

Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context

A Reassessment

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Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 took the world by surprise. While Europe had by no means been entirely peaceful since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, one European country's seizure of the sovereign territory of another stunned most American and European observers. Moscow's subsequent support, both open and covert, for a separatist movement in East Ukraine has been no less shocking; Western leaders continue to debate what Russia's goals are, what is behind them, and what should be done to mitigate the dangers of further violence in Europe.

Is Russia defending long-held strategic interests put at risk by an aggressive Western agenda, as Vladimir Putin claims? Was it fear of the potential economic repercussions of Ukraine's partnership agreement with the European Union (EU) that drove Russia to annex the Crimean peninsula and intervene in Eastern Ukraine? Is Russia's government just trying to keep domestic public opinion on its side and distract the public from other problems? Alternatively, is this

simply a matter of Putin himself, divorced from Russia's interests and goals, pursuing a personal agenda?

This Perspective assesses these and other possible explanations.¹ We conclude that Russia's general attitude toward Ukraine is largely consistent with historical Russian (and Soviet) thinking about security interests and foreign policy, not only over the past decade but going back some three centuries. But while the historical patterns of Russian foreign policy are an important starting point for understanding what has happened in the last year, they are insufficient by themselves to fully explain Russian actions. Russia's behavior, while carried out in pursuit of goals that are well-aligned with its historical interests, has been marked by unnecessary actions that have limited, rather than enhanced, its ability to attain those goals. We explain this deviation by arguing that Russian foreign policy today is also influenced by other factors. Most important of these are Putin's unchallenged policy-making role and his personal viewpoint regarding recent events in Ukraine, and the implications of both for his own country.

The Historical Backdrop

Since the end of the Cold War, leaders of NATO and EU nations have rejected the very notion of strategic or geopolitical competition between Russia and the West, arguing that Moscow could enjoy a positive-sum relationship, marked by cooperative security institutions and economic integration, with all European countries as well as the United States and Canada.

This was an ambitious worldview. While Russia has by no means been consistently opposed to the rest of Europe, its long, glorious, and sometimes tragic history as a European power has been one of vacillation between integration with the rest of the continent and rejection of it. It has been invaded on several occasions by rising European powers and repeatedly sought to protect itself by dominating the nations on its borders—including those of Central and Eastern Europe. Many Russian leaders—but none more than Putin—have pointed to these patterns when they claim Russia’s historical right to dominate its periphery. Was Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, then, simply a natural strategic response to Western encroachment on territory Russia regards as its own?²

The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union

Russia today, with its current borders, is historically unique, and Russia’s borders have changed greatly over the course of the nation’s history (see Figure 1). From conquest and retrenchment as Muscovy was built, to the Russian Empire’s expansion, and through the years of the Soviet Union, the territory ruled from the Russian capital has both grown and shrunk repeatedly.

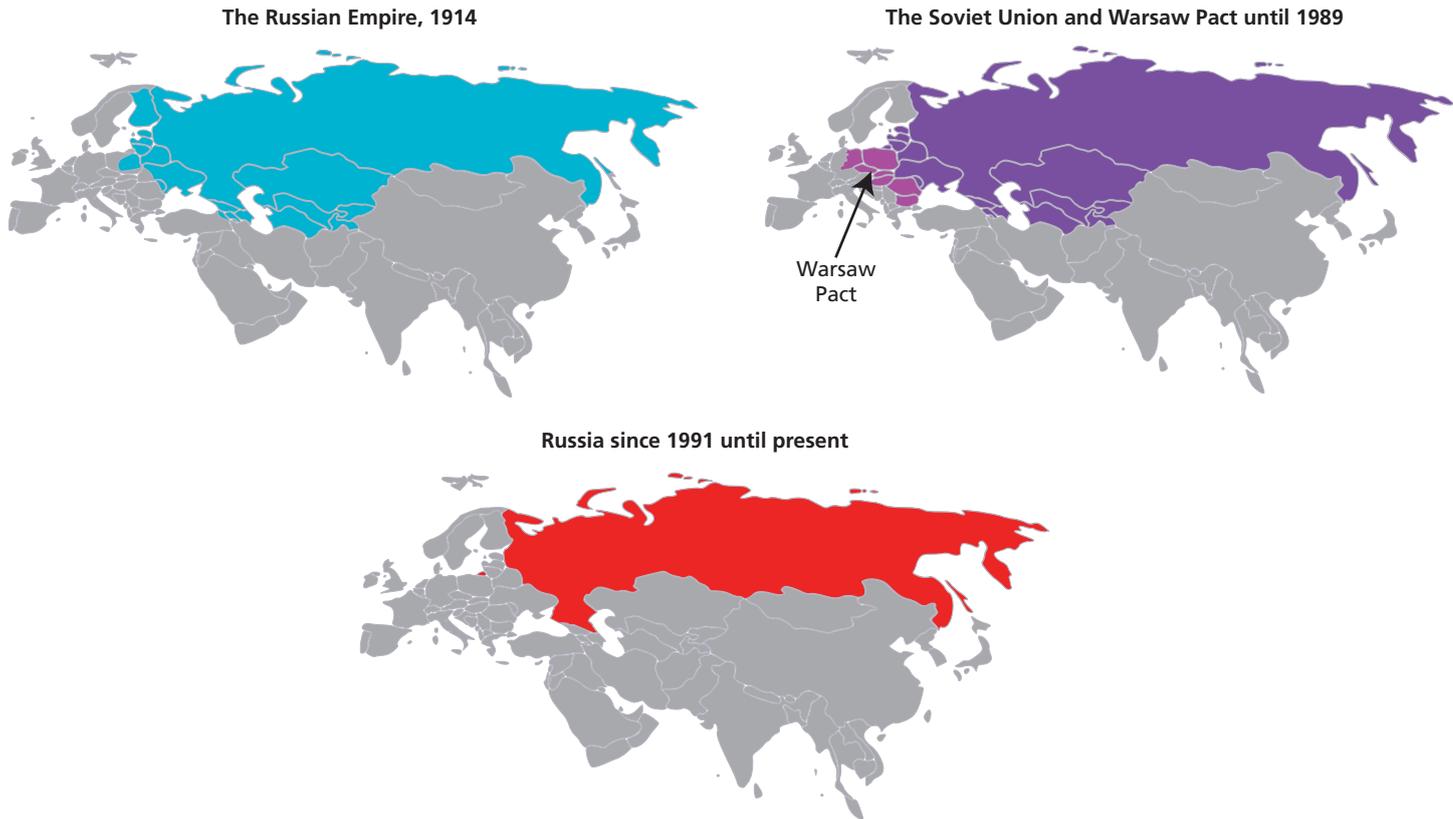
Even as territory shifted, Russia was, without doubt, a European great power since the time of Peter the Great, three centuries

ago.³ It was a decisive player in the Seven Years War, the land power that vanquished the Napoleonic Army, and a leading member of the Concert of Europe. Russia was the main protagonist in the Crimean War and subsequent crises that arose from the collapsing Ottoman Empire in the later 19th century. Russia’s alliance with France in the 1890s is widely viewed as one of the first steps on the road to World War I, just as its defense of Serbia in 1914 was a principal action in the rolling march toward war that fateful summer. The Soviet role in World War II was decisive. After that conflict was over, Moscow ruled much of Europe through the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact for half of the 20th century.

Like all countries, Russia also has unique attributes. The most obvious is its size, stretching across not only Europe but also Asia. This geography has made it easier for Russia to vacillate between periods of engagement with Europe and periods of relative retreat. While Russia has been part of the European system, it has also stood apart at times.

Perhaps the unique aspect of Russia most interesting to us today is what George Kennan in his famous 1946 “Long Telegram” referred to as a “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.”⁴ Russia’s extensive border creates a natural strategic challenge: The nation has many potential enemies, and has faced marauders and invaders. The border also creates an inherent internal security, administrative, and governance challenge. During the Cold War, Paul Kennedy argues, the Soviet Union claimed “absolute security along its extensive borders, yet its . . . unyielding policy toward its neighbor’s own security concerns worsen[ed] its relations—with western and eastern Europe, with Middle East peoples, with China and Japan—and in turn made the Russians feel ‘encircled’ and *less* secure.”⁵

Figure 1. Russian Geography Since 1914



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Imperial expansion was Russia's way of defending itself against invasion. This is not to say that the Russian appetite for imperial conquest was unique in the 19th century. On the contrary, it was in line with the imperialist trends of the era, as well as the dominant practices of *Realpolitik* in Prussia, France, England, and elsewhere. If Russia did not enlarge its empire, the logic went, other states would do so at its expense.

