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# The Geopolitical Strategies of Putin's Russia

## Case studies of Ukraine and Syria



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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis to answer the question: "What are Russia's geopolitical strategies under Putin's rule? And what are the driving forces that have shaped those strategies? Or why those strategies have been formed?" with the help of the international relations theory of neoclassical realism, and using a diverse collection of American, European and Russian sources.

The first subject to be explored is Putin himself and his views on the function of the state. Then his actions on securing territorial sovereignty in the case of Chechnya is explained, with an important emphasis on the struggle against the USA-sponsored Mujahedeen, whose ideological kinsmen Russia is now bombing in Syria. Putin actions and rational for going against the oligarchs who were impoverishing Russia is discussed and presented as an important part on the road to the revival of the Russian economy.

In the foreign policy part of the thesis, Putin's projects of the Eurasian Union is briefly presented, as well as his Munich Speech of 2007 which set the course for Russia's strategy in the international system; unipolarity vs multipolarity and the return of Russia as a great power.

The Color Revolutions appearing in Russia's near abroad are discussed, and it is argued that these are supported by the USA and serves her interests in containing Russia. The current civil war in Ukraine is an unfortunate case in point of this. In Syria, Putin is drawing a line in the sand and denying the aspirations of the Atlanticist, Turkey and the fundamentalist Islamists in removing the one of the last Russian friendly regimes in the Middle Eastern region.

The argument presented in the conclusion is that Putin's regional geopolitical strategy is a response to the USA's, and thus the West's, plan to isolate Russia by turning her neighbors into hostile states; a modern version of the Truman Doctrine. In the international system, Putin is trying to break the USA's unipolar hegemony and is through cooperation with, for example, China seeking to create a multipolar system based on civilizations, "large spaces" and regionalism. Therefore, it is argued, Putin's Russia is engaged in a new geopolitical struggle with the USA for defensive, and not aggressive, reasons.

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## Introduction

In the early 1990's, the bipolar international system which had been a reality since the conclusion of World War Two came falling down with the dissolution of the USSR, leaving the USA as the sole pole left standing in the world.

This created a power vacuum in Eastern Europe and the Middle East which was soon filled by the USA and its NATO allies. The West declared "the end of history" (Fukuyama) and the victory of the unipolar international system where American hegemony, liberal democracy, 'universal' western values and the globalization of the free market economy would reign unopposed.

The USA set out on this neo-liberal course in international relations, envisioning and actively propagating the spread of these ideas as the way to secure everlasting peace, profit and development; the fulfillment of American "Manifest Destiny" on a global scale.

But Russia, which many believed to have been truly and definitively defeated, suddenly awoke to the reality that the West was closing in on her. More and more of the post-Soviet space was being incorporated and integrated into the Western sphere of control and influence. This caused a stir in the Eurasian behemoth, and soon an unknown former-KGB man was chosen to lead Russia against this perceived challenge.

Many books, articles and speeches have been written about Vladimir Putin's presidency by a wide range of journalists, scholars and politicians - from west to east, north to south. Alexander Dugin, the father of contemporary Russian geopolitical studies, have recently had some of his work translated into the English language. This thesis will to a large extent build on material from the following of Dugin's works: "Eurasian Mission" (2014) which is a introduction to geopolitics in general and the specific Eurasian geopolitics connected with Russia proper; "Putin vs Putin" (2014) deals with the policies of Putin from a geopolitical perspective and the challenge of the Russian President in balancing between the Atlanticist and Eurasianist poles within his country; "Last War of the World Island" (2015) which deals with Russia geopolitical mission from the medieval state of the Kievan Rus until, and including, the presidency of Vladimir Putin - its main topic is that Russia,

which is the heartland of continental power, will always be in conflict with the strong sea-based powers of the world.

Dugin is an interesting Russian source to use since he is not a diehard supporter of Putin and neither an outspoken critic - he is therefore, to a wide extent, very balanced when commenting on the Russian President, although he has stated that: "So far, Putin embodies the empty, technological present, which is getting harder and harder to bear. However, the moment you compare Putin to the leaders of other countries (Western ones, of course), you end up at the other extreme. There are no equals, he is simply the best. And that is the truth." (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 289).

Another central book which will be supplying material for this thesis is "Russian Populist" (2012) written by Dr. Matthew Raphael Johnson who outlines the basic political views of Vladimir Putin, his ideas and reform plans in both domestic and foreign policy. Johnson is an ordained Orthodox Priest, a Slavophile and former American University Professor which gives his analysis a very unique and interesting take on Putin and Russia.

Also included are many articles from the American magazine *Foreign Affairs*, a subsidiary of the Council on Foreign Relations, which is very influential regarding formulation of US foreign policy, geostrategy and international relations for Republican and Democrat politicians. Therefore, these will constitute the American angle on Putin and Russia's foreign policy strategies. Among the authors used in this context is John Mearsheimer, who is an important authority in the Realist school of international relations.

All this information, due to its diverse nature, should help present the views of Putin and his foreign policy in a clear picture, and illuminate the question of what the Russian President is actually trying to accomplish at home and abroad as well as his ideas, rationality and goals behind Russia's actions on the international scene; specifically in relations to Ukraine and Syria. This project will seek to answer these questions.

## Problem Formulation

What are Russia's geopolitical strategies under Putin's rule? And what are the driving forces that have shaped those strategies? Or why those strategies have been formed?

## Methodology

My data will be articles, books and web pages from American, European and Russian think-tanks, political scientists, and news media in order to get a nuanced picture of the different perspectives and opinions concerning Russia's involvement in Ukraine and Syria from a geostrategic and political point of view.

The reason for choosing Ukraine and Syria as my two cases for research and analysis are due to the fact that they represent two different aspects of contemporary Russia's geopolitical strategy. Ukraine is a "near-abroad" example, since this country shares borders with Russia and is historically, culturally and religiously linked to the greater Russian, or Orthodox (to use Samuel Huntington's term), civilization. Western foreign influence in Ukraine is of great concern to Russia, since a Ukraine integrated into the EU and NATO would expand and strengthen the ring of hostile states surrounding Russia. Also, the plans for the political and economic integration of the post-Soviet space into a Eurasian Union would be significantly hampered if Ukraine turns west. Syria is an example of Russia going beyond its own regional sphere and again entering the international system as a great power. Russia has various reasons for interfering in Syria; firstly, Russia and Syria have historically good relations; secondly, Russia is worried about the spread of Wahhabi Islamism as it also threatens Russia in Chechnya; thirdly, from a geopolitical perspective Russia would not like to see more destabilization of the balance of power in the Middle East as well as the establishment of more Western military bases in the region.

In terms of Western sources, I primarily rely on information from the Council on Foreign Relations and their subsidiary publication *Foreign Affairs*.

The Russian angle will come from Vladimir Putin's speeches and statements, as well as the research done by political scientists from Europe and the USA. My primary Russian source will be Professor Alexander Dugin since he is the leading geopolitical scientist in Russia, he is also an advisor to people close to Putin in the Kremlin on foreign policy matters.

