

# Putin's Patriotic Pivot

Recent events in Ukraine have crystallised the Putin regime's move towards a more patriotic and bellicose national agenda, once again making Russia a difficult partner for the West.

By Aglaya Snetkov

Is Vladimir Putin's Russia now an uncooperative and dangerous pariah state – and what if anything is at the heart of his new vision for Russia? Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 triggered debates about the foreign and security agendas that his third presidential administration would follow. Would Putin 3.0 see a return to the early years in which he called for building a strong Russia with a centralized state, an embrace of the modernization agenda put forward by Medvedev (2008–2012), or would he pick up where he had left in the final years of his second term by following a more bellicose and anti-Western securitisation agenda? Recent events in Ukraine and Crimea appear to signal that the Putin regime has settled on the latter course rather than the former. Indeed, the Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 have simultaneously served to boost and crystalize the regime's new patriotic program and undo much of the good-will won among its foreign partners during the Sochi Olympic Games. Damage to Russia's international image has been further exacerbated by the recent shooting down of Malaysian flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine. Unmindful of the criticism its polices have attracted, the Putin regime has also moved to implement a greater securitisation program on the domestic front in order to silence its critics under the banner of patriotism. This more bellicose foreign security policy, coupled with an increasingly anti-Western patriotic security agenda has put Russia at odds with many of its regional and international partners, continues to undermine the regime's stated aim to re-invigorate Russia's current

flagging economic situation and could perhaps also undermine its ambitions of creating a Eurasian Union.

## An uncertain return

Upon his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin – for the first time since the late 1990s – appeared to lack a coherent ideological program. There was a shift from an emphasis on modernisation towards stability, and a return to “aggressive nationalism and Anti-Americanism”,<sup>1</sup> but the overriding impression was that the regime's political project was incoherent, splintered and ad-hoc. Whilst Putin continued Medvedev's efforts to attract more capital investment from the West and promote economic deals with the US and

## KEY POINTS

- Despite its initial uncertainty, the Putin regime has now settled upon a much more assertive nationalist regional and foreign policy trajectory.
- The annexation of Crimea has signalled a major revision in Russia's regional policy, and has substantially undermined its long-standing commitment to non-interventionism in international affairs.
- The impact of Ukraine has not only been on its foreign policy but also on Russia's domestic sphere, as Putin's regime has launched a major re-securitisation of its internal space.
- The Putin regime has been unable to resolve the tensions between Russia's ambitions of becoming a more powerful international actor and its ongoing economic slowdown. The Ukrainian crisis has brought these contradictions into a sharper focus.

European states, the on-going disagreements between Russia and the West over the appropriate response to the Syria crisis, and animosity over issues such as the Magnitsky Law (a US law intended to punish Russian officials implicated in the death of the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky), have limited the scope for such economic coordination. Indeed, the regime's attempts to cordon-off economic cooperation from the increasing intensity of its anti-Western discourse in both foreign and domestic security policy resulted in an increasingly incoherent policy agenda.

However, by late 2013/early 2014, this initial uncertainty about the direction of the third Putin presidency gave way to a growing consensus that its new platform centred on a traditional notion of patriotism and, in so doing, was designed to appeal to "ordinary" and largely "unheard" Russians. The Putin regime's adoption of a more patriotic and nationalist perspective can be seen as an attempt to win back domestic support lost to nationalist opposition figures, such as Alexey Navalny, who were influential in mobilising the protest and opposition movement during the 2011–12 electoral cycle. This focus on generating pride for Russia's strength was further galvanised during the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014. Indeed, the successful hosting of the Sochi games, despite various concerns voiced by international observers, was heralded by the regime as evidence of both its competence and also of the pride that Russians should take in their country's capabilities and international standing.

#### Showdown in Ukraine

Whilst the regime seemed at least partially interested in continuing to balance the aim of greater economic cooperation with the West, with an assertive patriotic agenda within its foreign policy during the initial period following Putin's return to the presidency, this changed in early 2014. The trigger was the crisis in Ukraine, and in particular the decision to annex Crimea in March 2014 and the Kremlin's role in ongoing clashes in eastern Ukraine.