Unlike the empires of other European states, however, Russia's was continental. Russia did not participate extensively in the carve-up of Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, or Asia; instead, it expanded by incorporating neighboring territories. While some differences and divisions were accepted, newly acquired land was viewed as Russian for the most part, and ruled accordingly.⁶ From the perspective of Moscow, Russia did not so much *have* an empire

as it simply *was* an empire, state and empire being the same thing.⁷ Indeed, even under the USSR, textbooks described pre-revolutionary conquest of, say, Turkestan, as “unification.”⁸

Russian imperial expansion was particularly energetic during the later years of the Napoleonic wars, which saw Russia annex what are now Ukraine, Finland, Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania, as well as territories along the Black Sea. In later decades, Russian forces conquered the Caucasus and parts of Central Asia. Newly Communist Russia, eager for peace, signed most of its Eastern European possessions away to Germany in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). The Soviet Union would reconquer all that it had lost and more in World War II. It did not, however, annex all the areas held by the Red Army at the time of victory. Instead, it established a tightly controlled sphere of influence in Eastern Europe through links with the ruling Communist Parties, security agencies, military bases and ties, and security and economic institutions such as the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.

Echoing Kennan, many Western scholars have argued that Russian (and Soviet) expansionism was driven by insecurity.⁹ Insecurity also contributed to a tendency to view other states as threatening, regardless of whether they had hostile intentions, and sometimes even despite limited capability against Russian or Soviet interests. Russia and the USSR tended to view the greatest threats as those on their periphery. In doing so, they defined this attitude as largely defensive. Although Soviet military planners consistently saw offensive operations as more advantageous, the USSR’s civilian leadership insisted on overall defensive strategies from the days of Leon Trotsky.¹⁰

Unlike Germany or France, Imperial Russia never threatened to take over another major European power, although smaller

states were at risk. But throughout history, Russia frequently found itself in conflict with European states, or groupings of them, over its policies in Central and Eastern Europe, especially the Balkans (e.g., the Crimean War, Treaty of San Stefano, support for pan-Slavism prior to World War I). In the aftermath of World War II, it was Soviet incursions into Iran (then on its borders) and divisions over the disposition of states in Eastern Europe that drove a wedge between Stalin and the other members of the Grand Alliance, thus causing the Cold War.

There were, however, two substantial differences between pre-revolutionary Russian patterns of behavior and Soviet patterns. First, the Soviet Union was a superpower. Although Tsarist Russia had substantial interests in Asia, its fundamental security focus tended to be on Europe. The Soviet Union, by contrast, was active globally, with bases and relationships throughout the world, and military engagements far from its soil.

Second, although both were insecure about their relationship with the West, Russia under the Tsars did not view its conflicts with other European great powers in existential terms. Russian leaders, like most of their contemporaries, saw conflict as being in the nature of the international system. Russia advanced its interests with military force, especially along its borders. For the Soviet Union’s leadership, by contrast, NATO’s liberal democratic world was seen as an existential threat to Communism (and vice versa), and thus the leadership’s hold on power. While pragmatic realist interests largely in line with those of the previous centuries generally tended to win out over idealistic goals of conquering the world for socialism,¹¹ this ideological component created a consistent rhetoric of the impossibility of long-term coexistence—even as the two systems, in fact, continued to coexist.

Russian Security Perspectives Since Independence

Moscow's relationship with the West since the end of the Cold War has been ambivalent, just as it was under the Tsars, with strong economic and cultural ties developing even as distrust continued in the security sphere. Russia has remained preoccupied with the alignments of countries on all its borders, but especially those to its west and southwest (the importance of Central Asia in Russian thinking has fluctuated). The collapse of the Soviet Union increased the Russian sense of insecurity by leaving many states that had historically been under its influence outside it—in addition to diminishing Russian power overall on the world stage.

As a result, many of the patterns found in both Russian rhetoric and Russian actions since the breakup of the Soviet Union echo those of both the Imperial and the Soviet past. As early as 1992, Moscow articulated a prerogative to protect ethnic Russians wherever they may live.¹² This was less indicative of the intent to protect emigrant communities around the world than a reference to the large ethnic Russian populations which had found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly living outside the Soviet Union as minorities in the neighboring newly independent post-Soviet countries.

In making this case, Russian doctrine and official statements in the 1990s referenced dangers from “local conflict.”¹³ This reflected continuing unrest in the neighborhood (including, by 1994, within Russia itself, as the war to hold on to breakaway Chechnya began). Western-leaning Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev articulated a need for Russian peacekeeping in the “near abroad” (as Russia termed its fellow post-Soviet countries) and stated Russia's intention to defend its interests in order to maintain influence.¹⁴ Russian troops remained deployed throughout its neighborhood in the 1990s, and indeed still remain in many places, including Georgia

and Moldova. Interestingly, according to polls, Russian public (and parliamentary) opinion at the time was generally opposed to military involvement in Russia's neighborhood. The Russian Duma echoed the sentiment, rejecting a peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia in 1994 (it was later approved through a special resolution).¹⁵ Public opposition combined with severe budgetary problems constrained Russia's enthusiasm for such deployments, but Russia's willingness to fight for the near abroad never fully disappeared. Russia's insistence on maintaining its military presence in Moldova and Georgia led to its suspending implementation of the Conventional Forces in Europe agreement in 2007.

Russia's continued insistence on a sphere of interests and influence in the near abroad was crystallized in a speech by President Dmitri Medvedev in 2008, who defined Russia's interests in the neighborhood as “privileged.”¹⁶ The speech came on the heels of a five-day war with Georgia over two breakaway regions that had been supported by Moscow since the 1990s. It was therefore clear that “privileged” interests meant that Russia insisted on the right to use force in its neighborhood. This did not, however, mean that it would do so at every opportunity: Two years later, in June 2010, when unrest in Kyrgyzstan following a government overthrow turned violent, Russia rejected the interim government's request for peacekeeping troops.¹⁷

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Russian doctrines and statements since independence have articulated contradictory views toward the United States and NATO. On the one hand, official Russian statements have included avowals of an absence of enemies since Moscow's first draft military doctrine in 1992. Russia signed the framework agreement on NATO-Russia relations in 1997 and joined in creating the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. It signed a partnership cooperation agreement with the EU in 1994 and began negotiating a more comprehensive partnership in 2008.

On the other hand, references to the dangers of "states and coalitions" that "seek dominance," and their prospective enlargement, have been no less prevalent.¹⁸ There is no question that these statements—which also date back to the early 1990s, when Russia was seeking to build solid relations with the West—referred to the United States and NATO. These references became more explicit as the 1990s went on. NATO's enlargement into what had been the Soviet sphere of influence over the next decade was met with published documents and statements by Russian officials that frequently described NATO as offensive, dangerous, and unreliable. They claimed that NATO had destabilized governments, interfered in the internal affairs of other states, and abrogated treaties (certainly a reference to U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile [ABM] Treaty). Despite this language, most formal documents and statements by Russia's leaders also took pains to point out that NATO did not pose a real threat to Russia.¹⁹ But other commentary, including by senior military leaders, took another tack. Even as Russia's doctrines and policies insisted that NATO was not a threat, these statements argued the opposite: NATO's enlargement was threatening, and the United States and NATO were seeking to weaken Russia, undermine its pursuit of its interests, and prevent it

from acting in keeping with its historical great-power role. Meanwhile, numerous military analyses explicitly identified the United States and NATO as prospective adversaries whose capabilities should drive planning requirements.²⁰ If the Kremlin noted most NATO members' decreased defense spending and the implications thereof for its military power, it avoided saying so. To the contrary, Russian analysts have been more likely to combine U.S. and NATO spending and characterize it as growing.²¹ And regardless of whether NATO was explicitly described as a threat, there is no question that Russians, including those in government, saw existing security institutions in Europe as poorly aligned with their own interests and their expansion as dangerous, if not always directly threatening to Russia. This view was crystallized in Medvedev's 2008 call for a new European security architecture.²²

The proprietary feelings toward Russia's neighborhood already mentioned converge with distrust of the United States to shape Moscow's view of democracy movements throughout the former Soviet Union, in which the Kremlin consistently sees a Western hand. Moscow believes that the United States, especially, is actively seeking to undermine Russian influence by supporting democratic forces. Indeed, democracy promotion is what Russian officials are often talking about when they refer critically to Western "intervention" in their region. Statements by officials in the George W. Bush administration lauding the spread of democracy played into that perception.²³

But if NATO was seen as dangerous and democracy promotion as anti-Russian, these concerns did not slow the growth of Russian trade with the European Union or Russian tourism to Western European countries. Moreover, before the Ukraine crisis, Russia also did not seem particularly threatened by its neighbors' grow-

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ing ties to the European Union. Russia certainly had its issues with Brussels, and there is no question that Moscow preferred bilateral relationships with most European states—presumably because it could negotiate with individual countries from a position of greater relative strength. Relations with the EU were further stunted by disputes over visa policy, trade, and Europe's Third Energy Package. But Russia seemed to view the European Union as an annoyance during most of this period: There was no evidence that the Kremlin saw it as a threat.²⁴

Thus, just as Moscow sought to control its periphery and viewed its neighbors in the West as both attractive and somewhat menacing during the years of Russian empire and the Soviet Union, this same pattern has repeated through the last quarter-century. As a result, Russia has viewed Western attempts to integrate it more closely into Europe's political and security institutions as at best inconvenient, and at worst hostile efforts to straitjacket and limit its power. Despite the loss of significant parts of its empire in 1991, Russia's geopolitical circumstances, and its perceptions of them, have not fundamentally changed.