Due to the divided opinions on the subject of this thesis, finding truly objective material on the matter is difficult. Therefore, by including both Western and Russian data and analyzing it using the theory of neoclassical realism I hope to be able to reach a nuanced picture which will help me answer my problem formulation. Also, since these conflicts are ongoing, new developments can appear every day and therefore some of the information appearing in this thesis can already be out-of-date.

I have chosen to use neoclassical realism as my theory because it puts a focus on the relation between internal and domestic factors on the actions and policies pursued by states within the international system.

## Theory

Neoclassical realism is an international relations theory associated with Gideon Rose and incorporates both internal and external variables in states' behavior in the international system. It is argued that a country's foreign policy, in terms of scope and ambition, is driven by its position in the international system as well as by its material power capabilities. These power capabilities' impact on foreign policy, however, are indirect and complex since systemic pressures must be deciphered through intervening variables at the unit level (Rose 1998, p. 146).

Gideon Rose argues that foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and therefore it is their perception of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being (ibid., p. 147).

Also, these leaders and elites will not always have the power or freedom to extract the national resources they would need for their foreign policy goals. A country's state structure and society likewise have an influence on actions taken within the international system; therefore, countries with different structures and societies are likely to act differently.

It is further argued that a country's relative material power is the main foreign policy shaping factor in regard to facing other actors in the international system. Any given country's perception of threats posed by others in the international system are likewise partly formed by one's own relative material power (ibid., p. 150).

In the anarchic international system, neoclassical realists argue that states respond to uncertainties in their external environment by wanting to control and shape it, and thus, to the extent they are able to do so, try seek a maximization of their external influence (ibid., p. 152). For this reason, the more relative material power and external influence a state manages to possess, the more ambitious their foreign policy will become, and they will seek to expand their power and control even further.

Neoclassical realists make the point that the international power distribution can only lead countries' behavior in the system by influencing the leaders, elites and officials. Therefore, in order to fully analyze the foreign policy of any given country it is necessary to look at how the governing body of a state see and understand their own given situation, and how this, in connection with their relative material power, translate into national behavior in the international system (ibid., p. 158).

## **Analysis**

### **Putin and the Russian state**

When dealing with the enigma of Putin it is interesting to point out that he was virtually unknown when he became Prime Minister under Yeltsin in 1999. He had been a high ranking KGB officer in East Germany, but other than that he was a mystery. Alexander Dugin believes that Putin was chosen as Yeltsin's successor because the oligarchs and other pro-Western elements in Russian society thought that they could control him (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 13). Also, there was a real concern that the Communist Party at the time would win the elections, which would have caused the "Westernizers" in Russia problems. The PR campaigns which dealt with Putin at the time presented him as a patriotic figure who could carry on with the liberal reforms initiated in the 1990's.

In the beginning, Putin opted for a balance between liberalism and patriotism as his ideology during his first eight years of power. The reason for this appears to have been an attempt to

satisfy both the liberal and patriotic camps inside Russia - the plan was simple: "liberalism was the end and patriotism was the means to get to it" (ibid., p. 15). Putin was supposed to follow Western interests in foreign policy and liberalism in economic reforms since this would give him support from the power elites, mass media and the community of liberal experts; while the patriotic rhetoric, e.g. the return to superpower status, was meant to give him support from the public, the majority of the population, whilst not being backed by concrete action (ibid., p. 39).

Dr. Matthew Raphael Johnson, who is a scholar of Russia and Slavic studies, has in his book "Russian Populist" (2012) explained some of the basic ideas and tenets about the early years of Putin's rule.

First off, the creation of a strong state is a very central part of Putin's solution for Russia. When Putin became President of the Russian Federation in 2000, the state was basically non-existing. This, Putin set out to change at once by following the idea that a reconstructed, consolidated and accepted state would make the economy recover on its own, because the state is the only mechanism to enforce contracts, property and financial oversight - in other words: without the state, oligarchy rules (Johnson 2012, p. 27-28).

In order to get the state under centralized political control, Putin began by cutting down the size of the Federal Council which meant that provincial governors and heads of provincial legislatures were removed from this body. The reason for this, Dugin explains, is that these people themselves had "largely transformed into little tsars, establishing semi-criminal regimes that had very weak links not only with law but to unity with the center." (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 135). This move by Putin ensured that the governors could no longer abuse their power to, slowly but surely, dismember Russia, and consequently the national separatists in the republics were told to back down. All this meant that the Federal Council went from being a body of dissent and regional lobbying to a quietly obedient organization. Moreover, in order to further centralize and strengthen the Russian Federation, Putin created Federal Districts meant to tie the territorial structure of the state to a military scheme which put into place powerful Moscow appointed civil servants, reporting directly to the Federal Government, who are responsible for national security (ibid., p. 18).

Matthew Johnson has pointed out that Putin's efforts to strengthen the Russian state has been interpreted as a form of authoritarianism by the West. To this, Putin has explained that Russia's commitment to democracy is dictated by the will of the Russian people and the strategic interests of Russia itself (Johnson 2012, p. 34-35). Moreover, Putin has emphasized the importance of taking Russia's history, sovereignty, geopolitics and other civilizational particularities into account in relation to its time frame and conditions for ensuring, and realizing, the principles of freedom and democracy (ibid., p. 41)

Furthermore, Putin's theory of the state is that it is the representative of the social consensus and that it needs to function as "the guardian of the common good" (ibid., p. 87). The state must not be connected with any non-public power center or any economic force in Russia, therefore the state must be objective when dealing with powerful actors in society.

Alain de Benoist, a French academic, journalist and philosopher, has also noted that Putin is often described by the Western politicians and media as a "New Tsar", a "KGB-ist", or a "neo-Soviet". But labels such as "fascist", "red-brown", and "Hitler" have also been put on the Russian President. Interestingly enough, de Benoist points out, Russia has never experienced such a degree of democracy as she has today, but still she is portrayed, if not outright, as a dictatorship, or at least as insufficiently liberal, meaning she does not conform to all the requirements of the "open society" (de Benoist, April 20 2014). This tendency will be sufficiently illustrated when we take a look at some of the Western sources later in this thesis.

Joshua Yaffa, writing for the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, has in his article "Reading Putin" (2012) commented that Putin's system of "vertical power" is not totalitarian, but rather works as a kind of pact between Putin and officials down the bureaucratic chain, from regional governors to local police chiefs. In exchange for loyalty, votes or other kinds of support for the federal government this pact allows these people to run their own microstates where they can pocket millions of rubles (Yaffa 2012, p. 129). Implied here is that Putin is running a corrupt system where the pro-Western oligarchs have been removed and replaced by new regional leaders loyal to Putin, thus giving him a passive political support base which will not get in his way.

