



# NDC Research Report

*Research Division*

*NATO Defense College*

*08/16 – October 2016*

## **The Determinants of Recent Russian Behaviour: What do these Mean for NATO Decision Makers?**

John Foreman<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The last decade has seen a steady deterioration of the relationship between the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) and the West<sup>2</sup> over, *inter alia*, allegations of the murder and imprisonment of political opponents, a crackdown on media freedoms, the invasion of Georgia, and worsening domestic repression. Yet the relationship reached rock bottom following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing support of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. In a stroke, President Putin transformed 'the post-Cold War diplomatic calculus,'<sup>3</sup> shattered trust, and broke previous mutual agreements on sovereign equality, and the territorial integrity of states.<sup>4</sup>

Ahead of State Duma elections in September, which will act to some extent as a further referendum on 16 years of the Putin regime, it is timely to assess the chief determinants<sup>5</sup> of recent Russian behaviour. This essay will argue that, although specific circumstances differ, Russian long-term behaviour, both domestic and foreign, is broadly consistent; geography, politics and national identity continue to shape how Russia and its leaders view the world, understand and organize themselves and act. This prism, rather than a chronology of events, will be used to analyze the question using recent examples. Finally, recommendations will be provided.

---

1 John Foreman is a Commander in the UK Royal Navy, currently serving on the EU Military Staff in Brussels. He previously served at British Defence Attaché in Kyiv, Ukraine. This paper won the Commandant's Award for the best Individual Paper of Senior Course 128. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

2 Defined as 'those states that share certain fundamental political ideologies, including those of liberal democracy, the Rule of Law, and human rights.'

3 Kalb, *Imperial Gamble*, Washington DC, Brookings Institute, 2015, p. xi.

4 As contained in the Helsinki Final Act and NATO-Russia Founding Act.

5 'A factor that decisively affects the nature or outcome of something,' OED.

## Geography

Although Napoleon's aphorism<sup>6</sup> that *'to know a nation's geography is to know its foreign policy'* is applicable to all states, Russia is an extreme case. Located on a *'vast and exposed plain,'*<sup>7</sup> Russia's experience of repeated invasion has led to a profound sense of insecurity,<sup>8</sup> and shaped its national outlook. First, there was a practical need to protect against invaders; the military instrument of power has long had state primacy; the Russian Army has been the largest in Europe since the end of the 17th century. Second, Russia directly equates territory held with security gained, leading to a desire to expand its defensive frontiers to prevent attack. The development of new Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities to deny a potential adversary's freedom of manoeuvre beyond Russia's border, as part of the current Russian military modernization programme, can also be seen in this light.<sup>9</sup> Russia's own *'manifest destiny,'* as evinced during its rapid expansion from the 18th century, has been to acquire as much land as possible, bringing it into routine conflict with its Western neighbours. Third, the Russian psyche displays a *'defensive aggressiveness,'*<sup>10</sup> viewing its neighbours not as potential Allies but as bridgeheads for potential foreign aggression, necessitating their subjugation or domination by whatever means available.

More broadly, Russia's position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, its location on a religious fault line between Eastern and Western Christianity, and its extended Mongol occupation, together resulted in a *'schism'*<sup>11</sup> that left Russia physically *'in'* Europe but not wholly *'of'* Europe. Kissinger notes<sup>12</sup> that Russia, viewing itself as a *'beleaguered outpost of civilisation,'* was close enough to Europe *'to share a common cultural vocabulary yet perpetually out of phase with the Continent's historical trends.'*<sup>13</sup> He continues: *'the West saw international order as an intricate balancing mechanism; the Russian view cast it as a perpetual contest of wills, with Russia extending its domain at each phase to the absolute limit of its material resources.'* Russia seeks security *'only in [a] patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it.'*<sup>14</sup> Russia and the West have a fundamentally different understanding of what constitutes acceptable state behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

---

6 Cited by Robert D. Kaplan. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. Random House, September 2012.

7 Kennan, *Long Telegram*, Moscow, 22 February 1946.

8 Kennan, *Ibid.*

9 Frühling and Lasconjarias, *NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge*, Survival, March 2016.

10 Kotkin, *Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics*, Foreign Affairs, May/June 2016.

11 Pushkin, Letter to Chaadaev 1836 cited in Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, Penguin 2003, p.368.

12 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, Allen Lane 2014, p.51.