The 2014 Crisis

Although Russia's proprietary attitude applies to many other states on its borders, Russians historically have tended to view Ukraine, even more than most other post-Soviet states, as fundamentally

Russian by culture and background (Ukrainians have tended to disagree). But the specifics of the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and since were still surprising. Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008 was the endgame of many years of skirmishes and conflict, with most in Moscow predicting an eventual military clash. Few inside or outside Russia predicted near-term military action in Ukraine, with which tensions had primarily been economic and had previously been resolved without violence. Ukraine's plans to sign the EU Association Agreement had been in the works for years, and Russia had not protested them prior to 2013.

2013 marked a sea change in Russia's attitude toward the European Union. That year, Russian government officials and experts began to voice concerns about the EU's Eastern Partnership, which previously had garnered little Russian attention. Some Russian academics and policymakers had characterized the expanding role of the EU, especially prospects for EU enlargement, as threatening Russia's economic interests—first in former Warsaw Pact countries and then in the former Soviet republics. But until 2013, these had been minority views. That year, however, the EU, like NATO, was described as infringing on Russia's interests.²⁵

Despite this shift in rhetoric, however, the idea that Ukraine signing an EU Association Agreement could spark a chain of events culminating in a Russian invasion seemed far-fetched at the time. Given Ukraine's long history of failing to fulfill

the conditions to which it has agreed with Western donors and partners, Russia could easily have concluded that its influence with Kyiv was not at risk from the EU association agreement and the protests in Ukraine's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) that began in late 2013 to support EU association and, eventually, demand the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Historically, all Ukrainian governments, including those described as "Western-leaning," had made mutually (and sometimes personally) lucrative deals with Russia. Russia's and Ukraine's close economic links, including in their mutually dependent defense sectors, had all-but-guaranteed continued cooperation and coordination. Past regimes had threatened a change in attitude, raising questions about the future lease for the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, for example, but none followed through.²⁶

While a second overthrow of Russia's preferred Ukrainian leader in a decade surely must have rankled, and the Russian government and media were quick to blame subversive Western influence for the protests, Russian politicians were not, initially, anywhere close to calling for blood. Indeed, the outright annexation of the Crimean peninsula clearly surprised many Russian officials as much as it did those in the West: Russia's Parliamentary speaker was insisting that Moscow had no designs on Crimea (just as Putin himself had said earlier that week) until just before the Duma voted to accept the peninsula into the Russian fold.²⁷

History argued that any western shift by Ukraine would be slow and filled with reversals. Russia could attain its goals mainly by waiting and seeing.

But Russia did not wait and see, surprising most at home and abroad. This means that while Russia's history of insecurity and its tendency to dominate its periphery is an essential backdrop for understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy—and what may lie in the minds of at least some Russian policymakers—it is insufficient to explain Russia's decision to use force in Ukraine and willingness to risk the destruction of two decades of cooperation with Western countries. For this, we must look to other factors.

The Role of the Russian Economy in Russian Foreign Policy

Russia's more-aggressive foreign policy under Putin has had substantial economic consequences. Russia's recent economic growth has been an important underpinning of Russia's new assertiveness. From a political economic perspective, the crony capitalism in which Putin and his allies engage has done nothing to limit Russia's sense that it has a right to dominate its periphery. But, ironically, Russia's economic growth has been driven in great part by the very integration that its most-recent actions have rejected and undermined. It was, after all, flows of finance and people

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(especially to and from Europe) that (along with high prices for oil) transformed the Russian economy.

This is not to say that other factors were irrelevant: Those high prices for Russian exports of oil and natural gas provided a critical impetus to growth unconnected to institutional and financial integration with the global economy. Revenues from these exports provided substantial resources for the Russian government and greater freedom of action.

The present crisis has inflicted severe damage on Russia's fiscal and economic health, because of both sanctions and investor skittishness. Meanwhile, the coincidental decline in export prices for Russian oil and natural gas has exacerbated these effects.

Growth Through Integration

Putin's terms in office as both president and prime minister with the exception of the recession in 2009 oversaw record economic growth for Russia, which raised the country to the ranks of the upper middle-income states. Along with social and political stability, economic growth has been a key element of Putin's high approval ratings. Russia's middle class has grown and, in the process, has become accustomed to regular vacations abroad and sushi and coffee bars at home.

Historically, Russia's foreign economic policy has focused on creating favorable conditions for Russia in the global economy, in part by ensuring Russia has a seat at the various international fora. Until recently, this has been successful. Early on, Russian economic policymakers recognized the importance of foreign trade and free flows of investment for economic growth. In pursuit of these objectives, Russia joined the International Monetary Fund on June 1, 1992, and the World Bank on June 16, 1992. Membership in these

institutions was especially important in the 1990s, as it provided an impetus to support continued liberalization of the Russian economy, although membership failed to stem the balance-of-payments crisis of 1998. Russia began negotiations to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994; because of opposition to lowering tariffs on the part of important Russia companies, especially in agriculture, Russia only became a member on August 21, 2012, 18 years after negotiations began. Russia was invited to participate on the sidelines of a Group of Seven (G7) meeting in Naples, Italy, on July 8–10, 1994.²⁸ Subsequently, it was invited to become a full member of the renamed G8 in 1998, shortly before that year's Russian economic crisis. Russia was evicted from the G-8 on March 24, 2014, in response to its annexation of Crimea.

In addition to having a venue in which to pursue Russian economic interests, Russian leaders have seen membership in these international organizations as validating Russia's role in the world. This is demonstrated by Putin's attendance at the Group of 20 (another international economic forum) in Australia in 2014, even as his fellow participants condemned his policies in Ukraine. Consistent participation by Russia's senior leadership in the Petersburg Forum, which foreign CEOs and investors attend, is another example of continued outreach.

Russia's most important economic partner by far is the EU. In 2012, the EU purchased 52 percent of all Russia's exports and accounted for 42 percent of its imports.²⁹ In prior years, the share was even higher. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992, trade with and investment from the EU have been key to Russian growth. Russia has exported oil, natural gas, steel, and chemicals to the EU and has imported machinery and equipment, food, and other consumer items.

Since 1992, Russian citizens and companies have diversified their risks by parking money abroad. The EU has been the largest recipient, as Russian investors have put funds into bank accounts there and purchased EU stocks, bonds, and real estate. EU banks, especially in Cyprus, have also been handy for Russians to bring back untaxed funds to invest in their businesses. Russians may prefer EU bank accounts because they see them as more secure than Russian banks. As a consequence, Russia and Russians have integrated their finances with the European financial system.

As Russian capital flowed out of the country, EU companies, banks, and other investors poured money into Russia, financing the development of financial services, retail and wholesale trade, housing construction, and telecommunications, sectors that had languished under the Soviet system. They have also financed large investments in energy and infrastructure. As important as the capital inflows has been the know-how and management skills these investors have brought to the Russian economy. Much of the rapid productivity growth in Russia between 1998 and 2008 stemmed from direct foreign investment by these companies, or skills learned by Russian entrepreneurs in working for these corporations. The reluctance of Russia to expropriate the holdings of foreign investors—even through 2014, as sanctions took hold—reflects the importance of foreign investors for Russian economic growth.

Prior to the enactment of the Lisbon Treaty on December 1, 2009, Russia was able to develop bilateral trade agreements with the individual national governments of the EU.³⁰ After the treaty was enacted, most foreign economic issues had to be dealt with through the European Commission. In addition, the treaty increased the European Parliament's authority over trade policy.

These changes sat poorly with Russia, which preferred to deal with the member states directly, as the Russian government felt it had more leverage when dealing with the member states on an individual basis. Russia was especially put out by the EU's Third Energy package, which was directed in great part at diversifying EU sources of supply of natural gas and also at eliminating Gazprom's ability to engage in price discrimination, thereby reducing profits from its natural gas exports to EU member states.