Yaffa goes on to state that Putin has made no indications in which direction he wants Russia to move and, unlike China which has a stronger governing order, he is in danger of creating a "Central Asian autocracy", defined by a national leader who does not defend the system as much as becomes it (ibid., p. 133). This statement, however, goes against Putin's work towards a Eurasian Union and the official statement he made during his 2007 Munich speech about the establishment of a multipolar international system. Both of these subjects will be presented and discussed later in this thesis.

When Putin got elected President again in 2012, he's old strategy of "liberalism plus patriotism" which had been sufficient during his first eight years as President stopped working, and for this reason, he had to define a new political policy strategy. Putin at this time was pulled at from two sides: firstly, those who advocated for further economic liberalism and a geopolitical stance friendly to the global unipolar aspirations of the USA; secondly, those who wanted market mechanism which will meet the national and social needs of the state, these people are negative towards the social effects of liberal reforms in the economy, and are interested in a strong state arranged according to vertical power (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 103). As of this writing, Putin seems to going in the direction of the latter group. Interestingly enough, the same two forces are also present in Ukraine, the former representing the Kiev government and their supporters, and the latter the East Ukrainians in Novorossiya - this will also be touched on later.

### **Chechnya and Russian territorial integrity**

In the case of national secessionist movements who were threatening to dismember the Russian Federation, Putin had to deal with a problem which had developed during the Yeltsin era; namely, the Chechen question and the loss of Russian influence in the Caucasus.

The case of Chechnya is important in order to fully understand some aspects of Russia's later involvement in Syria.

The Second Chechen War erupted the same month Putin became Prime Minister in August 1999. For this reason, it can be viewed as the first challenge Putin had to overcome in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian population.

There were three local factions fighting each other in Chechnya:

- 1) A moderate and national-democratic group receiving support from the West, and trying to play by Western rules.
- 2) A national-traditionalist Islamic group loyal to Russia.
- 3) A Radical Wahhabi'ist group linked to an international network of Islamic fundamentalism, they are fighting for the creation of a global Islamic state. Few of these fighters were locals from Chechnya.

Alexander Dugin has pointed out that the threat of Wahhabi Islamism was given new life during the Cold War, since American and British intelligence services saw a potential in using these fundamentalists to oppose socialism and pro-Soviet tendencies in the Caucasus and the Middle East. The CIA and MI6, for example, were behind the training of Al-Qaeda and the Mujahedeen, from this Dugin concludes that fundamentalist Islam is being used as a regional weapon by the West against Russia and its allies (Dugin 2015, p. 98). But American involvement in the Caucasus region also have an economic angle, namely the access to, and control of, the oil supplies coming from the Caspian Sea. Matthew Johnson has commented that: "As a consequence of this dominant interest, the U.S. is also committed to thwarting any attempt by Russia to expand its influence in the Caucasus. From the American viewpoint, Russian failure in Chechnya is welcome, as long as it does not get to the point that Chechnya becomes a base for Islamic revolution worldwide." (Johnson 2012, p. 134-135). Therefore, supporting anti-Russian rebels is seen as a means to an end, and "[t]error in the Caucasus is useful for the U.S. because it challenged Russian hegemony over the massive oil and gas deposits there" (ibid., p. 135).

Interestingly, the argument that the USA supports radical Islamic groups in order to further American interests abroad has recently been supported by Karen Kwiatkowski, a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the US Air Force, who in an interviewed done by RT (April 20, 2016) stated that: "When we say we don't negotiate with terrorists that is really more like rhetoric for television shows in the evening for people watching. In real life, in real negotiations I honestly don't think that it matters. If the terrorists are on the US side, we not only negotiate with them, we support them. So I don't buy that argument that it is part of US foreign policy that we don't

negotiate with terrorists. We fund terrorists, if those terrorists serve our purposes. That has been very well shown in the past 15 years – at least." ("*We fund terrorists...*", April 20, 2016)

When asked if he had any regrets about the USA giving support to fundamentalist Islamists in the Middle East during the 1970's and 1980's, which laid the foundation for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who is a political scientist, geostrategist and former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, responded: "Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire." and "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?" (St. Clair, January 15 1998). The Americans clearly had no idea that they had opened Pandora's box, but the continued support for Islamists in the Caucasus, and later to what morphed into ISIS in Syria and Libya, shows that nothing was learned and nothing has changed in the foreign policy strategy of the power players in the USA. Putin himself has public criticized this fact, which will be shown later in this thesis.

So, while the forces of "liberal" Islam and fundamentalist Islam in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus have been supported by the Western intelligence services, the Russians have been supporting their opposites such as the Islamic socialists and the pan-Arab Ba'athists (Dugin 2015, p. 98). This fact, again, is important in relation to the case of Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, which I will go into detail with later.

Incidentally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Americans and the British did not shut down these fundamentalist Islamist groups they had supported. Instead, these groups kept growing, they became increasingly autonomous and independent and started to, at first, carrying out local attacks against their former patrons, and later, striking them at home - the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center being a case in point.

Returning to Chechnya; the national-democrat faction and the Wahhabi'ists had a common ground to form an alliance since their geopolitical mission, to some extent, corresponded in that they both wanted a weakened and dismembered Russia; "the liberation of the Muslim North Caucasus from the imperialist Russian yoke" (ibid., p.100) seemed to have been a rallying cry for both.

Had the goals of this Western supported alliance been successful in separating the North Caucasus from Russia it could have led to secessionist attempts in other regions, both Muslim and non-Muslim, within the Russian Federation. In the long run, this would have meant the geopolitical fragmentation of Russia.

Putin, though, did not accept this and chose in favor of restoring Russia's territorial integrity by crushing the anti-Russian groups in Chechnya. First and foremost, Putin set into motion a strategy of destroying the paramilitary groups and their hotbeds, that way returning the areas which they had occupied back under Russian administration; secondly, he wanted to recruit the groups in the area with least connections to the West, which led to the alliance between Putin and the Kadyrov family, who are the leaders of the national-traditionalist Islam faction in Chechnya.

Alexander Dugin argues that the victory of Putin in the Second Chechen War signified a new page in Russian geopolitical history, since this event marked the first time Russia had not lost ground or influence since the 1980's (ibid., p. 105). Furthermore, it helped Putin gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people, and gave him increased confidence in his own mission concerning the strengthening of Russian sovereignty.

### **The revival of Russia's economy**

Another important mission for Putin was to get the economy under control in order to secure the finances and material power capabilities needed firstly to stabilize Russia at home, and later use it to try and regain her strength in an international context. Following the dissolution of the USSR, organized crime and shady privatization deals led to the creation of a pro-Western oligarchic class who took control of Russia's natural resources and created media outlets to influence public opinion. Furthermore, The tax police were easily bribed so taxation and tax collection soon ground to a standstill, the army was weak and demoralized, and the whole country was solely living on loans from the International Monetary Fund (Johnson 2012, p. 71).

This meant that the Russian state was almost non-existent by the end of the 1990's, so when Putin was appointed Prime Minister in 1999, and elected President in 2000, he inherited a country which could be compared to a post-colonial African state.