13 Such as Magdeburg rights, parliamentary representation, the Enlightenment and the Reformation.

14 Kennan, *Ibid.*

15 Kadri Lilik, *How to Talk with Russia*, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAT), March 2016.

## Polity<sup>16</sup>

Russia's unfortunate geography also influenced an enduring model of a strong, centralised state that serves, according to its proponents, to guarantee Russian security.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in a sprawling, disconnected and turbulent country, this strong state has also acted to enforce domestic order, repeatedly derailing 'efforts at liberal reform [due to] the need to attend to real or perceived threats.'<sup>18</sup> This strong state has habitually been personified in a single, omnipotent and coercive leader, buttressed by the Russian Orthodox Church in his quasi-religious mission to protect 'Mother Russia.' This tradition has '*emasculated individual initiative, exacerbated distrust and fortified patron-client tendencies,*'<sup>19</sup> resulting in a weak civil society with little experience of democracy, and a passive population.

Kliuchevsky described Russia as having '*an Asiatic structure, albeit one decorated by a European façade.*'<sup>20</sup> Arutunyan<sup>21</sup> explores the relationship between two enduring, co-existing and competing states in modern Russia: an external, formal, *legal-rational* state purportedly based on laws, institutions and bureaucracy, and an internal, informal, *patrimonial* state which ignores laws, subverts institutions and corrupts the bureaucracy. Thus Russia, whilst being rigid and legalistic on the *letter* of the law, will freely ignore its *spirit*.<sup>22</sup> This trait can be seen in the Russian willingness to disregard international norms, treaties and conventions it voluntarily entered into.<sup>23</sup>

## National Identity

Due to its geography, religion, culture, and history, quantifying the Russian national consciousness has vexed Russian and other thinkers<sup>24</sup> for centuries. Yet a common sense pervades that Russia is unique, a '*providential country with a special mission.*'<sup>25</sup> Figes<sup>26</sup> explores this issue, highlighting a perpetual tussle between Petrine Westernizers, ambitious to redraw Russia '*on a European grid*' along the lines of the Enlightenment, and Muscovite Slavophiles with their '*myth of a Russian soul,*' of Muscovy as a '*bearer of a truly Russian way of life set against Europe.*'

Berlin noted that Russia is ambivalent towards Europe displaying '*on the one hand, intellectual*

---

16 'An organized society; a state as a political entity.'

17 Kotkin, *Ibid.*

18 Mandelbaum, *New Russian Foreign Policy*, NY, Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1998, p.18.

19 Kotkin, *Ibid.*

20 Figes, *Ibid.* p. 369.

21 Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, US, Olive Branch Press, 2014.

22 Lilk, *Ibid.*

23 Such as the Helsinki Final Act, OSCE and WTO Charters, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the NATO-Russia Council Founding Act.

24 For the significance of the 'Russian soul' on historic behaviour see Raisa Ostapenko, *The significance of the Russian Soul in understanding contemporary geopolitics*, Cambridge Globalist, 8 June 2015. Available at <http://cambridgeglobalist.org/2015/06/08/the-significance-of-the-russian-soul-in-understanding-contemporary-geopolitics>.

25 Kotkin, *Ibid.*

26 Figes, *Ibid.*

respect, envy, admiration, a desire to emulate and excel; on the other, emotional hostility, suspicion, and contempt, a sense of being clumsy, *de trop*, of being outsiders.<sup>27</sup> He asserts that Russia combines ‘intellectual inadequacy and emotional superiority;’ it looks towards the United States and Europe as a model and craves for acceptance but ‘when they are rejected or feel that Russia’s values have been underestimated...[they] are inclined to be resentful and to lurch towards a chauvinistic pride in their country’s Asiatic size.’<sup>28</sup>

## ‘Russia’s Putin’<sup>29</sup>

Putin, who sees himself as a ‘reflection of Russia,’<sup>30</sup> is, judging by his own words and deeds, deeply influenced by the factors set out above. He conveyed his own sense of geographic insecurity at Munich in 2007, when decrying NATO expansion as a ‘serious provocation’<sup>31</sup> and in Moscow in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, when condemning the West’s historical policy of ‘containment.’<sup>32</sup> His Crimean and Ukrainian adventures suggest he shares the concerns and perceptions of his predecessors: that he had no choice but ‘to at least try to control the flatlands to Russia’s west;’<sup>33</sup> that he has the right to be the ‘Gatherer of Russian lands,’<sup>34</sup> even if these lie beyond the current borders of the Russian Federation; and that Russia possesses a ‘zone of privileged interests’<sup>35</sup> around its periphery.

