Russia in Ukraine's Quagmire: drowning or coming through?

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Abstract

The research question is the impact of developments in South-Eastern Ukraine on Russia and prospects for resolution of the Donbass conflict in a way that allows mending Russia – European relations. The article firstly explores the reasons why Moscow did not foresee the Euromaidan events in Ukraine as coming despite its geographical proximity and cultural closeness, and failed to act to calm down a developing confrontation. It proceeds to assess the phenomenon of grassroot activism which emerged in Russia in response to Euromaidan, and how it impacted upon the Russian state and its ability to act. The article argues that the ideology and identity coming out of Donbass movement expands beyond the region's borders. It analyses how Moscow managed Donbass affairs after the active fighting subsided. On the one hand, it never admitted its direct management role for an apprehension to be dubbed as a party to conflict, but on the other actively participated in the de facto statebuilding. This duality results in elusive and at times contradictory strategies. The paper addresses the international dimension of Ukraine's crisis where the goal is to make Kyiv admit that it does not wish the breakaway region back. The tactics is to turn the Minsk process into a routine similar to Geneva talks over South Ossetia. In this paradigm, Minsk process pushes Kyiv into a corner where a winning option is not to play. Internationally, time works in Moscow's favour while domestic troubles in Ukraine make it a weak and unconsolidated player. Russian ruling elite can exercise strategic patience waiting until Ukraine transforms from an existential battleground between Russia and the West into a developing country in a need of international assistance. The challenge is an absence of an end picture: how the ruling elite can square anti-Westernism it unleashed with being personally integrated with the West in material and cultural terms? And after Ukraine, is Europe a friend or a foe?

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Ukrainan Crisis, Crimea, Minsk

Özet

Araştırma sorusu Güneydoğu Ukrayna'daki gelişmelerin Rusya üzerindeki etkileri ve Rusya-Avrupa ilişkilerini düzeltmek üzere Donbas çatışmasının çözümlenebilmesi olasılığıdır. Çalışma öncelikle Rusya'nın Ukrayna'da vuku bulan Euromadian gösterilerini ve sonuçlarını kültürel ve coğrafi yakınlığına rağmen neden öngöremediğini ve yükselen çatışma esnasında soğukkanlılığını neden koruyamadığını tartışmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Euromadian protestolarına karşı Rusyada yükselen taban aktivismi olgusunun incelenmesi ve bu olgunu Rusya ve Rusya'nın hareket kabiliyetleri üzerindeki etkisinin tartışılmasıyla devam edecektir. Makale Donbas'tan yükselen kimlik ve ideolojinin etkisinin sınırları aştığını iddia etmektedir. Makale Rusya'nın Donbas'taki çatışmalar durulduktan sonra bölge olaylarını nasıl idare ettiğini analiz etmektedir. Bu çerçevede Rusya bir yandan asla çatışmanın bir parçası olduğunu kabul etmemiş fakat öte yandan Donbass'ta vuku bulan ulus inşası sürecinin aktif bir katılımcısı olmuştur. Çalışma Ukrayna krizinin, Ukrayna'yı ayrılıkçı bölgeleri geri kazanmayı düşünmekten uzak tutan uluslararası boyutuna da işaret etmektedir. Minsk süreci bu çerçevede nasıl Geneva süreci Güney Osetya çatışmasının süreklilik kazanmasında rol oynadıysa bir rutine dönüşmektedir. Dolayısıyla Minsk süreci Ukraynayı bir köşeye sıkıştırmakta ve zaman Rusyanın lehine çalışmaktadır. Rusya Ukrayna'nın Batı ve Rusya arasında bir çatışma zemininden dış yardıma muhtaç bir gelişmekte olan ülke haline dönmesi sürecinde stratejik sabır gösterecektir. Buradaki temel zorluk fotoğrafta bir sonun henüz ortaya çıkamış olmasıdır. Yönetici elit kültürel ve materyal anlamda Batı ile bütünleşmiş durumdayken bir Batı karşıtlığı kıskacındadır ve Ukrayna'dan sonra Batı'nın dost mu yoksa düşman mı olduğuna karar vermesi gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Ukrayna, Ukrayna Krizi, Kırım, Minsk

Introduction

Over the past 25 years everything that Russia was doing internationally has been political, but not necessarily strategic. Integration into global – in essence, Western, - institutions was the ultimate goal; however, it had invested in relationship-building, operations and structures in the region which did not reflect these ideas or indeed point to any coherent agenda. However, after the 2014 events in Ukraine, the Russian elite came to the realisation that integration into the Western world on its terms was not possible and it has to follow own path, realising that irrespective of intentions, its actions are likely to be interpreted as hegemonic power projection in its neighbourhood.

The article analyses Russia's projection of power in its interactions in the post-Soviet space, taking defensive realist perspective[91] as a point of departure. It follows John Mearsheimer's argument that it should be understood from the logic of realism while liberal order provides a poor interpretive framework for how states, - and Russia especially, - behave when seriously challenged.[92] This line of reasoning is developed by Richard Sakwa's in Frontline Ukraine who points to a fundamental failure to understand Russia's motivations as a cause leading to a major crisis in the West – Russia relations.[93] The article concentrates on the Ukraine crisis and the way it reconfigured Russia's power, its relations with the neighbours of Belarus and Moldova with a reference to the EU where a triangular relationship with the West impacted on how the power equation is shaping up.

The term 'power' is seldom used by the Russian political establishment which prefers to speak about 'influence' in global and regional affairs. Russia's understanding of power rests on several key neorealist maxims and demonstrates continuity with its historical tradition of state power projection.[94] Security is the priority consideration and permanence of conflicts is to be expected: the state is powerful if it can confront internal and external threats. In this paradigm, Belarus is a powerful state while Ukraine is not. The implication for Russia is that it wants stability on its borders and sees control as the surest way to achieve this stability, by political means if possible, and by the military ones if necessary. Moscow's advantage is that it is prepared to use force quickly and decisively, backed up by consensus at home., an An interplay of domestic and international factors can be observed in interpreting the sources of power which lie in (1) performance-based domestic legitimacy understood as 'effectiveness' (Lipset 1981, p. 83),[95] (2) pragmatic conservatism as a straightforward, accessible ideological orientation presented as common sense, (3) a change from defensive reactionism to pro-active engagement, (4) capitalisation on security deployment related to the former.

In Russia's view, power primarily lies with sovereignty of a nation-state and not with international normative regimes. This allows treating other states as 'black boxes' and influences the contradictory trajectory of Russia-led multilateralism. State rather than society is a source of power, and the main engine of policy formulation and implementation. Society

[91] Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979) Theory of International Politics. New York: McGraw Hill

[92] John J. Mearsheimer 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: the Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,' Foreign Affairs, 93:5, 2014, also 'Moscow's Choice,' Foreign Affairs, 93: 6, 2014, 167-171.

[93] Richard Sakwa. (2015). Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands. I.B. Tauris; similar point made in (2008) 'New Cold War' or twenty years' crisis? Russia and international politics,' International Affairs 84: 2, 241–267.