To turn things around, Putin decided that state monopolies and oligarchic control over the means of production had to be broken. Secondly, the laws on finance, banking and privatization from the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras had to be reformed. A major problem in Russia at the time was that the oligarchs and regional bosses were manipulating the banking system to ship off Russia's wealth (ibid., p. 75).

To combat this, Putin started to exile and down-size the number of "unpatriotic" oligarchs who were behind these clandestine activities. Those who were not exiled, Putin separated from each other and compelled them to play the game by the government's rules, making them accept and recognize the legitimacy of the state's national sovereignty policy. In order to break up the oligarchs power, Putin placed them into five separate departments, which Dugin refers to as the "departments of the political will" (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 49), namely the administration, the economic tycoons, the mediocrats, law enforcement, and the experts. These departments were in theory supposed to be linked to the President, in order to avoid the influence of intermediaries, who would try to further their own interests.

Moreover, Russia's new position as a "third world economy", surviving solely on the export of raw materials, was not acceptable to Putin who instead wanted to focus on government investments into areas where Russia could compete and have a competitive advantage; such as energy, technology, pharmaceuticals, automotive and aeronautics (Johnson 2012, p. 75). The grand plan was, and is, to make Russia as autarkic as possible.

Especially in terms of energy the Russian government has not only seen potential for considerable economic gains, but also an opportunity to influence its "near abroad". Putin's policy of turning Russia into a mighty energy state will allow him to get some control over the economic processes in the neighboring regions of Europe and Asia. Therefore, the pipelines of oil and gas to the West and the East are a part of a new Russian geopolitical strategy using energy as a means of power (Dugin 2015, p. 107)

## Putin as an absolute realist

Alexander Dugin has tried to analyze the political subject of Putin and concluded that he is an "absolute realist". Putin's view of the state is completely European: the "Leviathan" of Hobbes, the Westphalia idea of sovereignty, and Machiavelli's "New Prince" all seem to engulf his attitudes. Dugin does not see any long-term messianic ideology leading Putin, his political mission at home relies on absolute state sovereignty, and he does not recognize the legitimacy of demands made by the international community. For example, when the West puts sanctions on Russia, she just turns her back and looks east towards China, thus the geographic location of Russia allows her, and the people in control there, to act in this way.

Likewise, Putin equates the decisions made by international institutions to nothing, instead he believes that a relative stable international system relies on balancing the principle of state sovereignty and the structure of international law. The key to understand Putin's politics, Dugin argues, are the thoughts of the German national conservative Carl Schmitt, who formulated that the most important function of the state is to maintain order and the state should be completely free in a political sense of ideological convictions (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 239-248).

Nonetheless, Dugin believes that the Russian Idea, the vision of "Great Russia", is not completely lost on Putin. "Putin is somehow connected to it, in one way or another considers it, and associates with it" (ibid., p. 250), but there is no divine or historical mission in contemporary Russia in contrast to the past, such as the Medieval Russian Orthodox mission, The Third Rome, after the fall of the Byzantine Empire or the spread of International Communism during the twentieth century.

Putin himself has expressed a realist approach for Russia's future, saying that "we have a long-term agenda that must be independent of election cycles and the prevailing situation. These strategic goals include preserving the nation, bringing up our children and helping them develop their talents, which constitutes the basis of the power and future of any country, including Russia." (Putin: 3 December 2015). So independence and national preservation is officially on the long-term political agenda of Putin's Russia.

Furthermore, commenting on the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he stated that: "we have repeatedly faced a historical choice of which road to take to further development. We crossed another milestone in 2014 when Crimea and Sevastopol were reunified with Russia. Russia declared a *voce piena* its status as a strong state with a millennium-long history and great traditions, as a nation consolidated by common values and common goals." (ibid.) Thus Putin officially declared that the annexation of Crimea was, among other things, a signal of strength from Russia's side. Putin's nationalism also appears in this context; the Russian nation is old and proud, and she must be defended and strengthening in a world of increased globalization and uniformity.

Here it might be a good idea to try and clarify the Russian conception of civilizational nationalism, which is something very important in relation to the ongoing civil war, and Russian involvement, in Ukraine. Matthew Johnson has pointed out that Russia is historically and traditionally a vulnerable country due to her geographical position, and he explains that from the medieval period to the early modern times Russia has been under constant threat from Turkic slave raiders in the south as well as Papist expansionist aspirations coming from the west. This reality, this memory, coupled with the later invasions undertaken by Napoleon, in the name of democracy, and Hitler, in the name of Germanic *Lebensraum*, have become an important part of the psychology of the Russian ethnos, and thus Putin also feels and understands this historical trauma (Johnson 2012, p. 129). In Russia's case, there is a significant difference between imperialism, as it is understood in the West, and securing peaceful borders. Imperialism for Russia was never profit driven but rather initiated due to regional issues that had a direct influence on her security and wellbeing. So, the good Russian rulers have always been aware of this reality, starting from Ivan III and currently with Vladimir Putin, and had to try and secure their periphery, their near abroad areas, in order to maximize their own national security - a notion which is completely in line with the neoclassical realism of Gideon Rose.

Johnson continues by explaining that regional states need a tight connection with the center of their civilization, building on their historical interconnectedness, and should favor each other as a

large cultural region or bloc. The reason for this is that cultural ties creates the foundations for real, lasting alliances - in Russia's case, regional cooperation with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine would be an example of such a cultural constellation. According to Johnson, the USA, for example, have no historical ties with these countries in this region, and therefore they should keep out. This is the difference between imperialism and legitimate regional interests. So, if the USA is involved, either openly or clandestine, with Georgia and Ukraine, then Russia will be involved with Venezuela and Cuba in order to create a balance of power (ibid., p. 129).

Russia is not just a nation, in the narrow "ethnic" sense of the word, but a civilization. Russia is thus larger than her specific ethnos; this is the verdict of historical interrelatedness, not foreign policy demands. Ukraine, for example, is an independent country and should remain so, but she is also part of Russian civilization in a broader sense, although not Russian ethnically. Ukraine is, like Russia, part of the agrarian, Orthodox and monastic civilization. According to Johnson, these ancient cultural ties gives all members of this civilization the right and obligation to intervene whenever this civilization is under threat by those hostile to it. Putin saw what happened to his Serbian, Slavic Eastern Orthodox, ally in 1999, and later the West's ventures in his own country and her near abroad, and thus decided that Russia had to, once again, become a great power - a regional hegemon - in order to protect the members of her civilization (ibid., p. 130).

Putin himself has commented on this greater Russian cultural civilization as late as 2014. After Crimea had voted itself back into the Russian Federation, Putin stated that: "Crimea is a unique blend of different peoples' cultures and traditions. This makes it similar to Russia as a whole, where not a single ethnic group has been lost over the centuries. Russians and Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and people of other ethnic groups have lived side by side in Crimea, retaining their own identity, traditions, languages and faith." (Putin: 18 March 2014).