The initial crisis in Ukraine emerged as a result of President Yanukovich's decision to reject an EU Association agreement in favour of joining the Russian-led Eurasian Union. This led to large-scale popular protests against both this specific decision and the Yanukovich regime in general, under the banner "Euromaidan", most significantly in Kiev and the western cities of Ukraine. These protests continued until the ousting of Yanukovich, and the formation of an interim government in Kiev under the premiership of Arseniy Yatsenyuk in February 2014. Following these events, counter-protests, backed by the Putin regime took



Russian President Vladimir Putin looks on next to military personnel during a ceremony marking Victory Day in Sevastopol, 9 May 2014. *Reuters / Maxim Shemetov*

place in the Crimean peninsula, a region historically part of Russia, alongside the amassing of Russian forces on the peninsula, culminating in the holding of an internationally disputed referendum held in Crimea on 16 March, which, Moscow claimed, saw a majority vote for Crimea to secede from Ukraine and accede to the Russian Federation. The subsequent standoff between the Russian, Ukrainian and rebel forces and its annexation of Crimea demonstrated the full extent of Russia's bellicose and revisionist foreign policy position on Ukraine, and marked the most-significant revision of international borders in the region since 1991.

Following the annexation of Crimea into Russia, groups in eastern Ukraine that were opposed to the new government in Kiev and fostered similar separatist ambitions emerged, seizing control of governmental buildings and declaring that their towns, cities and region were now under their independent authority. Throughout this period, Russia continued its support for such groups, for example, by providing them with covert military assistance and know-how, alongside pressuring the Ukrainian state through the initial amassing of Russian troops on the Russia-Ukraine border. Particularly, since Ukraine's signing of the EU Association Agreement, widespread reports have emerged pointing to an escalation in Russia's military assistance to these groups, in the face of offensive operations by the Ukrainian forces to retake control of these cities, which continue to see clashes between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed militants.

However, the crash of Malaysian flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July, may substantially alter the dynamic in the conflict, if it is indeed proven, that it had been brought down by the Russian-backed rebels using a Rus-

sian BUK anti-aircraft missile system. Indeed, tensions over how best to carry out the investigation in and around the crash-site, alongside issues of access for the international investigation teams and questions of responsibility for the disaster are mounting, demonstrating the complex and evolving situation on the ground. Whilst the full repercussions of the crash remain uncertain at this stage, Russia's decision to go on a counter-attack by blaming the Ukrainian government and failing to take any responsibility for the disaster has only served to flare up anti-Russian sentiment both in Ukraine, but critically also in the West, which is likely to reverberate for some time.

### **Russia and the West: at odds once more**

Whilst many of the elements within Russia's official position on the Ukraine crisis are nothing new, this crisis has served to firmly position a focus on Russia's historical greatness, a more interventionist regional policy, and a sense of the need for Russia to protect itself from the malign intentions of the West, as the ideological centre points of both Russia's domestic and international policy. Critically, unlike in the West, the Euromaidan protests have been presented by the Putin regime as a de facto illegitimate coup and overthrow of an elected head of state, sanctioned and supported by the West. The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing fighting in eastern Ukraine have largely been couched in the historical imaginary of a common and shared past between the populations of Russia and these regions, manifested in a sympathetic view of the position put forward by the pro-Russian fighters.

As widely commented upon, the Ukraine represents one of the most significant security crises in Europe since the Cold War. The EU, US, NATO and other Western actors have strongly condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of separatist groups in eastern Ukraine. If the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 cast a long shadow over the Medvedev presidency, then the Russian annexation of Crimea is the most pivotal event (so far) of Putin's third presidency in terms of external relations. Russia now finds itself in a diplomatic impasse with the new political order in Ukraine, while its relations with the West have reached a new low point, as the US and EU apply sanctions, in the form of asset freezes and visa bans, on Putin's inner circle, at same time as analysts forecast a problematic future for the Russian economy.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst at this stage, it seems unlikely that Russia will seek to annex parts of eastern Ukraine, Russian support for anti-Kiev and separatist fighters on the ground is on-going. It is also likely that

Russia will continue interfering with the new Ukrainian government's attempts to rebuild itself as a more democratic and united country, either through its influence on the ground in eastern Ukraine or its blackmailing tactics over energy. However, it seems that, under current conditions, it has failed to reverse Ukraine's move towards its European partners, as demonstrated by the signing of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement in June 2014.