In the pantheon of Russian leaders and tyrants, Putin is far from being the bloodiest autocrat. Yet he shares many leadership traits with his predecessors: a centralisation of power; rule by *diktat* or decree; a complex nexus between power and wealth; a demand for order at the expense of individual liberty; the conflation of the national interest with his own;<sup>36</sup> a lack of exposure to and understanding of the West; and sporadic, top-down efforts to reform, which come to an end when the results of reform start to challenge the very basis on which his regime is built.

Also, perhaps sensing that his own rule is ‘relatively archaic in form, fragile<sup>37</sup> and artificial in its psychological foundation,’<sup>38</sup> and as he becomes increasingly ‘more insulated from reality, more

---

27 Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, Princeton University Press, 2002.

28 Figes, *Ibid* p. 380.

29 Zlobin cited Rojansky, George Kennan, Containment, and the West’s Current Russia Problem, Research Paper 127, NDC, Rome, January 2016, p.11.

30 Kalb, *Ibid*. p.23.

31 Putin address to 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy. February 2007, via Washington Post.

32 Putin address to State Duma Deputies et al. Moscow. March 2014, via Russian Presidential Website.

33 Tim Marshall, Russia and the Curse of Geography, *The Atlantic*, October 2015.

34 A phrase traditionally associated with Ivan III - better known as Ivan the Great - who significantly expanded Russia’s territories during his rule. A coin with this motif was produced after the Crimean annexation.

35 As coined by former President Medvedev in the wake of the Russia-Georgian war in 2008.

36 Kotkin, *Ibid*.

37 Russia languishes in international governance and development indicators on corruption, rule of law, judicial independence, and press freedoms. See Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/country/%20-%20RUS#RUS>

38 Kennan, *Ibid*.

*steeped in his own mythology*,<sup>39</sup> Putin, like his predecessors, fears foreign intervention in Russian internal affairs and any challenge to his own power. An anxiety to protect his regime can be seen in his reaction to demonstrations in Moscow in 2012, to events in Kyiv in February 2014, when condemning ‘*meddling*’ at Valdai<sup>40</sup> in 2014, and through the recent formation of a new National Guard under his direct command in 2016.

On becoming President, Putin asserted that Russia was ‘*part of European culture*.’<sup>41</sup> Yet, in Munich in 2007, Putin conveyed a rising anger that the West had rejected Russia’s hand of friendship since the end of the Cold War and demanded respect as a ‘Great Power.’ Despite Russia’s efforts to become part of the international community, he asserted again in 2014 that the West, directed by the United States, has pursued an aggressive expansionist policy that has encroached on Russia’s ‘space.’ This US policy, he said, had been accompanied by efforts to overturn friendly regimes in Georgia and especially Ukraine, regimes themselves based on the Putin model.

Following his return to the Presidency in 2012 and in the wake of demonstrations against corruption and vote rigging in 2011, Putin’s tone sharpened. His views appear to have consolidated around a nebulous ‘*patriotism*’,<sup>42</sup> echoing much of the Slavophile and Eurasian school of thought,<sup>43</sup> which is based on principles of conservatism, spirituality, the common good, idealism, and communality. It sets itself against the West, which is seen as liberal, secular, individualistic, relativist and materialistic. ‘Eurasia’ spans not only Russia but also the traditional Russian imperial ‘sphere’, intrinsically bound to Russia by history, ethnicity, and blood. This idea is evinced by Putin’s drive to forge countries in this region into a Eurasian Union to provide parity with the West.<sup>44</sup> Yet, ‘*without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire*,’ Brzezinski wrote in 1997, placing Ukraine as central to Putin’s calculations. ‘Eurasianism’ manifests itself in traditional Russian chauvinism, a *droit du seigneur* over other Slavs, even denying the right of newly independent post-Soviet states to exist, but also allowing Russia’s leaders ‘*to detach their country from Western rationalism, with its fussy obsession with truth and logic*.’<sup>45</sup>