## **Foreign policy**

During Putin's first years as President he played a passive role concerning the geopolitical moves made by the USA, especially in the Middle East. After 9/11, Putin was not hostile towards the establishment of an American base in Georgia, and was supportive of the US-led invasion of

Afghanistan. The reason for this seems to be Putin's idea that the West was coming in to remove a mutual enemy in Afghanistan, namely Sunni fundamentalist Islamists, which also constituted a threat to Russia in Central Asia. Likewise, Putin could have hoped that by giving a free hand to the Americans in Afghanistan they would in turn stop their system of diplomatic, political, informational, and economic support to the Islamist separatist movements in the North Caucasus. This, for Putin, turned out to be a mistake, and now instead of just having to deal with the Wahhabi Muslims at home and near Russia's borders, he also has to take the presence of new American military bases in Central Asia into account.

But when the US-led invasion of Iraq took place in 2002-2003 Putin made a 180 degree turn and denounced this action as an example of violent imperialist behavior. Matthew Johnson has pointed out that Putin's Russia had relatively good relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq since Hussein had an "ability to keep a tight leash on Islamic zealots in that country" (Johnson 2012, p. 151). The Ba'athist, pan-Arab socialist nationalist, ideology of Saddam Hussein is also shared by Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who had been equally successful in keeping Wahhabi and Salafi tendencies in his country under control until the civil war. Putin's support for these regimes in the Middle East can thus be interpreted as a way for him to secure that fundamentalist Sunni Islamism is kept in check, and does not become a long-term threat to Russia by having Wahhabi hotbeds established close to Russia's borders.

### **Projects for post-Soviet integration (the near abroad)**

An important part of Putin's foreign policy strategy concerning the post-Soviet area have different economic, political and military aspects attached to it. First of all, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which was formed after the dissolution of the USSR have laid some of the foundations for future integration in the region.

Eurasian integration of the CIS and the establishment of collective security agreements in this sphere are important aims for Putin. This way, by having an active foreign policy with the intend of establishing a "Eurasian Union", Putin can, in combination with domestic patriotism which must

compensate for the unpopularity of liberal reforms in the economy, bring about a situation that will help enhance the strategic status of Russia.

The Eurasian Union must, according to Dugin, not be like the Westphalian system composed of traditional modernist states. Instead, it should represent a civilizational union, a political entity with the characteristics of a confederation based on subsidiarity and broad regional autonomy and certain aspects of strategic centrism like that of classical empires. Furthermore, it must be built on more than economy, since economy is unreliable and does not determine the course of history, and ultimately, it must reassess the entire international system (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 172-174); away from unipolarity, towards multipolarity.

From a geopolitical point of view, the only way to combat unipolarity in the international system is to try and counter-balance the power of the USA through regional alliances. Even outside of the post-Soviet space, Russia has acquired a long-term partner in economic and strategic development in China, thus creating the basic framework for an international multipolar structure. China, like Russia, is not interested in unipolarity and by coming together they can form the aforementioned counter-balance in the international system. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a case in point of this cooperation.

Regarding American encroachment in the CIS area, Dugin has stated that this expansion into the post-Soviet space can only mean that the unipolar world will be established at Russia's expense, and is being brought on by means of force from abroad (*ibid.*, p. 125). He further points out that the US strategy leads to the same scenario everywhere: pro-American forces in a state, backed by local nationalists, overthrow the indecisive Moscow-leaning regimes and initiate cycles of instability in Russia's periphery - especially where the ethnic makeup leaves states prone to ethnic conflict. All this, according to Dugin, is a strategic process by the West of stripping Moscow of control over the CIS states and to begin the disintegration of the Russian Federation itself (*ibid.*, p. 125-126).

## Putin's Munich Speech 2007

In his famous 2007 Munich speech, Putin put forth his views on the international system and security. He stressed that such security is more than just military and political security, "It involves the stability of the global economy, overcoming poverty, economic security and developing a dialogue between civilizations." (Putin: 12 February 2007).

He criticized the unipolar world, "a world wherein there is one master, one sovereign", as undemocratic, and calls out the hypocrisy of the USA when it calls for the globalization of liberal democracy by using an international strategy which appears totalitarian.

Putin considers the unipolar model unacceptable and impossible, pointing out that the result of trying to apply this concept to international affairs has only led to "unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions" which have in return contributed to more conflicts, wars and death on a scale exceeding that which occurred during the Cold War.

Concerning the direct foreign policies of the USA e.g. the implementation of unipolar hegemony and the globalization of Western liberalism, Putin said that : "One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?" (ibid.)

He goes on to point out that this form of behavior in the international system creates fear amongst other nations. No one can feel safe if a hyper state can discard international law when this prevents them from realizing their domestic interests. Ultimately, this will lead these scared states to increase their military capabilities - and will thus encourage some to acquire weapons of mass destruction as a pure defensive strategy.

This statement by Putin is fully in line with the defensive realism of Kenneth Waltz, since states that use force to advance their interests, in this case the USA, will lead other states to worry about their own safety. Therefore, according to Waltz, power maximization is flawed because it might lead to the creation of counter-balancing coalitions between other states. This is exactly what is pushing Russia, China, Iran and others together, and likewise a factor in Putin's proposal for the creation of a multipolar international system which would establish a balance of power between civilizations.

Moving on to the economic growth of the BRIC countries, Putin concludes that these potential centers for economic growth in time will convert into political influence, and thus the foundation for a multipolar international system will be laid.

Putin then made clear that the only mechanism in the international system which can legitimize the use of force is the UN - not NATO, and not the EU. This is a hint to NATO's bombardment of Serbia, a historic and Slavic and Orthodox ally of Russia, during the war in Kosovo in 1999. The attack on Serbia also marked the first time NATO bombed a sovereign country in Europe, without having constituted a threat or attacked any NATO member. A reason for Russia not partaking a more active defense of Serbia in 1999 can be explained by the then lack of relative material power, as well as the pro-Western advisors surrounding Yeltsin at the time. This meant that Russia lost an important geopolitical partner in Europe. In the Middle East, Russia also followed a relatively passive stance until the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and later NATO's bombing of Libya in 2011. Both operations took out regimes with geopolitical importance for Russia since both Saddam and Gaddafi were anti-American in their outlook. Only in the case of Syria, where Russia got invited by the al-Assad regime, did the military passivity end.

Furthermore, Putin criticized the plans of the USA and NATO to expand the anti-missile defense system in Europe, saying that it "cannot help to disturb us. Who needs the next step of that would be, in this case, an inevitable arms race? I deeply doubt the Europeans themselves do" (ibid.). He goes on to stress the concern that as Russian troops are leaving the old bases in Georgia and Moldova, NATO - which ordered this removal of Russian soldiers - is placing frontline forces at the Russian border. Putin does not believe that the expansion of NATO has anything to do with European security, he views it as a "serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust" (ibid.) and a breach of the assurances that NATO, allegedly, gave Russia after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

Putin also discusses how current economic aid system to world's poorest countries work in relation to global security. The programs meant to help against poverty are linked to the donor

country's companies, and so the developed countries keep their agricultural subsidies and limit the accessibility to high tech products. Putin himself describes it thus: "one hand distributes charitable help and the other hand not only preserves economic backwardness but also reaps the profits thereof. The increasing social tension in depressed regions inevitably results in the growth of radicalism, extremism, feeds terrorism and local conflicts. And if all this happens in, shall we say, a region such as the Middle East where there is increasingly the sense that the world at large is unfair, then there is the risk of global destabilization." (ibid.).