Economic Ties with the Neighbors

As already discussed, the Russian government sees its fellow post-Soviet states (with the possible exception of the Baltics) as within its sphere of influence. But if Russia sometimes used force (e.g., peacekeeping forces as well as the troops sent into Georgia) to ensure that its security interests were upheld, it had less success in insisting on its economic prerogatives. Russia's economic relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan have diminished over the last two decades relative to ties with the EU—and more recently, China—and other developing countries. Between 2000 and 2012, the share these countries held in Russia's total imports fell from 35 percent to 13 percent. Russian exports to these states dropped from 19 percent to 14 percent after the 1998 crisis and never recovered to their precrisis level.³¹ For the most part, it has been the EU and China that have taken Russian market share in this part of the world, although the specifics vary from state to state. Russia's near neighbors have not been an important source of foreign investment for Russia, although Russian firms are often important investors in these countries.³²

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The Russian government has been concerned about its declining economic role in its neighborhood. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia and its neighbors—with varying degrees of enthusiasm—have taken a number of legal and institutional steps to try to keep economic ties strong. The first was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), created December 8, 1991, just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Its founding members were Russia and all other former Soviet republics except the Baltic states.³³ Although the CIS has taken positions on other matters, it was primarily designed to assist with issues pertaining to trade, currencies, economic statistics, labor mobility, and financial transactions, as well as other economic concerns. In this way, these countries hoped to preserve traditional trade ties. Since then, Russia and its fellow Soviet successor states have experimented with a number of agreements concerning free trade, common tariffs, and other economic arrangements. These have been helpful in reducing barriers to trade, albeit not as much as they might have been. These arrangements have differed crucially from approaches taken by, for example, the EU and its predecessor organizations. Whereas the EU is fundamentally a rules-based organization, the CIS and other efforts to foster economic ties in the post-Soviet space consistently have run aground on the refusal of members, including Russia, to abide by their rules. Participants frequently introduce higher tariffs than allowed or other barriers to trade forbidden by these agree-

ments. For example, Russia slapped anti-dumping suits and higher tariffs on imports of Ukrainian steel pipe in 2007.³⁴ These types of actions are often undertaken in response to domestic political pressures, including by oligarchs with influence on their respective governments.

Russia's initiative to create a Eurasian Customs Union, and later Eurasian Union, with states in the region does little to improve on agreements already on the books. Rather, the Customs Union seems to be more a reactive device to prevent members from negotiating free trade or association agreements with the EU than a mechanism for increasing economic integration between Russia and its neighbors. There has been surprisingly little discussion by Russian academics or policymakers on the potential economic effects of the customs union on the economies of Russia or other member states. A handful of studies forecast gains in the medium run through reductions in transaction costs and the subsequent expansion of intraregional trade.³⁵ But there are costs as well. After joining the customs union, Kazakhstan has had to increase tariffs on about 50 percent of its imports, which is likely to result in losses on interregional trade that will not be fully offset by the gains in intraregional trade.³⁶ Because the tariffs required by the union are already in place in Russia, Russia should enjoy some net gains from the agreement. But given the history of implementation of past economic agreements among post-Soviet states, it is hard to

imagine that the authors of the Customs Union expect high levels of compliance with its terms. Indeed, as of July 2015, the Kazakh Ministry of Investment and Development had introduced licenses for car imports from member states of the Eurasian Economic Union to protect Kazakh car dealers from competition with Russian cars, which had become much cheaper following the sharp fall of the Russian ruble.³⁷

But if its economic benefits are elusive, it is clear that the Customs Union makes it difficult for members to sign Association Agreements with the EU without Russian consent. This means that members will be forced to forgo substantial opportunities to enhance ties with EU states and bolster economic growth. This fits well with the general opposition to integration, for itself and its neighbors, that has been a hallmark of more recent Russian policy and makes it difficult to see the Customs Union as anything other than a political mechanism, geared to limit EU influence rather than enhance the economies of Russia or its neighbors.

Russia has also sought to use economic levers to pursue political goals vis-à-vis its neighbors, particularly Ukraine. For many years, Russia provided its neighbors with natural gas and, in the case of Belarus, crude oil, at lower prices than those paid by customers in the EU. Preferential sales were seen as supporting the economies of these countries during difficult times, hopefully damping unrest. They were also a means of co-opting political

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elites, including by providing opportunities for them to resell low-priced Russian natural gas at higher prices to EU member states, pocketing the difference. On the other hand, when states such as Ukraine and Georgia pursued policies that Russia frowned upon, Russia punished them by asking Gazprom to raise prices to levels higher than those paid by Western European states.

Protectionism as Counterweight to Integration

In terms of overall economic policy, the central thrust of Moscow's approaches over the last two decades has focused on liberalizing the economy and integrating it into global markets. However, officials and private interests have simultaneously pushed in the other direction, seeking more state intervention in the economy and more protection for local industries. Over the past decade, Putin, many in his inner circle, and managers of state-controlled companies have resuscitated policies focused on protecting Russian businesses and promoting state-controlled champions. Putin has put forward several plans to create state champions in oil (Rosneft), maintain state control in natural gas (Gazprom), and develop and promote state arms manufacturers, such as United Aircraft Corporation. Although Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has taken the lead on developing technology parks, such as the Skolkovo Innovation Center, it seems highly unlikely that this initiative would have gone forward without Putin's support. Russian leaders view these initiatives as making the Russian state stronger and restoring it as a great technological and economic power. The creation of United Aircraft Corporation and other state-controlled champions in the arms sector was also seen as an important component of restoring Russia's military power.

The impetus for these initiatives has not just been ideological. The destruction of the Yukos oil company and the arrest and incar-

ceration of its CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in 2003 not only sent a clear signal to potential rivals of Putin among the oligarchs, it also shifted oil fields and assets from a private-sector company into state-controlled Rosneft. Yukos, although the most prominent, was not the only company Putin took over. Kahka Bendukidze, a Georgian businessman, felt pressured to sell his company, *Obedinennie Mashinostroitelnie Zavody* (OMZ), to Gazprom at a marked-down price when he took the Minister of Economy position in his native Georgia. Russian leaders likely sought to regain state control of key components of Bendukidze's portfolio—for instance, nuclear power plant production.

Russian managers of state-controlled companies and administration officials have benefited from these sales, as they are able to use state-controlled companies to provide patronage and, in some cases, siphon money into their own pockets.³⁸ In addition to pressures from these groups on the Russian government, private-sector interest groups have pressed the Russian government to adopt policy measures beneficial to them. For example, private-sector agricultural interests, such as Cherkizovo, have pushed to block such competing imports as chicken or other agricultural products, using concerns about food quality and sanitation as a rationale. Thus, it does appear that on economic issues, in sharp contrast to security issues, some private-sector elites have had some influence on policy through both open and covert mechanisms. The Russian government has also insisted on local content clauses and provided special tax benefits for foreign investors in industries considered strategic, such the automotive sector.

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the basis of patronage and loyalty instead of performance has led to a sharp decline in the rate of growth in productivity, especially the productivity of capital. As companies are mismanaged and capital is squandered, Russia has entered a period of slow growth (and, with the decline in world market oil prices, recession), partly because of this shift toward greater state intervention in the Russian economy.

Economics and the Ukraine Crisis

Joining the WTO, opening up previously protected sectors, and providing protections to Western businesses are all ways by which the Kremlin has pursued integration and growth. At the same time, it has occasionally veered from those goals to please economic elites and maintain its capacity to distribute rents. However, both the Customs Union generally and Ukraine policy specifically do not appear to be driven by national or parochial economic interests. Russia's actions in Ukraine undercut both by damaging economic ties with key partners in Ukraine and the EU. Ukraine has been an important supplier to the Russian arms industry. The Southern Machine Building Plant Association (Yuzmash) in Dnipropetrovsk, which designs, manufactures, and services rockets and missiles, has been an important source of components, as has Zaporozhye-based helicopter engine manufacturer Motor Sich. The current conflict puts an end to these relationships, possibly for good, and thus

damaging Russia's defense sector. Financial and other economic sanctions imposed by the EU and Russia's embargo of imports of selected foods from countries that have imposed sanctions have had substantial economic costs. While Russia may not have expected these developments, it has accepted them, and has not taken steps to reverse the situation.

The annexation of Crimea also appears to run counter to Russia's economic interests. Crimea's primary economic activities have been tourism and hosting the Russian (and Ukrainian) Black Sea fleets. As incomes rose in the last decade, Crimea has struggled to compete with Turkey, Egypt, and other tourist destinations. Russians and Ukrainians, a strong traditional tourist base for the peninsula, have found these new destinations provide better services and lower prices. After the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainians no longer frequent Crimean resorts. Despite patriotic pleas, Russians have also shown no more interest, so this component of the Crimean economy is suffering. Ukraine has also restricted trade across the new de facto border, so costs of food and other products has risen, as Crimeans have had to transport substitute supplies from Russia over longer, more expensive transportation routes. Russia has countered these economic problems by subsidizing transportation costs. Russia now also covers pensions for the large population of elderly Crimeans, estimated at \$1 billion per year. Russia has also promised to build a \$7 billion bridge to Russian territory.³⁹ While there are some cost savings associated with no longer paying the \$97 million annual lease payments for the Black Sea Fleet, these increased expenditures, although not overwhelming, have already weighed on the budget.