[94] Philip Pomper (2012) The Evolution of the Russian Tradition of State Power History and Theory, 51, 60-88.

[95] Lipset, M.S. (1981) Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics, 2nd edn (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press).

in peaceful conditions plays a modest role, but at the times of turbulence, such as over Crimea and Donbass, signals to the ruling elite which way it expects it to go, as well as shows limitations on the state power. A related issue is 'soft power' which was initially negatively interpreted by the Kremlin as a Western ploy of imposition of 'democratisation tactics' aimed at the regime change, until realisation came that Russia is engaged in soft power projection as well.[96] Currently, socially conservative values, Russian culture and drawing benefits from dashed expectations with the West form uncomplicated, but appealing 'soft power' sources.

Lastly, - and this is where Putin's personality matters, - the Russian president believes in power of personal relations with other leaders. Personal judgement is a premise that he trusts. For example, relations with Victor Yanukovich were never cordial, - although preferable to his predecessor Victor Yushenko, - and after a short pause Moscow was prepared to deal with Petro Poroshenko despite a dubious legitimacy of his election. By contrast, the 2015 crisis with Turkey turned up badly because Putin counted president Erdogan among 'friends,' and 'friends' do not deliberately down each other's planes.

On a Collision Course over Ukraine

Russia and the EU share responsibility for plunging Ukraine into a major crisis. This is partially explained by a difference in their understanding of power and sovereignty in the international arena that developed into contestation over Ukraine. Nicu Popescu writes that 'EU eastern policy proved to be a policy with more or less explicit geopolitical consequences that was not designed to either really counter or withstand serious Russian opposition to it, nor, as an alternative, to accommodate Russia.'

Russia – EU relations have never been easy, and deteriorated with the accession of the Eastern European members. Tensions have been developing in the aftermath of the crisis in South Ossetia when Czech Republic and Sweden, - not counted among Russia's friends at the EU, - held the presidency in 2009 and 'Eastern Neighbourhood Partnership' (ENP) initiative was launched. It did not have a clear objective, such as whether its beneficiaries would be offered an accession to the EU, and Russia's place was not defined. Moscow disregarded the Partnership and put no response policy to it at the time. At the 2010 EU meeting in Madrid under the Spanish presidency the invited Russian diplomats from Moscow made themselves scarce when an attempt to involve Russia into dialogue were made.[97] Kremlin woke up late, and to an unwelcome surprise of 'the new proposals to strengthen the security dimension of the ENP, and ... calls for greater coherence of the ENP with the security and foreign policy dimensions of the EU's other actions abroad.'[98]

The EU position was that its growing expansion, including in foreign and security dimension, was completely benign and did not constitute a power projection. Friedman notes 'that might well have been the subjective intention of the Europeans, but the Russians saw that without buffers, a united Europe with a shifted intent might well pose an existential threat to Russia.'[99] NATO and EU expansions became interlinked in Russian foreign policy perspective, while previously only latter was viewed as spearheaded against Russia. It was inevitable that NATO enlargement and Western influence in Eastern Europe would be viewed as threatening encroachment by Russia, and no amount of statements to the contrary could alter that. In case NATO expanded to Ukraine, the pact's borders would come within 435 kilometres of Moscow which no Russian leader, however liberal in domestic affairs, could afford.

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[96] Hill, Fiona, 'Moscow Discovers Soft Power,' *Current History*, 105.693 (Oct 2006): 341-347

[97] Author's personal observation, Madrid, January 2010.

[98] Council conclusions on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, 14/12/2015. Press release 926/15 http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/12/14-conclusions-european-neighbourhood/

[99] George Friedman 26 May 2015. A Net Assessment of Europe Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly

Euromaidan Ukraine

Before the crisis, Russia's projection of power over Ukraine's domestic affairs was fairly limited and conducted by such instruments, as energy prices, cheap loans, publications in Russian media on the rights of Russian-speakers and creation of economic carrots and bureaucratic sticks for Kiev to join the Customs Union. This did not stretch to attempts to control government appointments, influence state budget composition or manipulate legislature. Engagement of civil society and independent political experts was almost non-existent.[100] Russian-oriented political observers in Kiev later lamented that Moscow did not get sufficiently engaged in Ukraine's politics and security, and found themselves with few power instruments at its disposal when destabilisation got looming.

Second Maidan proved an example of stark political short-sightedness of all actors involved. Each side, - the Ukrainian government at the time, its opponents, Moscow and Western capitals, - kept raising stakes in a hope that others would quail. But nobody did. The Russian intelligence failed to detect or manage events in Ukraine early on. Moscow did not foresee the Euromaidan events in Ukraine as coming despite its geographical proximity and cultural closeness, and failed to act to calm down a developing confrontation. It made two errors of judgement: firstly, it assumed that Brussels would seek to find an accommodation between the two association options and communicate to Kiev political elite that they were not mutually exclusive. Brussels was in no mood for such policy shift.[101] Secondly, it overestimated Yanukovich's statesmanship capacity leaving him to manage the growing crisis on his own under the EU supervision.

Preoccupied by the Olympics prestige project, Putin focused on Ukraine fairly late. Expert advice in Russia warning of the seriousness of the unfolding crisis was available, but signals were diverse and contradictory, and Ukraine issue was competing against other priorities seemingly more important.[102] As a result, an alarm at the higher echelons of power was not raised. Neither Russia nor Western actors envisaged the February 2014 scenario. In early 2014 Victor Yanukovich was deaf to Moscow advice, structures of authority were anaemic, while Russia had no real leverage over developments in the neighbouring country. The fleeing of the president came as a surprise to Kremlin which had to devise a last-minute rescue plan.[103]

Three developments at Euromaidan were overlooked leaving questions unanswered. Firstly, mere civil activists' calls for peaceful demonstrations do not appear sufficient to sustain violent protests that in the end toppled the government in Kiev. Some degree of planning and organisation was apparent that allowed successful countering of security forces and raids on weapons arsenals in Western Ukraine. Brussels only deplored violence of pro-Russian supporters in the South-East, but was more lenient towards use of force by the 'pro-EU' movement. This led Moscow to accuse the West of double standards and a selective vision.

Secondly, it remained a mystery why a sizeable 'anti-Maidan' constituency that existed in Ukraine, including in Kiev, remained passive when Maidan movement was turning violent. Moscow did not attempt to organise 'pro-Russian' supporters to clash with the Maidan activists, - Yanukovich's efforts to organise 'Titushki' was feeble and unpopular, - or render security assistance to struggling Yanukovich when he was still in power. Interviews with representatives of Russia-oriented constituency in Kiev suggest that they were law-abiding citizens who relied

[100] Alexander Chalenko, journalist, interview with the author, February 2016.
[101] Richard Sakwa. 2015. Frontline Ukraine. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 72 – 80.
[102] Vladimir Zharikhin, deputy director of the CIS – Diaspora and Integration Institute, author's interview, Moscow, February 2016.
[103] Informed analyst with connection to the Russian Presidential Administration, interview with the author, Moscow, February 2016.

on the state for protection. The idea that they should take direct action to defend an unpopular government was alien to them until it was too late.