Putin then goes on to suggest that the world's leading countries go together to work out a more democratic and fair global system of economic relations; something which the BRICS bank would seem to be an early attempt of and, again, an expression of the Russian wish for the establishment of a multipolar international system.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is also criticized by Putin, he believes that some countries are trying to turn it into an instrument for the promotion of their foreign policy interests in sovereign countries. As long as the OSCE works according to its stated mission of observing international human rights norms, Russia has nothing against it. The OSCE should not function as an NGO by interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, instead they should focus on building relations between sovereign states based on trust, transparency and respect. Putin himself stresses that NGO's are formally independent but purposefully financed and therefore under control.

On this theme, Russia has recently passed the "Law on Undesirable Foreign Organizations" which came into effect in July 2015 ("*Prosecutors ban Soros Foundation*": 30 November 2015). This law requires the Prosecutor General's Office and the Foreign Ministry to make a list of "undesirable foreign organizations" engaged in "anti-Russian activities" and then make them unable to perform their missions. When a group has been identified as undesirable, its assets in Russia are frozen, its offices closed and its materials are forbidden to distribute. The US National Endowment for Democracy was banned in late July 2015 because it engaging in an extensive campaign "to question the legitimacy of Russian elections and tarnish the prestige of national military service." (ibid.).

In November 2015, the "Open Society institute" and the "Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation", owned by George Soros, were banned from Russia. Putin is no stranger to the fact that Soros's organizations have been instrumental in creating the "Color Revolutions" around Eastern Europe, like in Serbia in 2000 (Grass: 14 February 2011), Georgia in 2003 (ibid.), and Ukraine in 2004 and 2013-2014 (Engdahl: 12 June 2015) which is most likely why these organizations were banned from Russia.

As for Russia's own foreign policy, Putin makes his vision very clear: "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today. At the same time, we are well aware of how the world has changed and we have a realistic sense of our own opportunities and potential. And of course we would like to interact with responsible and independent partners with whom we could work together in constructing a fair and democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all." (Putin: 12 February 2007). Here it is all summed up, Russia will follow its own interests in the international system but is willing to cooperate with others who want to establish a "fair and democratic" system, thus firmly rejecting the notion of unipolarity.

From Putin made the speech in 2007, the Russian plan for the establishment of a multipolar world system has been moving ahead. According to an article from RT titled: "*Shift to multipolar world: Lavrov says Russia working to adjust foreign policy to new reality*" (10 April 2016), the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, stated that Moscow is working on a new concept for future Russian foreign policy, adjusting it based on the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity in the international system.

More precisely, Lavrov said that: "We are trying to reflect this tendency in our fundamental doctrinal documents, namely Russia's national security strategy and the concept of its foreign policy," and that "A transition to polycentric architecture should be ideally based on the interaction of leading centers of power in the interest of finding joint solutions to global problems,"

Furthermore, the article explains that it is Vladimir Putin who has personally requested that these amendments to Russia's foreign policy be made. Therefore, it is clear that Putin, and Russia, is following the line laid down in 2007.

All this compliments comments made by Matthew Johnson on the matter, who says that the context of Putin's foreign policy is simply the drive of the West to impose a "liberal and oligarchic-capitalist ideology" onto Russia whether she likes it or not (Johnson 2012, p. 114).

### **Color Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia**

The "Color Revolutions" which took place in Georgia and Ukraine in the early-mid 2000's have been examples of an anti-post-Soviet integration tendency, in that they brought openly anti-Russian, pro-Western and sometimes nationalist political forces into power; often with the long-term prospect of incorporating these countries into NATO. Alexander Dugin has pointed out that these revolution follow the method of "non-violent resistance" which American strategists had elaborated in the framework of the "Freedom House" project (Dugin 2015, p. 118). The Freedom House project is an American NGO, funded by the US government, which goal is to spread democratic ideals throughout the world. In line with what Putin said about NGO's in his Munich speech, the Freedom Project has been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of many countries and it is believed to have links to the US State Department and the CIA.

Putin's own view of these foreign orchestrated revolutions has been expressed as follows: In Eastern Europe and the Middle East "[t]here was a whole series of controlled "colour" revolutions. Clearly, the people in those nations, where these events took place, were sick of tyranny and poverty, of their lack of prospects; but these feelings were taken advantage of cynically. Standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples' cultures. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals." (Putin: 18 March 2014)

The "Rose Revolution" which took place in Georgia was initiated by a youth organization called "Kmara", funded by George Soros and his Open Society Foundation (van der Schriek 2003, p. 2), succeeded in replacing the then President Eduard Shevardnadze, who was undecided about his country's relation to Russia and the West, with the strictly pro-Western and pro-American Mikhail Saakashvili. Dugin explains that Georgia under Saakashvili became a spoiler to further integration initiatives of the CIS countries. Instead, Saakashvili sought to create an anti-Russian coalition in the post-Soviet space called the GUAM bloc; consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. The GUAM bloc, from Dugin's perspective, works as a Western supported "cordon sanitaire" along Russia's southern border, and Georgia's role in this constellation is one of the reasons behind the Russia-Georgian war in 2008 (Dugin 2015, p. 118-119). From Russia's perspective, the West's involvement in the GUAM countries is a containment strategy meant to isolate Russia from her near abroad, and thus ruin the prospect of a resurgent powerful bloc in the Russian civilizational area, which could potentially threaten the global interests of the USA. Geopolitically, this is nothing more than a new application of the Truman Doctrine, although applied to the realities of the twenty-first century.

John Mearsheimer, commenting on the war in Georgia, believes that Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 was Putin signaling that he would not accept this country's entry into NATO. The war started after the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, ordered the Georgian military into the two autonomous republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to bring these areas under complete government control. Many of the citizens in these two republics are Russian citizens, so Moscow ordered the Russian army to occupy these areas to protect the integrity of their people. Despite this warning, Mearsheimer continues, NATO never publicly abandoned their goal of having Georgia and Ukraine become members of NATO (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 79).