Thus, Russia today seems to see economic policy as one more area through which to exercise influence in its neighborhood, in

alignment with what it perceives as its broader strategic interests. Russia has also shown that it is willing to incur substantial economic costs in pursuit of its goals in Ukraine and elsewhere. Indeed it appears that Moscow has come to see economic integration in the same light as political integration—as a political danger, despite the many economic benefits it has brought Russia to date.

The Role of Elite and Public Opinion in Russian Foreign Policy

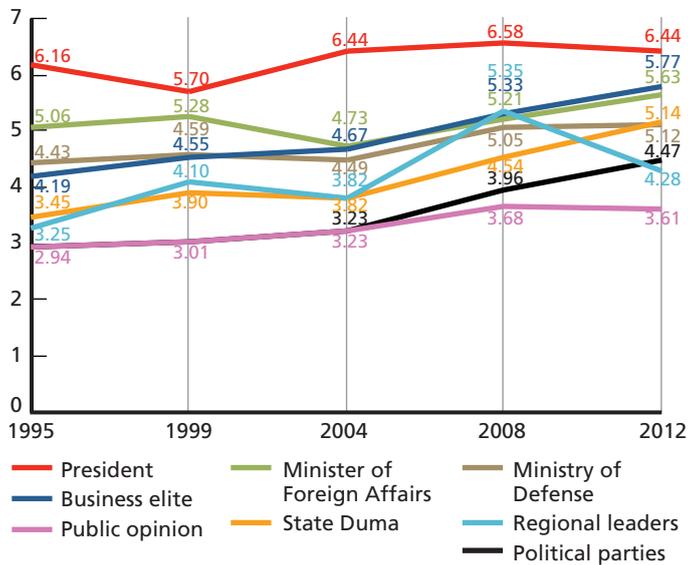
It is difficult to argue for any group or individual's influence (other than that of Putin himself) being decisive in a system as centralized as Russia's has become. Puzzlingly, however, Putin seems to care a great deal about what the Russian public, if not its elite, thinks, and will go to some lengths to shape those thoughts. This is largely because it is easier to control the country if public views are favorable to the regime. The result is that neither elite nor public views on specific issues appear to drive Russian policy, but the regime is deeply fearful of elite and public opposition to its actions.

Do Elites Matter?

Well before Putin's third term, the Russian constitution had tilted the balance of power in favor of the president by so much that some scholars characterized the Russian system as "hyperpresidential."⁴⁰ Following in Yeltsin's footsteps in this, if not in other matters, Putin cemented his power vis-à-vis the Parliament, making it increasingly a rubber-stamp body bought off with various patronage benefits.⁴¹ Following the Beslan hostage crisis, elected governors were replaced by appointed representatives. (And although this was officially reversed in 2012, a large number of governors

were appointed before elections could be held, postponing any real effects.) The idea of the “vertical of power,” laid out early in Putin’s presidential tenure, placed him firmly at the top of the pyramid of all decisionmaking, with everyone below beholden to him, personally and professionally.⁴² Perhaps as a result, actual decisionmaking, according to most observers, has since devolved to an ever-tighter and smaller group (or, perhaps, different groups that are consulted on different issues). In fact, most scholars agree that not only is decisionmaking authority increasingly vested in the president, but few elites have particular capacity to influence him, at least on

Figure 2. Russian Elite’s Rating of Domestic Actors’ Influence on Foreign Policy



SOURCE: Valdai Discussion Club, *Russian Elite—2020*, Moscow, July 2013.

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foreign policy. This is shown by the responses from interviews with key elites concerning drivers of Russian foreign policy shown in Figure 2.⁴³ The exception to this rule is foreign economic policy, where private business interests have been able at times to effect preferred, and preferential, treatment for themselves.

There are a few possible counters to this view that are worth examining individually. Some have argued that the so-called power ministries (i.e., those with weapons: police, military, intelligence) wield substantial influence in the Putin administration. The intelligence service, where Putin made his career, is often viewed as particularly important.⁴⁴ But it is not entirely clear that the intelligence services, as such, have affected foreign and security policy decisions. While these agencies’ budgets have risen, there is no evidence that they are propounding specific policies. Similarly, the military has enjoyed increasing resources in recent years, but it does not appear to have been (or tried to be) particularly influential on matters outside of its purview—while it maintains responsibility for military strategy and force structure, there is little evidence that it dictates foreign policy. Although military leaders’ statements align with those of foreign policy leaders, this is usually the case in most states, absent a significant rift.⁴⁵ Rather, it seems at least as plausible to argue that the Putin administration has much to gain from supporting these institutions and has done so for that reason, rather than due to lobbying on their part.

The Russian Orthodox Church has benefited from growing ties with both Putin and Medvedev. The church and its teachings are consistently used as a reference point for Russia’s newfound ideology of conservative values and, according to some, as part of the logic for closer ties between Russia and other post-Soviet

countries.⁴⁶ In domestic policy, a case can be made that the church has affected approaches to health and education.⁴⁷ Ties to foreign policy are harder to trace. While the church has spoken out on both Ukraine and Syria, these comments have followed, rather than led, Kremlin policy.⁴⁸ In our view, church-state relations bear watching. For now, however, we remain skeptical that the church is affecting Russian security policy rather than being used by the state to justify it.

Shaping Public Opinion

If it is difficult to find evidence that elite views shape Russian foreign policy, what about public opinion? In the months following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, President Putin's domestic approval ratings were consistently above 80 percent. This is high even for Putin, whose approval rating has rarely dropped below 70 percent since he became president of Russia in 1999, although it fell into the 60s in 2011, staying there until the Crimea adventure began in March 2014 (see Figure 3).

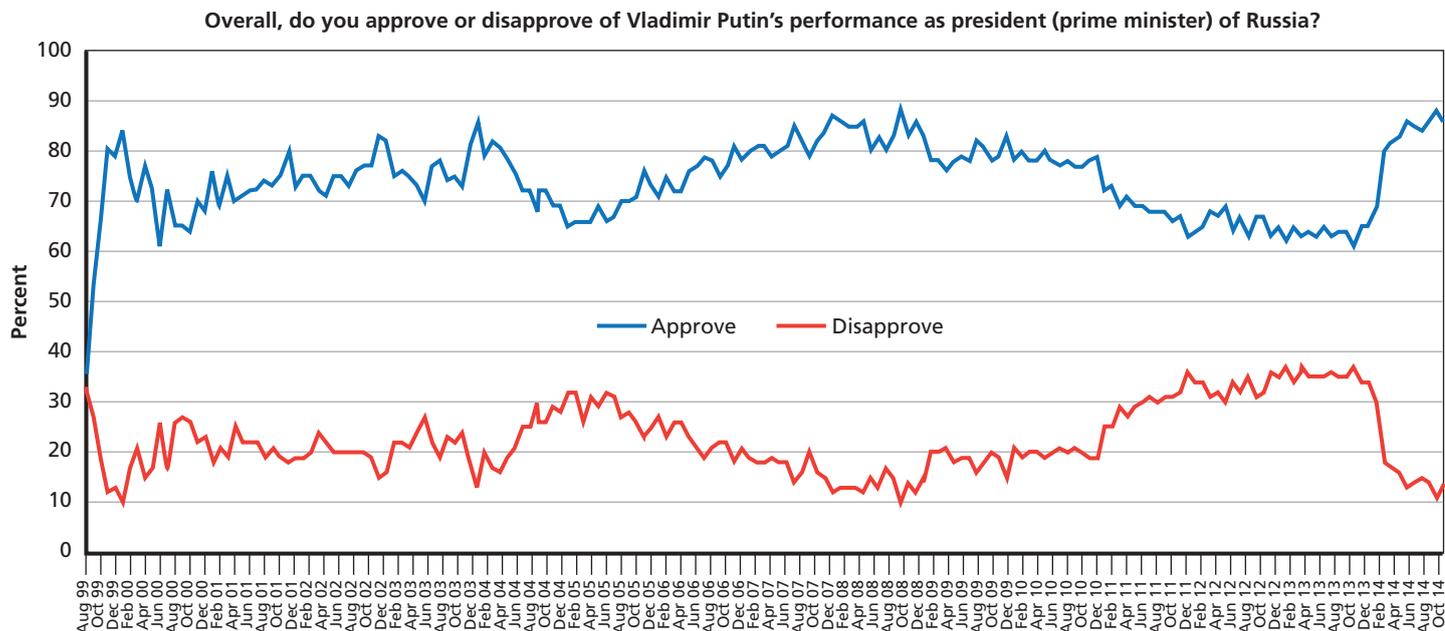
The 2011 downturn in public support for Putin coincided roughly, if imperfectly, with two factors. One was the aftermath of the 2009 economic recession. Putin's polling numbers dropped slightly in 2009, although they remained in the high 70s or better until the end of 2010. One might, therefore, conclude that economic pressures led some Russians to have less faith in their leadership. The other is a series of protests in which urban Russians took to the streets (primarily of Moscow and St. Petersburg) starting in the winter of 2011–2012. These demonstrations centered first on flawed parliamentary elections, which many saw as rigged, and then the imminent return of Putin to the presidency through an election that offered no other viable candidates.⁴⁹ Here, we might

suspect that both the protests and the dropping poll ratings reflect the same dissatisfaction. While some Russians were willing to attend public protests to show their anger, others may have become less supportive of the government in a quieter way, causing Putin's polling numbers to drop into the high 60s.