Thirdly, EU guarantees given in February 2014 to President Yanukovich were not backed by any power instruments and proved futile against the street when climax arrived. EU capitals had no influence over its Ukrainian adherents. The lesson that Russia and other regional watchers drew was that the EU security guarantees cannot be trusted in an hour of need, while Moscow would offer a safe haven to deposed rulers.

When Ukraine plunged into an internal crisis over its politicised identity, Moscow should have been an ally in resolving it. Euromaidan placed Russia and the EU on a continuum from rivals to enemies, albeit this plays differently in the member-states depending on their cultural and historical attitudes concerning Russia. Stripped of the psychological baggage, the EU should have been able to see the obvious, as put by Patrick Armstrong 'what Moscow wants from Ukraine can be simply expressed: a country that pays its gas bills on time, is not a NATO launch pad and doesn't have a crisis every five years that keeps everybody in Moscow up all night. In short, prosperous, neutral, stable.'[104] As put by Alexander Mercoulis, 'the Russians have always sought a negotiated solution to the Ukrainian conflict.'[105]In fact, Moscow had a plan of what to do in the South-East, proposing federalisation. This was similar to the EU's stance in Macedonia, but the idea was rejected outright as coming from Russia, while some EU diplomats privately expressed that Russia itself is not a federation.

Conflict Resolution in Word and Deed

Minsk Agreement was a vital step in stopping the war and mending fences with European states. However, it is essentially a ceasefire deal rather than a peace accord. The fundamental stance has not changed. In Putin's words, 'we need a stable, prosperous Ukraine. We very much hope that this will come true.'[106] There is a sense in Kremlin that its European partners do not appreciate the efforts that it makes to force the DNR and LNR, as well as its sympathisers in Russia to adhere to an agreed line, be it on postponing the elections, suppressing Novorossiya project or halting down the rebels' appetites for a further offensive. Still, the letter of Minsk is in Russia's favour, and it will continue with it. The strategy is to turn the Minsk process into a routine similar to Geneva talks over South Ossetia, while the tactics consists of endless rounds of technical consultations with commitments and concessions, and prevention of revision of the Agreement in substance. With Kiev's consent, the sides got drawn into a process blessed with international legitimacy, but which is likely to consume the product of a political solution. The ultimate goal is to make Kiev admit that it does not wish the breakaway region back. In this paradigm, Minsk process pushes Kiev into a corner where a winning option is not to play. Time works in Moscow's favour internationally as Ukraine's domestic troubles make it a weak and unconsolidated player.

Moscow successfully deploys legalistic tools in pointing to deficiencies in Kiev's position. One is over the elections in the rebel-held territories, as the territories fear an arrival of radical pro-Maidan activists and associated media into Donbass which can wreck havoc. Other examples of legal tools, - which all have fair points, - include the notion that the special status law would have no legal force unless the Constitution is amended, decisions of 2014-elected Rada are illegitimate because a large part of Donbass is not represented in it and closed electoral lists proposed by Kiev contradict OSCE norms. Moreover, Ukrainian lawyers

[104] Russian Federation Sitrep. 22 October 2015 http://www.russiaotherpointsofview.com/2015/10/russian-federation-sitrep-1.html

[105] Alexander Mercouris, 'End Game in Ukraine - Russia Wins', 12 October 2016, http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/end-game-ukraine-russia-wins/ri10390

[106] President Putin's Direct Line, 14 April 2016, http://www.1tv.ru/shows/vystupleniya-prezidenta-rossii/pryamaya-liniya-2016/pryamaya-liniya-s-vladimirom-putinym-2016-onlaynreportazh

attempted to introduce modifications to the Minsk-2 which contradict their own legislation.[107] Alexander Chalenko calls Minsk – 2 a 'trap for Kiev' since if the law on the special status is adopted, all Ukrainian legal acts may have to be endorsed by the territories' legislatures.[108]

At the same time, informal diplomatic tools are deployed for peacemakinig. Although president Poroshenko radicalised his stance throwing his allegiance with the West and reducing his room for manoeuvre with Moscow, consultations behind closed doors continue which Ukrainian side is not keen to make public.[109] Still, an absence of a politically-shaped peace constituency in the government-controlled Ukraine coupled with an exodus of Russia-oriented elite means that serious interlocutors are scarce while public atmosphere for courting the new elite representatives is not in Moscow favour.

Russia has more permanent interests in Ukraine as the EU does, and geography adds weight to power. Looking into the future, if the inability of making Ukraine a prosperous, stable, clean-governed and EU-loyal state would be on the horizon, Western governments are likely to declare the mission accomplished. Their interest will wane down, leaving middle-level technical staff to manage the relationship.[110] Presently, Russia still holds the weaker position. However, its relative strength has increased with the rise of divergent interests within the EU, Brexit and pressures in Ukraine. As the fragmentation increases, Russia's relative power will rise with it.[111] In the circumstances, there is little Moscow feels it needs or can do over Ukraine, until internal dynamic alters and Russia's power finds an opening again. The Russian ruling elite can exercise strategic patience until Ukraine transforms from an existential battleground between Russia and the West into a developing country in a need of international assistance.

Russia in Hostile Waters: Sanctions, Countersanctions and other power tools

Economic incentives and tools such as development of energy infrastructure and investment opportunities formed a major pillar of Russia's power projection in the first decade of 2000s. This was modelled on China's rise whose phenomenal economic growth won it a great reverence in international affairs irrespective of its much worse domestic record than that of Russia. By contrast, despite successful economic performance and ability to offer attractive benefits to its post-Soviet neighbours, Russia was seen in a state of a permanent depression by the West. As Andrew Monaghan wrote in 2013 before the Ukraine crisis, 'in the West, there is a broad orthodoxy that Russia is in decline, emphasising the insecurity in the mix: unreformed economically and politically stagnant, on the verge of major domestic upheaval while dependent on high oil prices, Russia faces a range of challenges in a fast-moving and evolving international environment.'[112]

Ukraine crisis vastly accelerated this thinking. Sanctions have been the Western main response to the crisis, until Germany and France initiated the Normandy process. They drew support even from the liberal quarters, such as international conflict resolution NGOs. European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) paper advocated for sanctions as a 'peacebuilding' tool:

> *Sanctions should be enacted in such a way as to ensure that each subsequent wave does not give Russia the impression that its previous misdeeds are no longer relevant.*

[107] Alexei Chesnakov, director of Центр Политической Коньюнктуры, interview, Moscow, February 2016.
[108] Alexander Chalenko, journalist of Donbass origin, interview, Moscow, February 2016.
[109] Andrey Sushentsov presentation, Chatham House, London, May 2016.
[110] This point was made by Patrick Armstrong already in summer 2013, SitRep.
[111] Friedman, Assessment of Europe, Ibid.
[112] Andrew Monaghan. The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept: Evolving Continuity Russia and Eurasia. REP April 2013/03. RIIA/ Chatham House.