The Ossetian nation is split into two autonomous republics: North Ossetia in Russia and South Ossetia in Georgia. The Ossetians have voluntarily declared themselves to be with Russia, which is the reason why many of them in Georgia have Russian citizenship. Dugin has explained that Putin had to intervene in Georgia due to Russia's historical pledge to protect these people who throughout the ages have functioned as an important Russian outpost in the Caucasus. Also, the

North Ossetians would never have accepted a radical separation of the South Ossetian lands from Russia (Dugin 2014, *Putin vs Putin*, p. 129). Therefore, if Putin had not come to the aid of the South Ossetians he would have permanently lost legitimacy in the eyes of the patriotic segment of Russian society, which is the segment that acts as the basis for his political support at home. More specifically: "The surrender of South Ossetia would have been a personal catastrophe for him: the end of his political legitimacy and the denunciation of his mission to revive statehood" (ibid., p. 129).

The intervention in Georgia also signified a new and direct confrontation with Washington and its plans in the Caucasus. Putin was running a big risk since pro-American agents, to use Dugin's term, influencing or controlling important strategic areas in the Russian economy, community of experts and the media could have initiated direct sabotage.

Therefore, Putin's action was a step away from following America's lead and instead assuming full responsibility for his country, the destiny of its people, starting a new cycle of patriotic history and rebuilding Russia's status as a great world power (ibid., p. 129).

Putin, in an interview he gave to CNN in August 2008, expressed his views on the war in Georgia by pointing out that the hostilities started as a consequence of the Georgian military shelling Russian peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia by artillery fire. Therefore, when he was asked by the interviewer if he could guarantee that Russia would never again attack a neighboring country, Putin answered: "It is not for us to guarantee that we will not attack someone. We have not attacked anyone. It is we who are demanding guarantees from others, to make sure that no one attacks us anymore and that no one kills our citizens. We are being portrayed as the aggressor." Emphasizing that: "The responsibility for the loss of life rests squarely with the present Georgian leadership, which dared to take these criminal actions." ("*CNN interview with Putin*": 29 August 2008) Putin's stance is that it was an act of self-defense, and not one of aggression.

Matthew Johnson has argued that the Russia's performance in Georgia changed the Western view of Putin's military capabilities, in that the modernized Russian army outperformed the American supplied Georgian forces with little effort (Johnson 2012, p. 174). Despite this, it seems that US

support for anti-Russian actors in the region has not ceased significantly; the conflict in Ukraine being a case in point, and a subject which we will now look into.

### **Ukraine, the Euromaidan and civil war**

The French academic and philosopher, Alain de Benoist, has commented on the events in Ukraine. de Benoist, who is in favor of multipolarity, is uncertain whether the USA had a part to play in the Euromaidan Revolution, but he does point to the fact that they have previously funded and inspired other "Color Revolutions" in the area; such as the Georgian "Rose Revolution" in 2003 and the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" in 2004-2005. These orchestrated revolutions were "seeking to channel an often justified popular discontent in order to integrate peoples into the Western economic and military orbit" (de Benoist: 6 April 2014). A hint to American involvement is that the then newly appointed Ukrainian Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, was immediately flown to Washington D.C. after the revolution; and thus, de Benoist points out, the Euromaidan can "not be considered a good thing for all those who struggle against the world hegemony of the United-States." (ibid.)

From a geopolitical perspective, de Benoist asks the question of whether the Cold War ever really ended for the US, since the collapse of the Soviet system seems to have changed little in terms of how the Atlanticists view Russia. Ever since the end of WWII, the USA has been trying to prevent the rise of another rival power in the world, and Russia, even after Communism was abandoned, has not ceased to be viewed as a threat to their global interests. The subsequent eastern enlargement of NATO, an organization which de Benoist believes should have been shut down simultaneously with the Warsaw Pact, shows this same geopolitical strategy of weakening and encircling Russia: "by destabilizing or taking control of its neighbours" (ibid.) in an attempt to stop the formation of a new great Eurasian bloc.

There were two anti-Russian factions present at the Euromaidan Revolution; the liberal pro-West elements who want to integrate into Europe and join NATO under US leadership; and then the Ukrainian ultra-nationalists of "Svoboda" and "Right Sector" who does not want anything to do

with Moscow, Washington or Brussels. Therefore, de Benoist points out, the simplified "pro-West versus pro-Russia" picture painted by the Western media is simply not true (ibid.).

Crimea has historically been a part of Russia, but in 1954 it was handed to Ukraine by the Soviet government, seeing that the Russian and Ukrainian republics basically constituted the same country anyway back then, without concern and consultation with the local, mostly Russian, population. A crucial point in understanding Putin's choice to enter Crimea is that a strategically important navy base is located in Sevastopol, constituting Russia's access to the Black Sea, and as de Benoist explains: "To imagine that Putin could tolerate NATO taking control of this region is obviously unthinkable." (ibid.). The West has continuously declared the referendum on Crimea joining Russia, which ended with huge support for a unification, as being illegal, illegitimate and in violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. To this, de Benoist points out the West's hypocrisy concerning "legality" and the "inviolability of borders" starting with the attack on Serbia in 1999 and the subsequent support for the secession and independence of Kosovo. Also, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are mentioned, and the fact that the Americans own country was created by secession from the British Empire (ibid.).

Regarding Russia's complicity in the rise of anger amongst Ukrainians, de Benoist refers to "a real Russian tendency to deny the Ukrainian identity, although this denial has sometimes been exaggerated. Things would probably not have arrived at this point, if Russia had treated Ukraine on an equal footing and with reciprocity." (de Benoist: 20 April 2014).

He further explains that Russia must recognize the identities of its "near abroad" neighbors and respect the rights of minorities, autonomy and regionalism - and so must Ukraine.

Concluding, de Benoist emphasizes that "[t]he concept of zone of influence has a meaning, and this meaning must be recognized, but "satellite" countries must now give way to partners and allies." (ibid.).

Alexander Dugin, in his article "*Ukraine, Russia and Westernia*" (23 March 2014), argues that the conflict in Ukraine is due to the presence of two competing ethnic groups within Ukraine: the Ukrainians and the West Ukrainians. The Ukrainians, Dugin explains, are part of the Russian ethnos; meaning Eastern Slavs with a strong Orthodox identity. The West Ukrainians are Ukrainians who,

due to the historical presence of Poland in the area, have been under the influence of Catholicism. This has led the West Ukrainians to consider themselves separate from, and opposed to, their Orthodox compatriots in the East.

Making peace between these two identities was the goal of the Ukrainian state from 1991 to 2014, which the Ukrainian elites failed to do. Dugin believes that the present civil war erupted when: "[t]he Western Ukrainian minority insisted that the entire modern-day Ukraine must possess a single—Western—identity, thereby opposing the rest of the Ukrainians. Thus, it was they who ultimately destroyed contemporary Ukraine." (ibid.).

Ukraine is today split into two entities:

1) The West Ukrainian, which Dugin calls "Westernia", with its center being in Kiev. Westernia is exclusively orientated towards the USA, and not continental Europe, since the West Ukrainian identity is also anti-Polish. This Galician ultra-nationalism, as Dugin terms it, will in time make the West abandon them and they will create tensions with the other nationalities in south-western Ukraine, namely the Hungarians, Romanians and Carpathian Rus. Dugin believes this entity will collapse sooner or later.