While Russians clearly have views, however, it is not clear that these views constrain their government or cause it to adjust foreign policy. If that were the case, Russian foreign policy would consistently change to accommodate the polling numbers and demonstrators. It does not. The one example that can be cited is the possibility that Russia might have briefly limited military action in its neighborhood in the early 1990s, as already discussed. In contrast to foreign policy, it is possible to point to examples of where demonstrations and popular discontent led to changes in domestic economic policy. For example, in 2005, pensioners demanded and got pension increases that were higher than originally planned, to offset cutbacks in nonmonetary benefits.⁵⁰

Instead of adapting to public viewpoints, the Kremlin has made substantial efforts to shape public opinion to ensure continuing support for its policies at home and abroad. The Putin administration, it seems, cares what the electorate thinks, but rather than adjusting approaches and pleasing more people that way, it instead seeks to generate approval by swaying more people to support what it planned to do anyway. Under Putin, this has involved concerted efforts to delegitimize the opposition, increase limits on press freedom, and promote conservative, "Russian" values as an antidote to Western liberalism. Russia's government is also not above misrepresenting its policies to maintain support, as shown by continuing denials of Russian troops in Ukraine, and the effort to hide evidence of the deaths occurring there. Much of this has been

Figure 3. Putin's Approval Ratings



SOURCE: Levada Center, homepage, 2015. As of July 17, 2015: <http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>

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in place for some time, but it has become more pronounced since 2011, leading some to speculate that Putin and his inner circle saw the roots of a real threat to his power in the 2011–2012 protests.⁵¹

Delegitimizing the opposition has involved crackdowns and arrests of critics of the government. With Mikhail Khodorkovsky the most obvious and prominent example from the early days of Putin's leadership, the most notable recent instance may be that of nationalist activist Alexei Navalny, who was tried and convicted of embezzlement and fraud. Other prominent trials have included that of three members of the performance art collective Pussy Riot and

the 27 cases, some still in progress, against participants in a protest march to Bolotnaia Square in May 2012, on the eve of Putin's inauguration. Although never directly linked to the government, the beatings and murders of Putin critics (including, most recently, the February 2015 killing of Boris Nemtsov, a former Deputy Prime Minister turned opposition leader) also contribute to an environment in which those who seek to speak out have excellent reasons to fear for their safety.

Another component of the campaign against opposition forces is a concerted strategy to suggest that groups and individuals who

opposed Russian government policies are foreign-backed, especially by the United States. This applies beyond Russia and, of course, aligns with the broader view of Western intentions and influence discussed above. Putin and others in his administration have accused the United States of orchestrating the so-called Color Revolutions, in which mass protests led to government overthrows in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s. The United States was also portrayed as being behind the “Arab Spring” protests of 2010 and, most recently, the “Euromaidan” movement in Ukraine, which led to the fall of the Yanukovich government in February 2014. In Russia, laws now limit foreign involvement in civil society. Legislation enacted in 2012 requires all nongovernmental organizations to disclose sources of their funding and register as “foreign agents” if that funding comes from abroad (this has included Russians using funds in foreign accounts⁵²). A 2014 law limits foreign ownership of Russian media outlets. Various legal pretexts have long been used to harass and intimidate organizations with foreign ties. For example, the European University in St. Petersburg, which is partially funded by Western donors and foundations, was shuttered for six weeks in early 2008 for alleged violations of fire safety regulations. The new laws, however, seem to have been created overtly for this very purpose: Organizations such as the Soldiers Mothers’ Committee and the human rights organization Memorial have faced substantial harassment under the 2012 “foreign agents”

law and organizations with any connections to the United States are increasingly under pressure.

Limiting opposition views also means limiting press coverage critical of the government. Constraints on media freedom in modern Russia have a long history. Early in Putin’s first term as president, the regime took over NTV, at that time the only national private television channel. Since then, state encroachment on freedom of the press has been documented by both Western and Russian scholars.⁵³ Freedom House, for example, has rated the media environment in Russia as “not free” every year since 2002.⁵⁴ While it might be an exaggeration to say that the mainstream Russian press is state-controlled, it certainly fair to describe it as state-aligned. Whether driven by fear of retribution, patriotism, or something else entirely, major outlets have increasingly taken great care since 2000 not to criticize the president and to limit critiques of the government more generally.⁵⁵

In recent years, the effort to ensure that alternative views are limited has escalated. In its milder manifestations, it continues to take more traditional forms, such as government discussions with, and suggestions to, journalists regarding what to cover and how.⁵⁶ In its harsher form, it means that press outlets and individual journalists critical of the government increasingly have trouble keeping their jobs and businesses. Laws prohibiting “obscene” and “extremist” content have targeted journalists critical of the government. Recent amendments to the media law have made these provisions

Limiting opposition views also means limiting press coverage critical of the government. Constraints on media freedom in modern Russia have a long history.

applicable to online sources as well. Cable carriers reported that government pressure was a factor in their dropping the *Dozhd'* television channel in early 2014, which by the end of that year was forced to broadcast from a private apartment, having been evicted from two locations. In March of the same year, the editor of the long-standing online news service Lenta.ru was fired after the website published an interview with a Ukrainian nationalist leader. Much of her staff resigned in protest and the new Lenta.ru toes a much more government-friendly line.⁵⁷

The result is that while varied perspectives can still be found on the Internet and in a few newspapers, most independent voices on television, radio, and in most readily available print media have been silenced or severely constrained.

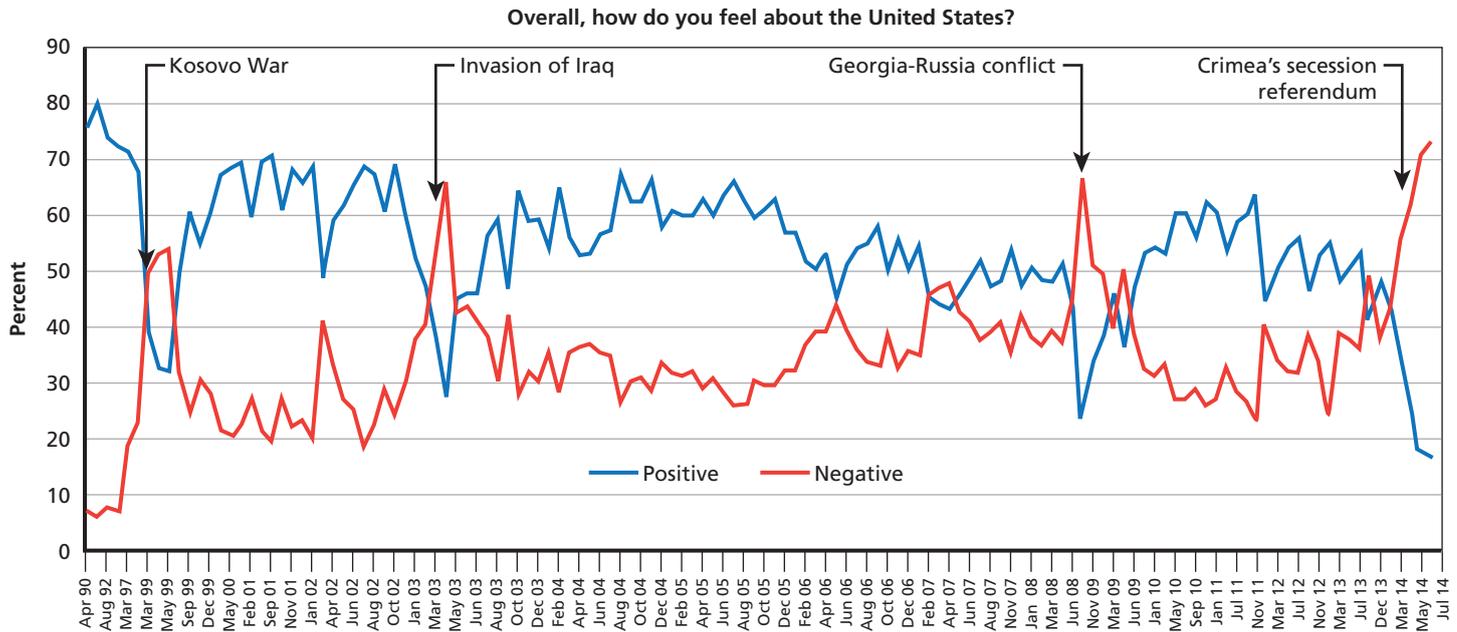
In addition to limiting access to nongovernment-controlled media and delegitimizing the opposition, the Kremlin has helped ensure that the mass media that do reach most Russians put forward an explicitly progovernment message, as well as a nationalistic one. Leitmotifs of Russian pride and readings of history to support that pride are prevalent in a storyline of a resurgent Russia. This applies not just to media; the pattern can also be found in government statements and school textbooks.⁵⁸ Traditionalism, the Russian Orthodox Church, and family values are other key themes that allow for a storyline in which conservative Russia is a bulwark against a more liberal, decadent West.⁵⁹ Russia's glorious history, both Tsarist and Soviet (in the latter case, victory in World War II is particularly important), is consistently invoked.⁶⁰ Individuals who voice these views most effectively have enjoyed success in recent years, the best example perhaps being Dmitry Kiselev. Kiselev, a popular commentator on Russian television Channel 1, was appointed in 2013 to run the media conglomerate *Rossiya*