The annexation of Crimea and military support for the war in the east of Ukraine remain valid reasons to maintain Russia's international isolation and punishment.[113]

The rationale was largely not to influence a solution to Ukraine's crisis, but raise the costs for Russia to project power. The sanctions largely achieved that effect, but underestimated Russia's resilience. As Mearsheimer predicted in 2014, they did not alter Russian decision-making, and it was prepared to take considerable punishment to protect its interests.[114] They also resulted in a loss of interlocutors on the Russian side as most of the influential policy figures were banned from the West. Moscow having fewer incentives to press the rebels much further beyond what it has already done, as hostile relations with the West became acknowledged as the new reality. It no longer relates lifting Western sanctions to the implementation of the Minsk Agreement, as it believes that sanctions follow the logic of policy towards Russia in western capitals rather than are motivated by developments on the ground. It rather accepts the necessity to adapt to new economic realities. This is reflected in the new National Security Strategy (December 2015) that professes a comprehensive approach to security determined to reduce Russia's vulnerability to external pressures.

Sanctions were prolonged until the end of 2016 without meriting a discussion explained by a technical argument of non-implementation of the Minsk Agreement. Given that most of Minsk provisions are not enforceable, - at least without significant and painful steps by Kiev,[115] - according to this line of reasoning, lifting of the sanctions can never happen. Moscow brushed them off. Head of Federation Council International Affairs Committee Konstantin Kosachev dismissed the sanctions as having no psychological effect and expressed that time is working in Moscow's favour. European politicians are getting tired of Ukraine's problems and confrontation with Russia, while addressing global challenges, such as anti-terrorism and Syria settlement requires cooperation.[116]Russian economy somehow adapted to sanctions, but they had an effect on society making it far more difficult since the Cold War for the West to reach out to the Russian public. Signs emerge that there is a move toward revision of this policy, although it has a long way to go. In the words of Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, "Russia must be treated decently. We must make efforts towards a practical relationship with Russia. It is not sexy but that must be the case, we can't go on like this."[117]

Sanctions had not featured prominently in the Russia's power arsenal, although trade wars and sudden bans on agricultural imports have been deployed against Georgia, Moldova, Belarus and others. Ukraine crisis changed that, although with a considerable time lag after Euromaidan. In October 2015 Russia closed its airspace in retaliation for Kiev's action to ban Russian air carriers. On 1 January 2016 EEU customs duties were introduced due to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) entry in force, and a food embargo was levied because Ukraine joined Western sanctions against Russia. Still, Ukraine has not been overly concerned with the loss of the Russian market as it expected the EU to compensate for it.

As Kremlin got a handle on how to use international legal instruments to its advantage, law suits have become a tested power tool since gas disputes of the early 2000s, and are applied again. On 1 January 2016 Moscow initiated legal proceedings against Ukraine over non-

[113] Natalia Mirimanova, 'Peacebuilding in Ukraine: What Role for the EU?' EPLO Civil Society Dialogue Network Discussion Paper No. 8. 2014.
[114] Mearsheimer, 93:5.
[115] Anna Matveeva, 'No Moscow Stooges: Identity Polarisation and Guerrilla Movements in Donbass,' Journal of Black Sea and South European Studies, February 2016.
[116] http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2881941
[117] 9 October 2015 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34486157

payment of the $3 billion debt and added that it would file a lawsuit in an English court.[118]It waits for an out-of-court settlement offer from Kiev which should blink first. However, Western political backing gives Kiev confidence that the power equation is in its favour.

Introduction of travel restrictions, such as visa regime is among Moscow's effective power tools which is hard for the West to criticise given its own steep entry barriers for the CIS countries. Introduction of visa regime with Georgia contributed to Eduard Shevardnadze's downfall when migrant labour income reduced and the country plunged into poverty. This also sent a signal to Baku which tamed its rhetoric at home and distanced itself from anti-Russian geopolitical projects internationally. However, Moscow lost as well. Mikhail Saakashvili who succeeded Shevardnadze, made an anti-Russian stance a cornerstone of his rule and was far less amendable to cooperation than his apparatchik predecessor. If current trends continue, Ukraine may become a visa regime recipient. It has paved the way to that by restricting travel for male Russian citizens aged between 18 and 60.

Still, Russian ruling elite has an Axilles heel in its personal and cultural integration with the West, for which they are criticised by nationalist politicians and public figures. In the words of Alexander Borodai, one of the leaders of the *Russian Spring*,

> Elite of the Russian Federation in major part is denationalised, it is not statist, nor imperial, it is cosmopolitan, which is illustrated by its own material and political economic considerations. It is constantly flocking between Monaco and London, then to New York and back.[119]

This discourse gained prominence since 2014, forcing the elite on a defensive and made it difficult to make concessions without being vulnerable to the accusations of selling off of the national interests by the ideological right.

'Soft power'/ Discourse

Western policy discourse often tends to deny Russia any positive power and is inclined to interpret Russia's actions as motivated by weakness.[120] This may be in fact a weakness of analysis which often uncritically takes the views of the former Soviet bloc elites as having a monopoly on truth.[121] Such lenses attribute qualities and intentions to the Russian leadership which it may not have. The other common assumption confusing analysis is to equate Russia's power with personality and ambitions of the omnipresent and omnipotent President Putin, who turned the country into his fiefdom.[122] Ian Birrell summarises the trend of demonisation of Russia's president: 'Putin is a fundamentally anti-Western leader whose serial disregard for the truth has destroyed his credibility as a negotiating partner. He [Putin] remains arguably a bigger threat to Western stability than Isis.'[123]The inability to see Russia beyond Putin and appreciate that although a different leader would have brought a different style, fundamentals of Russian ideological narrative are shared across the elites from liberals to security structures, confines Russian politics to that of one man.

[118] 'Russia initiates legal proceedings against Ukraine over $3bn debt,' Financial Times, 1 January 2016.
[119] Alexander Borodai, interview with the author, Moscow, May 2016.
[120] Is Putin motivated by Russia's weakness? 14 October 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34520670
[121] See a typical article 'Eastern Europe Tenses as Russia Flexes', Theresa Welsh, 25 November 2015, http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/11/25/for-countries-close-to-russia-a-different-perspective-on-putin-and-power
[122] Stephen Kotkin, 'The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin,' March/ April 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/resistible-rise-vladimir-putin
[123] 'Putin hasn't changed, but suddenly the West's short-termist rhetoric has softened,' 22 November 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/a6744286.html

The West's sneering at Russia was at odds with how the country saw itself and was seen by parts of the post-Soviet space and beyond. This greatly worried the Russian elite and required action, but earlier efforts to set up a pool of ideas to promote at home and abroad were inconclusive. Establishment of the *Russky Mir* [Russian World] foundation modelled on British Council played only a modest role in consolidating 'soft power' around a coherent model.