Internally, driven by this new ‘patriotism,’ ‘*any form of democracy, open economy, local governance or secularism*’<sup>46</sup> at home is regarded as highly dangerous. A leaked Russian State Cultural Policy in 2014, initiated at Putin’s behest, rejected Western principles of tolerance and multiculturalism as anathema to Russian values. Anyone who sought to challenge the ‘*natural Russian order*’ and impose

39 Galeotti, *If US Intelligence on Russia is Broken (A Bit), What Can Be Done To Help Fix It?* Author’s blog. November 15.

40 Putin remarks at Valdai 2014, via RUS Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>

41 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/06/vladimir-putin-15-ways-he-changed-russia-world>.

42 Feifer, *Putin’s Patriotism Playbook*, Foreign Affairs, February 2016.

43 Clover, *In Moscow a new Eurasianism*, International Security Affairs Journal, Fall/Winter 2014.

44 Based on the ‘*best values of the Soviet Union...[and]...to preserve the identity of the people who inhabit the Eurasian space*’ according to Putin.

45 The Economist, *The In Crowd*, 23 April 2016.

46 Barbashin and Thoburn, *Putin’s Brain*, Foreign Affairs, March 2014.

'alien' values ('traitors and fifth columnists') was to be dealt with decisively. The Russian Orthodox Church was placed at the epicentre of Russia's moral and spiritual rebirth.<sup>47</sup>

All these interlinked themes run through a tendentious article by Lavrov<sup>48</sup> in which he reiterated Putin's claims to Russian uniqueness and greatness. He rejected accusations of Russian backwardness, claimed it as a European Great Power, condemned historic Western - in particular US - aggression and interference, and referred to the Eurasian Union as necessary to achieve geopolitical equilibrium.

## Case Study: Ukraine

Russia's actions in Ukraine demonstrate Lavrov's argument in action. EU attempts to secure an Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2014 were seen as direct US interference in Russia's self-declared sphere of influence, '*aimed against Eurasian integration.*' Having tried, and failed, over many years, to secure a vassal Kyiv government through bribery, coercion, direct support to Ukraine's security services, and exhortations of a common heritage, shared wartime suffering and family, economic and religious ties, Putin denounced the events as a '*coup.*' He then moved swiftly, reportedly without informing his Foreign or Defence Ministers,<sup>49</sup> to annex Crimea in order to guarantee the presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and also to extend Russia's defensive frontier westwards. But, as seen in his post-Crimea speech, deeper emotional currents of history were also present. Putin noted '*in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia.*' Sevastopol was described as a cradle of Russian Orthodoxy and a site of Russian military glory; Kyiv as the 'mother of Russian cities.' His support to the conflict in the east of Ukraine aimed to keep the new government off balance and the country weak.

Internal factors were also at play. Demands for freedom and democracy by Maidan demonstrators were a direct threat to Putin's authoritarian model of government and seen as a spread of malign Western values counter to core 'patriotic' Russian values. Moreover '*Russia's collective identity is a negative one: people are consolidated only in the face of a perceived threat from an outside enemy.*'<sup>50</sup> Putin encouraged the Russian people to focus their domestic anger on the West and, by portraying the annexation of Crimea as defensive and the 'coup' as the evil work of the United States, and the new Ukrainian leaders as fascists, he allowed Russians to '*assume the role of victim.*' This deflected attention from an already faltering economy and post-2011 dissatisfaction with the '*cynicism, disregard for human rights, greed, and corruption*'<sup>51</sup> of his regime.