Segodnya, which replaced RIA Novosti and also includes the Voice of Russia radio station. Kiselev's off-hand homophobia and criticism of Western culture fit well with the narrative of Russian traditionalism and of Russia standing up to the bullying West. As the Ukraine crisis escalated, he used his television news pulpit to point out Russia's ability to turn the United States into radioactive ash.

In this context, it is not surprising that access to independent media may well lower support for the ruling party in Russia.⁶¹ However, historically, even when the press was freer, Russian public opinion on foreign policy issues has tended to side with government positions during times of crisis. Figure 4 shows Russian perceptions of the United States over the last 23 years. It shows that crises in U.S.-Russian relations have consistently led to more negative views of America—although these views have reversed themselves when the crisis eased.

It would be a mistake to think that Russian opinions are created by Russian media or other mechanisms (such as the increasing role of the Russian Orthodox Church in society), including the military and schools.⁶² Like anyone else, Russians make up their own minds. But—also like most populations—they are affected by the information (or disinformation) available. For example, when the media and political environments were more open in the 1990s, Russians appear to have paid attention to media messages but voted for those presidential candidates whose positions were closer to their policy preferences.⁶³ More recently, with less access to varied information, it appears that less-informed Russians are more receptive to pro-regime political coverage while better-informed Russians are less receptive.⁶⁴ Thus, Russia's already constrained information environment made it comparatively easy for the Kremlin to present

Figure 4. Russian Perceptions of the United States



SOURCE: Levada Center, homepage, 2015.

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its own views both of events in Ukraine and of Western fault in those events to its public, and to have those views be accepted.

The Russian public's continuing support of its government in the foreign policy sphere is thus likely a result of both a general predilection to support the government on such issues and the appeal of the specific messages that the Kremlin has used. Nationalism and rebirth are appealing concepts. As the economy deteriorates, nationalism may provide some social cohesion and support for the regime. The Russian government knows what it is doing by both

limiting alternative viewpoints and putting forward a nationalistic storyline, particularly in a time of crisis.

At the same time, the substantial effort that goes into molding public opinion and ensuring support means that public support is important for the Putin administration. The escalation of such efforts since 2011's protests and the slight drop in Putin's public opinion numbers in that year speaks to a government view that such things could get worse if left unchallenged. Public opinion may not shape foreign policy in Russia directly, but it is, evidently, very important to the Kremlin.

Public Opinion and the Ukraine Crisis

Why is public opinion so important that it must be shaped? One argument holds that hybrid governments such as Russia's, which have elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, benefit from retaining democratic elements, and thus will take pains to keep them in place and avoid outright repression.⁶⁵ Another, related argument lies in the concern expressed by the Russian government regarding "Color Revolutions," as already discussed. Whatever the actual degree of foreign backing for protest movements around the world, there is no doubt that such movements have often been successful in ousting regimes from power. The fact that this has taken place in neighboring post-Soviet countries that have much in common with Russia politically and socially is not lost on the Kremlin. Thus, one way of looking at the broad effort we have described here as an approach to shaping public opinion is as "diffusion-proofing" Russia against a possible overthrow of its current leadership by means of popular protest.⁶⁶

Returning to the current crisis, we find that the same things that have led the Kremlin to impose limits on information and the opposition may well have influenced its response to events in Ukraine in early 2014. The popular protests on the Maidan in Kyiv, the inability of the Yanukovich government to effectively control the situation—even (perhaps especially) through force—and the subsequent failure of the international community to broker a lasting arrangement due to Yanukovich's flight from Ukraine must surely have been a nightmare scenario for the Kremlin. Ukraine's system and recent history are in many ways different from Russia: Despite high levels of corruption, consistently poor governance, and much lower living standards,

Ukraine had a substantially stronger civil society and freer press than Russia. However, the close cultural and linguistic ties between the two countries, as well as their shared history, mean that there are many parallels. Russian officials may well have feared that the Ukrainian example, if successful, could spur imitation at home.

The Putin Factor

Some analysts argue that, with Russian foreign policy so centralized, policy toward Ukraine is simply the result of the preferences and approaches of Putin himself. Proponents of this outlook point to the somewhat more accommodating line Russia took toward the West under Medvedev. They argue, in particular, that Putin's view of foreign policy is deeply shaped by his own experience, including as a former KGB officer, and that a zero-sum, strictly realpolitik view of the world permeates all his interactions with the West.

As already noted, decisionmaking in Russia is highly centralized and has become more so under Putin's rule. What does it mean to have this particular leader making all the calls on foreign policy? The personal image that Putin has sought to project aligns well with the overall narrative of a reborn Russia. "He raised us from our knees" is the refrain of Russians who strongly support their president in the face of whatever opposition remains.⁶⁷ Most Russians credit him with the economic growth Russia enjoyed in the early 2000s and Moscow's increased influence on the world stage. Putin's image has been carefully orchestrated from the time of his anointment as Yeltsin's successor. He was initially presented as a contrast to Yeltsin—a sober professional. In time, traditional masculine attributes were emphasized. Putin does not flinch at strong language (recall his promise to annihilate terrorists in the outhouse) and maintains great vigor

(communicated through judo tournaments, tagging tigers, and riding horses bare-chested). This appeal to both conservative standards of manhood and to strength of both body and purpose is reflected in the spin that is put on his policy actions at home and abroad.⁶⁸

The historical narrative, and the concept of Russia as a traditional, conservative bulwark against “Western liberalism” is also tied to Putin personally. His recent divorce aside, Putin presents himself as a churchgoer who has close ties with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been very supportive of his rule. Even historical pride—for instance, in the victory of World War II—is tied to Putin personally.⁶⁹ In these ways, Putin embodies this new Russian ideal. His is the key voice for all elements of Russian policy, foreign and domestic, from standing up to Western bullying to rejection of Euro-Atlantic integration for both Russia and its neighbors.⁷⁰

In this context, Putin is not only both decisionmaker and embodiment of Russian policies, he is also, in a way, the embodiment of the state, an image strengthened first by his designating Medvedev to take over as president at the end of his second term and then by his taking it back in 2012.⁷¹ If Putin equates himself with the state, it is perhaps not so surprising that his general approach to government power and its role in society is of the sort generally described as “statist.”⁷² This indicates a perspective that sees the state as crucial and involved in much of society, playing a leading role in guiding that society, as differentiated from more laissez-faire or populist approaches. This statist philosophy fits with the concept of a strong executive, of course, and the two reinforce one another, even as Putin has worked to ensure that both continue to become stronger.⁷³ This view of state stability, and thus leadership stability, as critical to the country’s survival provides fodder

for the fears of instability. A state that cannot control its citizenry, a state against which its citizenry might revolt, is clearly not strong and will not succeed or survive.

Analysts have also argued that Putin’s personal views about history, relations with other European powers and with the United States, and even whims and emotional responses have driven his policy positions.⁷⁴ In a system as centered on the presidency as Russia’s, this is certainly plausible, although more difficult to demonstrate. What does seem clear is that Putin is indeed at the center of decisionmaking and that the decisions he made in 2014 are a product of both historical Russian strategic perspectives and his regime’s (and his own) concerns about maintaining his power in the future. Moreover, while the specific choices made in 2014 and since may have been Putin’s, they are now a part of Russian policy. This means that as long as Putin’s successors seek to continue the authoritarian regime he has built, they are likely to be prone to the same foreign policy patterns we have seen in recent months. Different personalities may lead those responses to manifest in different ways, but the core themes will be similar.

What’s Behind Russia’s Recent Actions in Ukraine?