A popular understanding of the *Russky Mir* term includes Russian-speaking ability or preference for Russian language, recognition of Russian culture as one's own, social and cultural attraction of the way of life associated with Russia, and interest in Moscow's positioning in world affairs. However, according to Petro, the term *Russky mir* is employed differently by the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church. 'Where the state uses it as a tool for expanding Russia's cultural and political influence, the Church views it as a spiritual concept linked to God's objective for the rebuilding of a Holy *Rus*. The relationship between the two provides a popular and definable framework for Russian foreign policy. Values play a significant role in policy formulation and, throughout modern history, three constants dictate how Russia responds to Western actions: sovereignty, capability to defend that sovereignty, and loyalty to those who share Russia's sense of honour.'[124] RussVesna constituency has its own understanding.

Eventually, values-based narrative had to move beyond the cultural definition of the 'Russian World' if it were to rival the West's normative discourse and create an alternative to it. In addition to cultural values that includes family, historical tradition and the attitude to the World War II, centrality of the state and statebuilding based on a multilingual and multi-religious model emerged as an importance pillar. A rise in soft power as a foreign policy tool was a reaction to the failure of the initial expectation of an equal partnership with the West based on complimentarity of Russian resources and Western technology that could have evolved into a common identity. This gave way to the mantra that 'we were cheated as common fools' in the 1990s, with an implication that this should not be allowed in future. Defiance moved centre-stage. Recalling ex-Yugoslavia as a warning example, defeat of Serbs in the Balkans should not be repeated in the post-Soviet space.

Moscow started to stress a challenge to unipolarity and the 'end of history' ideology, expose contradictions in Western societies and project its interpretation of international affairs presented in culturally more accessible terms than, for example, *Euronews* in Russian. Its role in Ukraine and Syria sought to portrait Russia as a civilisational centre rather than a mere nation-state. Donbass gave a huge boost to the Russian World which acquired emotional resonance and got its first heroes. It exacerbated the perceived values gap between the West and Russia, yet Russia claims it occupies the higher moral ground by defending its core values of honour in the context of the unique historical, religious, and cultural bonds with Ukraine.[125]

Soft power is a noticeably growing asset, but it is in the eye of the beholder and certainly does not work for everybody.[126] Still, observers register Russia's rising soft power among European parties and countries that feel victims of the EU 'technocracy,' such as Greece or Hungary.127 Laruelle notes an increased appeal of Russian conservatism in European right-

[124] Petro, Nicolai N. 23 March 2015. Russia's Orthodox Soft Power. http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727

[125] "Soft Power": The Values that Shape Russian Foreign Policy, David C. Speedie, U.S. Global Engagement, 30 July 2015

[126] Richard Giragorian, Soft power in Armenia: Neither soft, nor powerful. 12 August 2015. http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_soft_power_in_armenia_neither_soft_nor_powerful3094

[127] David Speedie, foreword p.viii Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship, (ed. Marlene Laruelle, Lexington Books 2015).

wing circles.128 Growing audiences for Russia Today 129 and Voice of Russia, the discourse challenging the US hegemony and what is perceived as Western moral hypocrisy, the sense of irony, lapses in political correctness - which some find refreshing, –demonstrate that those tired of Western liberal moralistic lecturing found a pole to rally around. The network now claims a worldwide audience of 700 million and is widely present in social media, having 1.4 million subscribers on YouTube.

Kremlin came to realisation that performance-based domestic legitimacy of providing security, growth and welfare also works as an image-booster abroad. While in 2004 Putin's national idea was based on economic performance, in 2015 patriotism became its key concept, successfully creating a different basis for legitimisation of the ruling regime. Combining social conservatism with technological progress and a sense of distinctiveness from the West makes the essence of a 'Russian model'. Domestically, the authorities and society in Russia have converged on conservatism as an expression of 'social contract' which gave it a moral and political consolidation and allowed the Russian elite to react with a virtually united front to the events in Ukraine.[130]

Crucially, post-Ukraine narrative emphasized the fear factor, creating a sense that Russia is encircled by enemies and that the West intends to leave it no political space in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. The resonant premise is that the West is working around the globe to foster regime change based on the examples of Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, the Middle East and Macedonia, where 'revolutionary' mechanics followed the same pattern. In Putin's words:

> The export of revolution … continues. … How did it actually turn out? … brazen destruction of national institutions … violence, poverty, and social disaster. … I cannot help asking those who caused this situation, 'Do you realise what you have done?'[131]

This is believed to be done by sponsoring 'friendly' NGOs who for years nurture anti-government sentiments, then destabilise the countries through initially peaceful protests which turn violent. It calls for vigilism if the governments and people do not wish their countries to go down that route. Some citizens of these countries who found themselves on the losing side articulate this idea publicly, giving credence to the argument. Even in China a law on NGOs modelled on the 'foreign agents' Russian equivalent is being put forward for adoption.[132]

BBC film

The West was very ready to jump on the danger discourse, and the two reinforced each other. It is hardly surprising that Moscow discourse has hardened as a reaction. The Baltic states and Poland exploited the fears of spreading the conflict more widely and talked up the 'Russian threat,' for which the post-Ukraine re-shaping of politics opened the door. The Cold Warrior discourse became a predominant orthodoxy and tends to suppress views which challenge that. 'we can use this fear of Russia in the EU neighbourhood countries for the EU to save their sovereignty and independence.' In this line of argument, if the ENP countries are sufficiently scared of Russia, they will be drawn towards the EU to seek its protection. Simultaneously, the

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[128] Marlene Laruelle. November 2013. 'Conservatism as the Kremlin's New Toolkit: an Ideology at the Lowest Cost,' Russian Analytical Digest, no. 138.

[129]http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/dec/21/bbc-world-service-information-war-russia-today

[130] Leonid Polyakov. December 2015. 'Conservatism in Russia: Political Tool or Historical Choice?' IFRI Russia/ NIS Centre, Paris.

[131] Putin in Address to the UN General Assembly, 28 September 2015.

[132] HRIC Law Note: Draft Law on Foreign NGOs Undermines Chinese Civil Society and China's International Engagement, 17 September 2015, Human Rights in China. http://www.hrichina.org/en/legal-resources/hric-law-note-draft-law-foreign-ngos-undermines-chinese-civil-society-and-chinas

EU must invest into hard security, reinforce its borders and surveillance[133] in recognition that its soft power in the ENP ran out of mileage and begs hard power deployment. Much of what is written and said about Russia in the UK is in danger of losing an analytical capacity, as it is influenced by emotional and existential considerations rather than rational reasoning. Although BP is the largest British investor in Russia, Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House its sponsors calls for treating Russia as an enemy:

> NATO must retain its credibility as a deterrent to Russian aggression. In particular, it needs to demonstrate that limited war is impossible and that the response to 'ambiguous' or 'hybrid' war will be robust. Conventional deterrent capability must be restored as a matter of urgency and convincingly conveyed.

