity about who can be considered a "compatriot".[7] Since then, the law has been amended several times, and the topic has regularly been raised by Russian politicians, adding to Russia's for-

7 Oxana Shevel, *Migration, Refugee Policy, and State Building in Postcommunist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

eign policy a bio-political element. Bio-politics means that the population as a whole is considered in terms of being a political problem. Neither territory nor the state are the sole objects of power, rather, power's attention is increasingly directed towards the population.

In 2005, Putin highlighted that the end of the USSR, "for the Russian people, became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory." This issue was picked up again on March 18, 2014: "Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders." The compatriots also figure prominently in the 2013 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. It underlines that "particular attention will be paid to providing support to compatriots living in the CIS Member States, as well as to negotiating agreements on the protection of their (…) rights and freedoms."[8]

The defense of Russian citizens or *russophone* populations abroad became a key issue and a rationale for justifying the exertion of pressure on neighboring countries. The intervention in South-Ossetia in 2008 was explicitly made on the grounds of saving the lives of the *sootechestvenniki*. After hostilities had started, Dmitri Medvedev affirmed on August 8, 2008: "Civilians (…) are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be." With regard to Ukraine, Putin broadened the concept of compatriots, and stated that there "live and will live millions of *ethnic Russians, russophone citizens*, and Russia will always defend their interests with political, diplomatic, and legal means." Russia clearly allots to the former Soviet republics a special place in its foreign policy not only due to geographical proximity and resulting socio-economic ties, but because their populations include Russian or *russophone* minorities, and thus actual or potential compatriots. In this light, it seems, the Kremlin displays an interest in the population of the CIS in the first place, and only then, in its territory. Russia reserves the right to intervene to protect this population with whom Russia claims to have "close historical, cultural and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests. (…) we cannot remain indifferent if we see that they are being persecuted, destroyed and humiliated", as Putin underscored. Or, put more bluntly by Foreign Minister Lavrov, on April 23: "Russian citizens being attacked is an attack against the Russian Federation." Such an interpretation of compatriots means that the current Russian foreign policy explicitly recognizes a mismatch between the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation and the population for which the regime claims responsibility.

Conclusions

It might be true, then, that *raison d'état* and sovereignty are "more traditional" forms of power, but they are not outdated. It would be questionable to assume that they have been replaced and that, as Obama stated, "through centuries of struggle, through war and enlightenment, repression and revolution, (…) a particular set of ideals began to emerge" associated with a new type of (democratic) power. Russian and Western states' foreign policy bears witness that there is not a series of successive elements of power in foreign policy, with new ones causing the older ones to disappear. History does not evolve linearly, and power is exercised simultaneously targeting the state, the territory, and the population. Hence, on the one hand, there are many continuities with the policies initiated by Primakov some eighteen years ago, which stressed state greatness and great power spheres of influence. The road to Crimea had, in this sense, already been sketched out.

However, there are some truly new elements: firstly, the Russian leadership's interpretation of Russian identity has shifted increasingly to include a biopolitical concern for the compatriots living in the post-Soviet space. This concern is coupled with a willingness to actually mobilize the military apparatus in order to protect the lives of the people considered to have "close historical, cultural and economic ties" with Russia. This readiness had already become visible in 2008, when Russian troops rushed to assist South Ossetia

Secondly, in the case of Crimea, Russia went beyond this. Not only did it invade Ukrainian territory, but in an extremely swift legal procedure, went on to first recognize Crimea as an independent state (March 17) and then to incorporate it as part of the Russian Federation itself (March 21), circumventing constitutional limitations that would have required Ukraine's consent to let Crimea go, as stipulated by Federal Constitutional Law No. 6-FKZ. So, in contrast to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Crimea became part of Russia itself. In both cases, however, control over territories inhabited by compatriots was restored. Because of this mismatch between the territory of the Russian Federation on the one hand, and

8 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 12/02/2013, available at: <http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D>

the *Russky mir*[9] or its "sphere of identity", Russian foreign policy contains an expansionist potential aimed at preserving influence over territories where compatriots live.

While the West was never fully willing or able to welcome Russia as equal partner, now some Western leaders have completely written-off the Putin regime.[10] The Russian leadership, for its part, increasingly gave up on the idea of Russia becoming a part of the West and "started creating their own Moscow-centered system", as noted by Dmitri Trenin as early as 2006,[11] turning its attention more and more towards Russian compatriots in the former USSR. The incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation seems to be the last nail in the coffin of Moscow's Westernizers.

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9 Igor Zelevev, "The new foreign policy doctrine of Russia", *Vedomosti,* 07/04/2014, available at: <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/2014/04/07/24981841>
10 Peter Baker, "In Cold War Echo, Obama Strategy writes off Putin", *New York Times*, 20/04/2014.
11 Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Leaves the West", in *Foreign Affairs* 85 (4) 2006, 85–96.

ANALYSIS

Taking the Shortcut to Popularity: How Putin's Power is Sustained through Ukraine

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Abstract
Putin has built his popularity on two incongruent myths: that Russia is an eternal great power and that the country is beset by cyclical periods of weakness. Putin's popularity stands in contrast to the lack of legitimacy within Russia's overall political system. Recently, Putin has used Ukraine to revive his popularity as his term in power stretches well beyond a decade, but it remains unclear what the cost of these actions will be.

Russia as a Great Power
Speaking about the purportedly poor condition of state museums in Crimea, which in mid-March 2014 had been annexed to the Russian Federation by almost unanimous votes in both houses of the Russian parliament, Russian President Vladimir Putin lamented on April 10, "Ukraine has its own problems; it even had its own ideology of development or, on the contrary, obliterating some of the common pages of our history. But what is entirely clear is that they need to be revived."[1] On the same day, marking the 70th anniversary of its liberation from Nazi occupation, Putin issued a greeting to residents of the southern Ukrainian city of Odessa and to surviving WW II veterans there: "The President of Russia expressed his conviction that centuries-old traditions of good neighborliness and mutual support will continue to unite Russians and Ukrainians. He stressed that their common duty is to cherish the memory of the past war, to thwart any attempt to rewrite history and to bring up the younger generation on the high ideals of patriotism and pride for our Great Victory."[2]

Seen in the context of the generally tense situation between Russia and Ukraine, Putin's words could certainly be interpreted as ominous. The small components of the language he used, such as "the common pages of our history" that "need to be revived," "unite Russians and Ukrainians," "thwart any attempt to rewrite history" (what parts of history?) and "pride for our Great Victory" all had the same connotations: scarce recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of Ukraine, and instead profuse references to Ukraine as destiny-bound to community with great-power Russia.

In this article I argue that Putin's strong promotion of Russia's annexation of Crimea and his hardline stance against Ukraine are highly consistent with the basic

1 <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7001> (accessed 16 April 2014).
2 <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7000#sel=3:1,3:64> (accessed 16 April 2014).