On an international level, the Ukraine crisis had also demonstrated the ongoing rift between Russia and its Western counterparts, particularly as the Putin regime has now firmly adopted a more patriotic and resurgent position in foreign affairs, a gap that is unlikely to be bridged in the near future. Indeed, instead of trying to re-build bridges with its international partners, Russia's response in the wake of the flight MH17 downing was to go on the offensive against the international consensus that it bears some responsibility for this crash. In turn, the image of Putin as a dark and menacing figure bearing culpability for the crash now looms large in the West, and is unlikely to dissipate any time soon if parallels with the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988 prove to be correct.

### **Re-securitization of Russia's internal space**

Putin's return to the presidency also saw a sharp re-securitisation of the Russian domestic space. Seemingly picking up from where he had left off in early 2008, the regime set about characterising an ever wider range of groups and

#### **FURTHER READING**

##### **Russia, the West, and Military Intervention**

*Roy Allison (Oxford University Press, 2013)*

The question of Russia's policy towards military interventions has been a prominent issue in recent years, be it over Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, Iran and many other international security crises. Roy Allison's monograph is the first such work to delve into this question in great depth.

##### **Russia's foreign policy change and continuity in national identity**

*Andrei Tsygankov (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013)*

Andrei Tsygankov's monograph explores in great depth the ebbs and flows of Russia's national identity, and argues that central to the way in which Russia conducts its foreign policy are not only its material capabilities or external realities but also its perceptions of itself and its friends and foes.

##### **The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation**

*Andrew Wilson (Yale University Press, 2000)*

Andrew Wilson provides an outstanding account of the formation of Ukraine, its historical, cultural, linguistic, political and national contexts and experiences that continue to shape Ukraine's politics to the present day.

sections of society as internal security risks to national stability. Much of this domestic re-securitisation was also closely inter-linked with the increase in anti-Western rhetoric, and increasing tensions in its international relationships with the US and European states.

Indeed, the crisis in Ukraine also accelerated the domestic security clampdown and the promotion of a more patriotic, traditionalist and populist agenda for Russia. On the one hand, and in contrast to the international fallout, the domestic impact of the Ukraine crisis was to galvanise public support for Putin and the regime around the Crimea issue, with his presidential approval ratings increasing significantly during the crisis to 80%, reversing his initial downturn in popularity following his return to the presidency. On the other, it precipitated an even stronger securitisation and restructuring of the domestic sphere, as all alternative opposition voices from pro-Western groups, liberal media outlets and nationalist leaders came under increasing pressure from the authorities.

Notably, media outlets came under greater pressure not to challenge the official Russian position and version of events, with critics side-lined, as seen by the removal of the editor of the Lenta.ru news website, Galina Timchenko, in March 2014. As well as seeking to increase its control over media, the regime also took steps to keep protest leaders in-check around this period, with Navalny placed under house arrest in February 2014 in relation to embezzlement charges, and banned from using the internet. At the same time, official media characterised those groups challenging the regime's policy in Ukraine and Crimea as a fifth column acting according to their own or external interests, rather than those of the nation. In this way, the regime – as following the 2004 Orange revolution – seemed to equate the developments in Ukraine with those in Russia, considering it necessary to take steps to prevent the emergence of a common cause between the nationalist and liberal critics of the regime, as had been seen in Ukraine in the shape of Euromaidan.<sup>3</sup>

### Belligerence is likely to backfire

The Kremlin's response to the Ukraine crisis reflects an intensification of a gradually developing trend since 2013 towards a more bellicose and patriotic policy, which has

come to predominate over the more economically driven modernisation agenda developed under Medvedev, which necessitated cordial relations with both Western and regional foreign policy actors and investors. Whilst most of the focus in the Western media has been on Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine, the crisis has also precipitated a re-securitisation of the Russian domestic space that had been largely underreported abroad. In spite of this policy turn, the Putin regime continues to face unresolved economic problems that necessitate not only a domestic restructuring, but also an opening up of the Russian economy to attract foreign investors, a prospect which will be increasingly difficult in the current international climate. Equally, the increasingly patriotic fervour and more active foreign security agenda cultivated by the Putin regime will not only make Russia a less attractive partner for the West, but also for its regional neighbours. Indeed, the fallout from the Ukraine crisis may have hurt the prospects for the development of a successful Eurasian Union.

To conclude, the relationship between Russia and the West now seems to be entrenched in a negative spiral with Russia being increasingly presented in the West as a rogue state headed by a sinister and crazed leader. Whilst it seems unlikely that this was actually what Putin intended to do – it might prove to be a very difficult corner for Russia to get out of any time soon. Therefore, the future prospects for Russia under the current Putin regime remain very uncertain.

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