It argues that 'the West [should be] better prepared for any further deterioration in relations with Russia' and 'when dealing with Russia, optimism is not a strategy.'[134] Fear factor masks awkward questions of if people are anti-Russian, what makes them more European? What are the qualities that a 'European' has which a 'Russian' does not? To what extent non-democratic means are appropriate to combat Russian 'soft power' and are conducive to 'European values'? In Ukraine fourteen Russian channels have been banned in 2014 and editorial premises raided. Still, 18% of viewing audience still manage to watch Russian TV which perhaps respond to a need which Ukrainian and Western media do not address and legitimacy of which they deny. Moldova is following the same route: in January 2016 journalists from three Russian media outlets were banned from entering to cover the protests. This prompted a Russian reaction that the countries that seek European closeness, fail to live to the values the EU preaches.[135]

Relations with the Western CIS region

Belarus

Belarus is one of Moscow closest allies, joined in a Union State, while Russia is pivotal to its political, economic and cultural life. Indeed, significance of the relationship cannot be overestimated, although discourses differ on whether its influence is benign or not. What unites the two countries is a claim to the joint political and cultural heritage of the Soviet era. Both Russian and Belarusian state narratives are based on the acknowledgement of the Soviet past rather than on its rejection, with the Second World War as the centre piece of immense heroism, suffering and sacrifice. On a popular level, the soft power works very well, evident in the use of Russian language, open borders, ease of travel and education, mutually understandable life strategies and prominence of Russian TV channels. There are few cultural barriers in the society to Russian embrace.

This does not mean that Belarus is keen to unify with Russia: in December 2015 IISEP poll, only 29.7 % said that they would vote 'yes' in a hypothetical referendum on joining Russia, while the EU featured worse with 19.8% wanting to be a part of it.[136] In 2015, out of foreign media, 65% of viewing public trusted Russian TV channels and 44% - western ones.[137]

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[133] Chatham House workshop, 2 December 2015.

[134] The Russian Challenge. Chatham House Report Keir Giles, Philip Hanson, Roderic Lyne, James Nixey, James Sherr and Andrew Wood | June 2015, p. viii. When it comes to a discussion on Russia, gloves are off. Questions on the Chatham House 'EU as a regional power' workshop agenda include 'how can Ukraine be reformed if Russia is bent on destabilising it?' 'The EU as a regional power: the Eastern Neighbourhood', 2 December 2015.

[135] МИД РФ прокомментировал запрет на въезд журналистов из России в Молдову, 21 January 2016, http://www.vesti.md/?mod=news&id=53485

[136] Подальше от Евросоюза IISEPS, December 2015. http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3901

[137] Беларуски Час, January 2015. http://belchas.by/news/samye-populiarnye-v-belarusi-telekanaly.html

Although in 2011 president Putin said that unification of Belarus and Russia was 'possible, very desirable and entirely depends on the will of Belarusians', and that Belarusians should 'make efforts towards joining Russia' if they wanted so,[138] in reality political trajectories have been moving apart.

Population's openness towards Russia gives apprehension to the national elite, exacerbated by the Crimea experience. A fear of assimilation in the long term dominates the minds of political class who point out that the prominence of Belarusian language and identification with it is lower as compared to the Soviet era.[139] In this paradigm, Minsk only relies on Moscow's goodwill not to overtake Belarus which could be easily accomplished.

Nevertheless, Belarus has been a loyal participant in Moscow's integration designs. The EEU treaty was signed in Astana on 29 May 2014. The Union envisages creation by 2015 of four freedoms of movement, i.e. of capital, labour, services and goods, although implementation has been slow, in large measure explained by Russia's reluctance to provide access to its domestic market. Belarus' disadvantage during accession negotiations lay in its limited expert capacity to recognise potential traps in the proposals emanating from Moscow. Still, the EEU served as an alternative for Belarus to integration within the Eastern Partnership format. Lukashenko failed to attend the May 2015 Partnership summit in Riga reluctant to upset Kremlin.[140]

At the same time, Belarusian president has not been an easy customer for Moscow and had previously threatened to block the EEU signing if restrictions in trade, including oil product duties, were not removed.[141]He hailed the signing, despite his disagreement on exemptions on oil export duty and Russia's decision to postpone the formation of a single energy market until 2025. Even after the signing, the EEU remained a space of negotiations where an alliance between Minsk and Astana was working to offset Russia's dominance. For example, Belarus and Kazakhstan denied support to Russia in raising duties on import of Ukrainian goods[142] and refused to join Russian sanctions over Ukraine. Accession of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in 2015 limited Russia's power further, as the EEU member states were reluctant to support Russia's geopolitical fights.

For Belarus, the pattern of relations has been set and is unlikely to be disrupted: sustained alignment with Russia combined with freedom to develop relations with other foreign policy actors, as well as lobbying the interests of Belarusian producers in the Russian market, who suffer losses because of weakened rouble and economic downturn.[143] Russia's interest in Belarus is driven by three prevailing considerations:

- Political – maintenance of internal stability, predictability in bilateral relations with no unpleasant surprises for Moscow;

[138]Plaschinsky, G. (2011), 'The Road to Russia is Paved with Good Intentions'. URL: http://belarusdigest.com/story/road-russia-paved-good-intentions-7009

[139] On discussion of language and identity see, for example, Grigory Ioffe, 'Belarus: National Identity and Schengen Visas,' Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 11 Issue: 95, 21 May, 2014 http://www.jamestown.org/

[140] Alexander Klaskovskii. Белорусская дипломатия на коне. 4 January 2016. http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/01/04/ic_articles_112_190629/

[141]Makhovsky Andrei, 'Belarus won't block creation of Eurasian Economic Union,' 9 May 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/09/us-russia-belarus-unions-idUSBREA480GY20140509

[142]http://forbes.ua/news/1374097-belarus-i-kazahstan-zablokirovali-povyshenie-poshlin-dlya-ukrainy

[143] Belarusian Foreign Policy Index, November – December 2015, Belarusian Institute for Security Studies, http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_FPI29_2015ru.pdf

- Geopolitics – alignment with the Moscow's line in regional and global affairs, participation in Eurasian integration projects and no attempts to enter NATO and the EU rival blocs;
- Geoeconomic – after the Ukraine debacle, significance of transit via Belarus to the West grew. Strategic importance as a transport corridor for Russian exports means that Moscow has to decide on its long-term infrastructure projects. They will be based on a calculation how reliable an ally Belarus is, what the price for its loyalty is and whether Moscow is willing to pay it.

Close ties with Russia serve as the main pillar of the existing economic model while its subsidies and cheap energy have been crucial in keeping Belarusian economy afloat. Some argue that they account for the lack of reform: 'when Russian money expires, reforms are talked up; as soon as the new influx arrives, the talk goes down.'[144] The total Russian support in different subsidies has been estimated at 16 percent of the Belarusian GDP in 2012. They have cushioned external threats to the country's stability, eliminating reform incentives. However, Ukraine crisis has accentuated a threat of the disproportionate reliance on Russian support to Belarusian economic and political independence. President Lukashenko welcomed other financial sources on the condition that they would not undermine his power, turning to the International Monetary Fund for a loan in 2015.