---

47 Bershidsky, *Putin's rejection of the West, in writing*, Bloomberg View, 4 April 2014.

48 Lavrov, *Ibid.*

49 Galeotti, *Ibid.*

50 Gudkov of Levada Centre, Moscow, cited in *Russia: a Strategy of Spectacle*, The Economist, 19 March 2016, p.17.

51 The Economist, *Ibid.*

## Recommendations for Decision Makers

How to deal with Russia dominated discussions at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016.<sup>52</sup> Leaders agreed to ‘*continue our strategic discussion on Euro-Atlantic security and our approach to Russia*’, implying NATO’s strategy is not settled. For the foreseeable future, the Alliance will have to deal with Russia as an ‘*adversary, competitor, partner and peer*,’<sup>53</sup> often simultaneously. Based on the earlier discussion and conclusions, broad recommendations can be drawn to inform the development of a future NATO strategy:

- **The period of strategic confrontation with Russia is likely to be extended.** Galeotti notes that ‘*we could expect to see the Russian elite trying to find some way of instituting Putinism without Putin.*’<sup>54</sup> An enduring instinct to preserve elite power and wealth will likely prevail. Thus, the tone of relations may change but the elite’s intent - regime survival - and its ways and means to achieve this will probably not change.
- **The Alliance must not panic.** Russia lacks the potential, military forces, ideology of the Soviet Union and the capacity to take on a global role. Indeed, overreacting in terms of Cold War rhetoric, attempting to isolate or damage Russia, or stationing large forces forward, will play directly into Russia’s traditional fear of encroachment.
- **NATO must not react in kind.** With Russia ‘*highly sensitive to [the] logic of force*’<sup>55</sup> and its concept of a perpetual battle of wills, Russia’s shrill tone must be met with calm, intimidation with resolve, propaganda by facts, and cynicism by values. Yet, NATO must somehow strive to maintain communication channels for a frank dialogue, to de-escalate current tensions and achieve greater predictability in its relationship.
- **The West should not personalise the issue.** Denouncing Putin as mad or irrational is unwise. From a Russian perspective, Putin is very rational and his goals - to ensure Russian security and to reclaim Great Power status - are historically consistent. Projecting Western norms of behaviour onto him or Russia is wishful thinking.
- **There is a risk of miscalculation.** Putin’s centralised rule has led to a very closely-knit, conservative and suspicious elite. There are few checks and balances on their behaviour, increasing the risk of weak understanding, narrow thinking, and poor or hasty decision-making. This risk is true for the West too.

But, most importantly and as noted by Kennan, there is an acute need for NATO to develop a **deeper understanding of Russia**, its leadership and its motives, as there ‘*is nothing as dangerous as the*

52 See Warsaw Summit Communiqué dated 9 July 2016. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm)

53 Very Senior NATO Military Official to NDC SC128, May 2016.

54 Galeotti in Moscow Times, ‘*Who will replace Putin in 2018?*’, 5 April 2016.

55 Kennan, *Ibid.*

*unknown.*<sup>56</sup> This will help ‘divorce fact from fantasy and illuminate not only what Russians think about their own country and the world, but **why they think it.**’<sup>57</sup>

---

56 *Ibid.*

57 Rojansky, *Ibid.*



The Research Division (RD) of the NATO Defense College provides NATO's senior leaders with sound and timely analyses and recommendations on current issues of particular concern for the Alliance. Papers produced by the Research Division convey NATO's positions to the wider audience of the international strategic community and contribute to strengthening the Transatlantic Link. The RD's civil and military researchers come from a variety of disciplines and interests covering a broad spectrum of security-related issues. They conduct research on topics which are of interest to the political and military decision-making bodies of the Alliance and its member states. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or

the NATO Defense College. Printed copies of this paper can be obtained by contacting Mary Di Martino at [m.dimartino@ndc.nato.int](mailto:m.dimartino@ndc.nato.int)

**Research Division**

Jeffrey A. Larsen, PhD, Division Head  
NATO Defense College - Via Giorgio Pelosi, 1  
00143 Rome – Italy  
website: [www.ndc.nato.int](http://www.ndc.nato.int)

Follow us on  
Twitter at [https://twitter.com/NDC\\_Research](https://twitter.com/NDC_Research)  
Facebook at [https://facebook.com/NDC\\_Research](https://facebook.com/NDC_Research)

**Printed and bound by**  
DeBooks Italia srl  
V.le G. Mazzini 41, 00195 Rome, Italy  
[www.debooks.us](http://www.debooks.us)

Portions of this work may be quoted or reprinted without permission, provided that a standard source credit line is included. The Research Division would appreciate a courtesy copy of reprints. Please direct all enquiries to:  
[m.dimartino@ndc.nato.int](mailto:m.dimartino@ndc.nato.int)



The NATO Defense College applies the Creative Common Licence “Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivs” (CC BY-NC-ND)