Governments do not always behave in predictable ways, and political science hardly provides a crystal ball. However, understanding the likely sources of Russia’s behavior in Ukraine can help decisionmakers formulate policy regarding Russia in the future. How the United States and its allies interpret Russian foreign policy today has important implications when it comes to questions of how to restore and maintain security in Europe.

Our assessment enables us to reject several of the hypotheses presented at the start of this analysis. Russia’s actions do not appear

to have been significantly motivated by fears that Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU would be costly for the Russian economy. The seizure of Crimea and the war in Ukraine also do not appear to have been driven by an effort to court Russian public opinion, although a concerted and successful effort has kept the Russian public firmly behind the government.

Instead, at its core, Russia's foreign policy is rooted in longstanding beliefs about its rights within its region, beliefs that are rooted in Russian history and geopolitical circumstance. These are exacerbated by a consistent post-Soviet view of a continued competition with the United States, in which western efforts at integration were seen, at least partly, as a mechanism of controlling and weakening Russia. In addition, and drawing in part on the latter factor, the current regime harbors deep fears about the effects of pro-democracy or pro-European forces that have increasingly surrounded it since the end of the Cold War. Russia, in general, and Putin, specifically, see Ukraine as unquestionably belonging in Moscow's strategic orbit, not the EU's. The Kremlin was therefore angry at what it saw as Western "interference" in Ukraine, to which it attributed the Maidan protests and, indeed, most opposition to the Yanukovich regime.

These protests were also a challenge to Putin's personal belief in a strong state at the vanguard of society, a belief shared by those around him. If such protests could happen in Ukraine, which was so culturally similar to Russia (and viewed in Russia as an auxil-

iary nation), they might happen in Russia as well. Coming against the backdrop of the 2011–2012 protests in Moscow, they seemed all the more menacing to Putin's grip on power. Putin took action not simply to counter what he saw as Western activity on Russia's border and to maintain influence in Ukraine. Rather, Russia has annexed Crimea and helped maintain a conflict in eastern Ukraine to prevent this overthrow of the existing order from leading to a successful, functioning government—or even a semi-successful, but still functioning, one. The threat to the Russian state, seen as one with the Russian government—not to the status quo in Ukraine—is what led Russia to risk incurring substantial economic costs.

Putin's personal leadership style and viewpoints were likely critical to the specific actions that were taken, although not to the attitudes that drove them. Indeed, the initial confusion about Russia's intentions toward Crimea seem to indicate that the decision to annex the peninsula (as opposed to simply foment unrest and protest against the Kyiv government, as was done in the East), was quite probably a decision taken by Putin with little consultation. At the same time, there was likely an evolutionary and responsive quality to Russia's actions. The Kremlin could not have predicted the exact effects of its actions in Crimea. It is certainly plausible that the success of that operation spurred increased activity in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. When this unfolded differently, the Kremlin adapted. Its goals, however, remained the same: to undermine the Ukrainian government put in place by the Maidan.

Russia's actions do not appear to have been significantly motivated by fears that Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU would be costly for the Russian economy.

What, then, does recent history tell us about plausible future Russian behavior? For one thing, the last year and a half should make all wary of efforts to predict Russian policy and actions. Rather, it behooves Western governments to prepare for a range of possible outcomes, both good and bad. Russia may again overreact or behave in ways that other states see as irrational and counterproductive, or it may seek what seems a more rational path. Regardless, even if the current crisis cools, future Russian governments will likely remain paranoid about Western intentions, both within Russia itself and on its borders. It will see Western efforts to weaken and undermine it in most U.S. and NATO member actions—even many that are not, in fact, related to Russia at all, and it will tend to place any disagreements or conflicts into a narrative that juxtaposes Russia and the United States, downplaying the role of other powers. Meanwhile, Moscow will almost certainly insist on holding on to Crimea regardless of what else happens. This means that some level of sanctions—and tension—will remain whether the situation in Ukraine overall escalates or not.

What could shift Russia's calculus regarding Ukraine? Continuing European and U.S. efforts to put economic and political pressure on Russia in the hopes of changing its policies seem unlikely to be sufficient to force the Kremlin to withdraw from Ukraine in the near term, or even the medium term. The financial and military costs of occupying parts of Ukraine will eventually begin to take a toll, however. It is important to note that Russia does not seek Ukraine's territory, so much as its acquiescence to Russian domination. If Russia does not back down, both it and Ukraine will surely suffer further economic and human losses in the coming years. Thus, while true acceptance of the government put in place by the Maidan is probably unlikely for some time to

come, Russia may eventually recognize how counterproductive keeping military forces in Ukraine is. This could lead Moscow to withdraw its troops—regular and irregular—and most of its support from the Donbass, while holding on to Crimea and settling for a low level of unrest in the East. Ongoing unrest there could be sufficient for Russian leaders to point to (at home and abroad) as a cautionary tale of the risks of seeking Western support for democratic reform.

The worst possibility is one in which Moscow escalates conflict with the West in Ukraine or elsewhere. In this context, while NATO and the European Union should not rely on Russian economic weaknesses alone to preclude further aggression on Moscow's part, they should recognize that Russia's capabilities are limited. The Russian armed forces have improved substantially over the past decade, particularly in the wake of reforms instituted in 2008, but they remain best suited for limited local conflict. While Moscow has touted grandiose plans for continued military development, these are already well behind schedule. Although the Kremlin insists it is prepared to continue military investment as planned, the tightening of Russian federal budgets in the wake of continued economic crisis and lower export prices for crude oil and natural gas limit resources for defense. Moreover, if Russia might have failed to predict the response of both the West and Ukraine itself to Moscow's actions over the past two years, it now knows better what results aggression will reap, and must recognize that a lengthy occupation of a hostile neighbor, whether Ukraine or one (or more) of the Baltics, would soon turn very ugly.

Collectively, these factors diminish, but do not eliminate, the risk of further Russian aggression in the near future. Under

Whatever happens in Ukraine, Russia will, sadly, pose a challenge for the United States and its allies for years to come.

the current regime, Russia will continue to fear the enlargement of liberal democracy and Western institutions, above all the EU and NATO. It will seek, within its capabilities, to keep them at a distance, and, provided the opportunity, weaken and undermine them, including through force of arms. These policies are in keeping with long-standing historical Russian patterns.

Whatever happens in Ukraine, Russia will, sadly, pose a challenge for the United States and its allies for years to come. But with Moscow's goals likely still evolving and its interests competing,

NATO and the European Union will be best served by a strategy that hedges against the worst possible outcomes, yet does not give up on Russia in the long-run or foreclose potential new opportunities for cooperation should they arise. With the Ukraine crisis, the West has embarked upon a new era in relations with Russia, one that calls for greater vigilance, new strategic vision, and a consistent, long-term effort to rebuild the stability that has been lost in Ukraine and in Europe more broadly.

Notes

¹In taking an approach that looks at systemic factors, domestic factors, and individual factors as possible determinants of foreign policy, we are indebted to Kenneth Waltz's classic, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959. Our analysis does not follow this format perfectly, particularly in separating out economic factors, both international and domestic, as a separate section, but it does borrow heavily from the general approach.

²Russian analysts who have made this argument are plentiful. A good English-language overview is Aleksandr Lukin, "What the Kremlin Is Thinking: Putin's Vision for Eurasia," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August, 2014. For aligned views from the United States, see John J. Mearshimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Policy*, September-October, 2014; and Juliane von Mittelstaedt and Erich Follath, "Interview with Henry Kissinger: 'Do We Achieve World Order Through Chaos or Insight?'" *Der Spiegel*, November 13, 2014. As of December 16, 2014:
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073-2.html>

³This is argued by, among others, Hajo Holborn, *The Political Collapse of Europe*, New York: Knopf, 1963, p. 9. A. J. P. Taylor provides an apt definition of great power in the European context: "Even the greatest of Powers shrank from fighting alone against a coalition; and the weakest among them could make a respectable showing in a general conflict among the Great Powers. At any rate, the difference between the Great Powers was much less than that between any of them and the strongest of the smaller states." A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. xxiv.

⁴George Kennan to George Marshall, "Long Telegram," Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, February 22, 1946.

⁵Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000*, New York: Random House, 1987, pp. 488–489.

⁶Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, p. 79.

⁷On this point, see, also, Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 2011, pp. 18–21.

⁸As noted in Pipes, 1974, p. 79, footnote.

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About This Perspective

This Perspective is intended as an overview of how a better understanding of the sources of Russian foreign policy can help explain Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. It evaluates arguments based on Russian historical strategic interests, economic policy, and domestic policy to determine which approaches, alone or in combination, stand up best to the realities of Russian choices and actions. The authors conclude that Russia's general attitude toward Ukraine is largely consistent with historical Russian (and Soviet) thinking about security interests and foreign policy. However, they also argue that historical patterns alone are insufficient to fully explain Russian actions, which are also influenced by domestic factors, most importantly by the ways in which Russia's leaders interpret the implications of recent events in Ukraine for their own country.

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