Minsk is in a never-ending process of negotiation with Moscow on multiple levels, gaining temporary relief and hoping to obtain a better deal. The 2014 round was in Belarus' favour: Russia agreed to phase out its oil export duties. In 2015 a half of their amount, which is estimated at US$3.3-4 billion, stayed in the Belarus' budget. In addition, two Belarusian oil refineries received Russian oil for full-capacity operation. Moscow also agreed to lend Belarus US$2 billion for ten years with a 4-percent interest rate to prop up Belarus's hard currency reserves.[145]

After a year, this began to change because of diminishing resources in Russia and a growing frustration with Lukashenko's government. Lending from the EEU Anti-Crisis Fund expected by Minsk in 2015, failed to materialise as Moscow got more stringent with respect to non-performing loans. It had been inconsistent in the past in making Minsk fulfil its loans and subsidies' conditions, and allowed the latter to get away with not meeting its obligations. While some of Belarus industrial assets are attractive for Moscow which insisted on their privatisation, the most lucrative, such as oil processing or machine building, have not been a subject to it. Those offered for tender came with heavy conditions attached, making commercial investment unviable. The state enterprises could be attractive only if Russian investors would be allowed to radically restructure them, - an option which Minsk so far successfully resisted.

Significance of Belarus for transit necessitates maintenance of the political *status quo* and a predictable leadership to deal with, while keeping a set of leverages to ensure compliance. Purchase of *Beltransgas*, the national gas pipeline operator in 2011 provides some degree of control. On this occasion Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller announced a threefold salary rise for Beltransgas' employees at Putin's request.

President Lukashenko emerged as a beneficiary of the events in Ukraine, as he saw opportunities in the aggravating crisis. Belarus profited from disruption of flights between Russia and Ukraine in October 2015, when Minsk became a transit hub. It hoped to divert to Belarus a lion's share of gas transit from Ukraine, which Moscow plans to cut off from its supplies to Europe by 2019, and revive the idea of a second section of the Yamal-Europe gas

[144] Author's interview with a political analyst in Minsk, May 2014.
[145] http://news.tut.by/economics/398288.html

pipeline with a capacity of 15 billion cubic meters.[146] However, Moscow fears that the country may prove as problematic a transit partner as Ukraine if transit via Belarus is significant enough to provide Minsk with leverage.[147] Moscow has been hesitant to route any major flows through its territory. In March 2015 Gazprom announced that the Belarusian option had been scrapped in favour of the North Stream – 2 via Baltic seabed which delivers gas straight to the German market.

Defence is another sensitive sphere of cooperation. In theory, Russia and Belarus are the closest allies through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation which commits them to collective defence in case of an external aggression. Moscow supplies Minsk with weapons and military hardware. Many Belarusian military professionals were educated in Russia and look at its armed forces as a model. At the same time, creation of a joint air defence command on the western border which is also Russia's line of defence vis-à-vis the West has not been accepted by Belarus even after the 2012 'teddy bear' incident for the fear of losing sovereignty over the border control. Russia leases two dual-use facilities in the country, - an air-surveillance station in Gantsevichi and a communication centre for Russian Navy in Vileika, - but the future of cooperation is uncertain. An issue of an air base in Bobruisk announced by the Russian military to be opened in January 2016, has been put on hold. Lukashenko who recently mended relations with the West, is not keen to disrupt them by a move that could be seen as a Russian provocation, in which Belarus would be blamed by implication.[148]

Still, there are risks. While the general public is sympathetic to the Russian position, intelligentsia has been split along pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian lines which may emerge as a new identity marker. There is an existential dilemma in political intelligentsia's discourse: 'Are you together with Lukashenko against Moscow or are you with Moscow against Lukashenko?'Crisis in Ukraine acts as a substitute for a political spectacle at home where internal process is too opaque to allow a robust debate. Thus, Ukraine satisfies intelligentsia's desire for intellectual and emotional stimulation. An apprehension of Russia's future intentions led to a discourse on Belarus' vulnerability.[149] A statehood nationalist elite discourse concerns the choice of geopolitical trajectory away from Moscow towards Transatlantic integration, including NATO membership and an association agreement with the EU. In this paradigm, Russia is seen as an expansionist power with an ambition to swallow Belarus,[150] while NATO and the EU memberships serve as guarantees that this would not happen.

The President benefits in both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian visions. In the first, - as a Russian ally in the regional projects; in the second – as a guarantor of Belarus independence against potential Russian advances and the main interlocutor for the new Ukrainian government among the CIS states. Soliciting support among nationalist-minded opposition by presenting Russia as an aggressor and himself – as a protector from it is easy for Lukashenko when this becomes politically expedient.

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[146] 'Putin Tells Gazprom to Revisit Yamal-Europe-2 Pipeline Project,' 4 April 2013, RIA Novosti, http://en.ria.ru/business/20130404/180432128/Putin-Tells-Gazprom-to-Revisit-Yamal-Europe-2-Pipeline-Project.html

[147] Ol'ga Samofalova. Лукашенко хочет заполучить украинский транзит, 21 August 2015. http://www.vz.ru/economy/2015/8/21/762502.html

[148] Alexander Klaskovsky, Ни авиабазы, ни кредита. Путин ждет, пока Лукашенко "созреет"? 22 December 2015. http://ru.delfi.lt/abroad/belorussia/ni-aviabazy-ni-kredita-putin-zhdet-poka-lukashenko-sozreet.d?id=69923504

[149] See, for example, Andrei Paratnikov interview to *NashaNiva*, 'ПсихологическиБеларусьуязвима, с низкойспособностьюзащищаться' 23 May 2014, http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=128373&lang=ru

[150] See, for example, Andrei Fedorov, 'Минск не хочет оказаться с Москвой в одном окопе,' 30 December 2015. http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2015/12/30/ic_articles_112_190595/

Ukraine is a sore point in Russo-Belarusian relations. Russia's overtaking of Crimea came as a surprise to Belarusian political establishment, over which it was apparently not consulted. Minsk accepted the *de facto* situation, but differed from Russia in stating its support for territorial integrity of Ukraine. The president sought to play an independent card by arguing against federalisation of Ukraine, recognising the new government in Kiev and condemning the hostilities in Ukraine's south-east. Moscow was not happy about the pro-Ukrainian rhetoric, such as Lukashenko's speech after Petro Poroshenko inauguration ceremony which included *inter alia*: 'Ukraine should be a single and integral state and it will be such a state. Why not go to Crimea and negotiate the return of it? Do not lose Crimea.'[151]

Minsk is aware that the situation of a heightened Western attention to Ukraine is not forever and is determined to maximise benefits. Its pro-Kiev position was appreciated by the EU and the US which took steps to mend their relations with Belarus. The conflict allowed Minsk to realise some of its foreign policy objectives in rapprochement with the West and use the discord in its interests.[152] When it offered to act as an intermediary in building bridges with Kiev, Belarus emerged as a peacemaker, even if only by a virtue of its geography. Lukashenko grew so confident in this role that he offered Belarus mediation in the Russia – Turkey dispute.

Still, the situation in Ukraine is not easy for Minsk. On the one hand, relations with Russia are important. On the other hand, Belarus has serious and long-term economic and security interests in Ukraine. The country is a major market for Belarusian producers. Belarus did not support Russia in closing the CIS free trade regime with Ukraine, but agreed to participate in controls over Ukrainian imports and transit of the EU goods which go via it. At the same time, it covertly re-exports banned Ukrainian produce into Russia, as well as the sanctioned EU agricultural goods. Ukrainian media reported clandestine defence cooperation, in which Belarus renders assistance in building fighting capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces.[153] The lessons that Belarusian leadership drew from Ukraine crisis are that at a critical junction the EU promises cannot be trusted and that Russia will decide alone what course of action to choose and inform the allies *post factum*.

Russia's policy remains a key variable in Belarus. Annexation in some form is highly unlikely and hardly possible. There is no sense of identity politics at play and Lukashenko is mindful of security implications of politisation of identity. Free movement of people and goods facilitate social ties, and there is no 'push factor' on a popular level. In practical terms, Belarus provides most things that matter for Moscow anyhow or would do so if sufficient incentives are applied. Economic support to Belarus will continue, but with more conditionality and greater insistence that they are met.

Moldova

Russia's interest in Moldova is fairly limited. Moscow prefers the status quo, i.e. for Moldova to stay neutral, not seek a NATO entry and not turn into a mouthpiece of anti-Russian rhetoric. Unlike in Ukraine, signing of the Moldova – EU Association Agreement in 2013 proceeded with barely a reaction from Moscow and was hardly regarded as an existential choice. Moldova is not a transit country for Russian goods, but depends on exports of its agricultural produce and labour force to Russia. Transdniestria issue, and Russia's role in it, has been a sore point for two decades but its significance scaled down. Moscow abandoned serious

[151] 'Belarus President attends Poroshenko inauguration, says Ukraine should remain united,' Minsk Capital TV, 7 June 2014, http://www.ctv.by/en/belarus-president-lukashenko-attends-poroshenko-inauguration-ceremony-says-ukraine-should-remain

[152] Elena Daneiko. Между РФ и ЕС: куда повернется Минск в 2016 году. 22 December 2015. http://www.dw.com/ru/

[153] Belarusian Foreign Policy Index.

efforts at its resolution after the 2003 Kozak memorandum was rejected by Chisinau.[154] The then Communist president Vladimir Voronin was led to believe that the EU and the US would deliver a better offer than the one brokered by Moscow, and failed to appreciate that the proposal on the table was as good as it could get in the circumstances. Putin's reaction was curt, and Kremlin's attention hardly turned to Transdniestria resolution ever since, although Moscow did not recognise region's independence unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Still, Association Agreement became a momentous event that deepened the division between the two banks of Moldova, as Transdniestria was unwilling to share that route. Political negotiations stalled and relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol deteriorated after the signing. The thorniest issue was the DCFTA that threatened the region's exports into the EU and could seriously undermine its economy. Nevertheless, by the time it came into force in January 2016, Tiraspol authorities found a way of participation at the last minute without renouncing their independence claim. On the whole, the EU is regarded in Transdniestria with great suspicion, while Russia is seen as a protector from its expansionism. EU's role in Ukraine, implications of the crisis there upon Trandsniestria, and cultural resentment of what are regarded as alien values in a socially conservative society, such as gay rights and juvenile justice, add to this perception.[155]

In this context, Russian version of pragmatic conservatism has more mileage in the region. Tiraspol sought a greater inclusion into Russia's political and socio-cultural space since Moldova's EU association. The region started to follow the Russian educational curriculum, adopt its law templates, healthcare standards etc. Approximately 180.000 residents have Russian passports. Russian power structures are omnipresent, and information and economic resources are deployed, albeit on a reduced scale due to economic problems in Russia. Moscow supplies peacekeepers, provides for an upkeep of Transdniestria's security sector and deploys an unknown number of troops stationed without Moldova's consent.

The situation on the Right Bank is far from straightforward, as the public is divided along identity and geopolitical lines. There is a significant electorate which supports closer ties with Russia, and political forces representing this constituency are active. Dissatisfaction with the state of affairs under the pro-European government is widespread: in November 2015 88% of Moldova's citizens (excluding Transdniestria) believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction.[156]In Gagauzia nine out of 10 people consider that the autonomous region should strengthen its relations with Russia.[157]In this climate, an inclusion of Transdniestrian population into all-Moldova vote would tip the electoral balance away from the current government who wishes for less rather than more Russia-leaning voters. Should the two banks politically re-integrate, Tiraspol may become a game changer in Moldovan politics.

Thus, reintegration entails a high political risk, and after the years of frustration, there is less energy on the Right Bank to commit resources to it. Potential perils loom large, while pro-unification incentives are not obvious. There is a perception in intellectual circles on both banks that re-integration is less of an internal agenda, but an international roadmap compelled by the US and the EU for geopolitical reasons rather than deriving from the indigenous priorities.

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[154] Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdniestria, Europe Report N°157 17 June 2004, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/moldova/157-moldova-regional-tensions-over-transdniestria.aspx

[155] Author's field research in the region, September 2015.

[156] «Барометр общественного мнения» проводится Институтом общественных политик дважды в год при поддержке фонда Soros 8 December 2015 *Gagauzinfo agency* http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=22080

[157] http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=17032

There is also an apprehension of being used as proxies in the West's fallout with Russia. After 25 years of separate development, Transdniestria issue appears irresolvable on the basis of Moldova's territorial integrity, and Chisinau is implicitly resigned to that. The limbo status increases dependency on Moscow, while legitimating independence would provide the Tiraspol authorities with more room for manoeuvre.

Conclusion

Ukraine crisis showed that the pattern of power projection in Russia has changed. Economic instruments scaled down, while security and ideational considerations increased in significance. Moscow drew a realpolitik lesson that power in Europe mostly lies with the key member states, such as Germany and France rather than the Union as a whole. They were prepared to engage in crisis mitigation and offer an alternative to a punitive Transatlantic approach. After Brexit, relations with individual states will be key in Moscow's approach to Europe in future that the EU s a whole, but it will watch the EU – Belorussian rapprochement carefully, deploying economic instruments if necessary, to signal the limitations.

The crisis also conveyed a sense to Moscow that if it wishes to see its power grow, it has to engage with internal politics of the neighbouring states and not leave the developments at the mercy of ruling regimes. Already four post-Soviet presidents have been deposed by popular protests with a relative ease, each time forcing Moscow to start building relationships anew. Thus, soft power projection is likely to grow more diverse and proactively deployed.

Ultimately, Russia's power understood in realist terms, is not geared against the West, unless it challenges its core strategic interests. It aims to find an appropriate place for itself in European affairs, in which the Western CIS has a special significance. The challenge is an absence of an end picture: how the ruling elite would square anti-Westernism it unleashed with being personally integrated with the West in material and cultural terms? And after Ukraine, is Europe a friend or a foe?

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