2) The Ukrainian, called "Novorossiya", which has a strong Orthodox East Slavic identity. Dugin stresses that Novorossiya is friendly towards Russia and will remain independent. Towards the Ukrainians in Novorossiya, Dugin emphasizes that "Russia must act not as an enemy, but as a friend and patron of the Ukrainian identity. The Ukrainian *ethnos*, language, culture are all part of our spiritual and historic wealth." (ibid.) And that they "are worthy of love, friendship, and the most gentle and attentive kind of a relationship. We must not insist on the Russification of Ukrainians, but instead act as the guarantors of safekeeping and developing their culture, language, and identity." (ibid.).

In March 2014, Putin gave a personal speech on his thoughts and feelings concerning the Ukrainian question. He stressed that Russia does "not want to harm [the Ukrainian people] in any

way, or to hurt [their] national feelings." (Putin: March 18 2014). He then goes on to assure that Russia has no plans to divide the Ukrainian nation or lay claim to other regions than Crimea which "was and remains a Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean-Tatar land." (ibid.). On the other hand, he criticizes and blames the Ukrainian elites for the current civil war.

Putin then goes on to emphasize the historical and national connection between the Russian people and the Ukrainian people, saying that: "Our concerns are understandable because we are not simply close neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other." (ibid.). It is interesting to note that Putin does not differentiate between the west and east Ukrainians in this regard, seeing that the former, as Dugin has pointed out, does not in any way identify with Eastern Slavic, Orthodoxy or the larger Russian civilization.

Nonetheless, Putin does point out that he will not tolerate discrimination of ethnic Russian's, pointing out that: "Millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend their interests using political, diplomatic and legal means. But it should be above all in Ukraine's own interest to ensure that these people's rights and interests are fully protected. This is the guarantee of Ukraine's state stability and territorial integrity." (ibid.) This clearly illustrate that Russia will be involved in Ukraine through its Russian minority. Also, the last comment can be interpreted as a threat, if the Kiev government and their supporters does not recognize the rights of the Russian people living in Ukraine, their guarantee of stability and territorial integrity from Russia side might be revoked. This scenario would not be unlikely, taking into account that Putin did just this in Georgia when the Russian Ossetians were threatened.

In order to remove any assumptions as to Russia's designs for Ukraine and her status, Putin stressed that: "We want to be friends with Ukraine and we want Ukraine to be a strong, sovereign and self-sufficient country. Ukraine is one of our biggest partners after all. We have many joint projects and I believe in their success no matter what the current difficulties. Most importantly, we want peace and harmony to reign in Ukraine, and we are ready to work together with other

countries to do everything possible to facilitate and support this. But as I said, only Ukraine's own people can put their own house in order." (Ibid.) Thus Putin makes it clear that a stable and friendly Ukraine is in Russia's interests since it would bring economic prosperity to both countries. Nevertheless, Russia is military present in east Ukraine where they are actively helping and supporting the rebels there. This has been confirmed by a central figure in Donbass, who claims to have been in direct contact with Moscow. His statements are crucial in order to get a nuanced view of the East Ukrainians situation and rational for armed resistance, as well as discussing Putin's not publicly claimed ambitions for this region of Ukraine.

Pavel Gubarev, who was one of the initiators of the Donbass uprising following the Euromaidan, has in a new book called "The Torch of Novorossiya" given an insider's account of the events, from the perspective of the locals of Donbass, leading to the Ukrainian civil war. The book is not translated into English, but quotes of Gubarev's from this work have been published in Polish by journalist Jacek Kaminski, which has in turn been translated into English by American journalist Jafe Arnold. The English translation of the Polish article was published in April 2016 by the Center for Syncretic Studies. The following words of Gubarev are taken from this source.

Gubarev stresses that in Ukraine "[t]he collapse of the Soviet Union and 'liberal market reforms' brought hell. Deindustrialization, poverty, wild corruption of the 'elites', insane social stratification, and the extinction of the indigenous population," (Kaminski: April 1 2016). This is what initially created a lot of discontent among the East Ukrainians. The independence of Ukraine, not unlike the situation in Russia before Putin, made the country dependent on the West. Moreover, the rule of "a parasitic class of oligarchs" (ibid.) soon led to the impoverishment of Ukraine. The Euromaidan, which for many people in Eastern Ukraine, signified the seizure of power of pro-Western oligarchs and ultra-nationalists in Kiev was the drop that made the cup overflow.

In March 2014, the "People's Militia of Donbass" was created in order to resist the Kiev government put into place after the Euromaidan. The militia did not fight for the return of the more pro-Russian Yanukovich, whom Gubarev also considers to be an oligarch, but for the

creation of an independent state, called "Novorossiya", made out of South-Eastern Ukraine. This statement supports Alexander Dugin's analysis, dealt with above, of the civil war between two ethnic groups within Ukraine.

Initially, when the militia had first been created, they had hoped for a variation of the annexation process which had taken place in Crimea, but this did not happen since Russia, according to Gudarev, is still in a "semi-colonial" state due to the presence of "pro-Western liberal and oligarchs in the country's government" (ibid.). Despite this, Gubarev does acknowledge that Russian troops, "vacationers" (ibid.), were supporting them and that they received military materiel in the summer of 2014. So, despite the fact that the Russian government and media denied these facts earlier, it can now be firmly established that support was given, and probably still is, to the rebels in Novorossiya. Thus Putin definitely have an agenda in the creation of a pro-Russian autonomous region within the borders of contemporary Ukraine.

Gubarev believes that "Russophobic" Western funded NGO's "conducted intensive work among youth with the aims of nationalist or liberal indoctrination" (ibid.) around Ukraine, and that these operations were instrumental in what became the Euromaidan Revolution. He also estimates that, at the time of the Euromaidan, these "Western NGO's had an army of 150,000 so-called volunteers, or paid activists, in Ukraine." (ibid.).

The Novorossiya movement is characterized as being "white-red". White represents Christian Orthodoxy and conservatism in terms of morality. Red symbolizes a radically left position on political and economic systems. They are also strong supporters of the Eurasian idea and worldview, therefore they will be loyal supporters of Putin's plans for a Russian dominated Eurasian Union, which can also explain Russia's support for them. It is thus a long-term strategy for Putin to secure the existence of this faction within Ukraine.

This is reinforced by Gubarev's idea that Novorossiya, which was historically part of Tsarist Russia and not Ukraine, "should become detached from the territory of Ukraine, to which it does not historically belong despite its proximity. Due to its economic potential, a wisely governed Novorossiya could become the center of revival of the entire Russian World, i.e., the community of

the civilizational and national "Russian" peoples who include Great Russians, Little Russians/Ukrainians and Belarusians." (ibid.).

Gubarev is very sympathetic to the idea of recreating the Russian Empire; meaning a pluralist community of many nationalities who share a common, Russian civilization: "This unifying idea defines Russian civilizational nationalism.", according to Gubarev (ibid.). This echoes the same explanation given by Dugin and Johnson in their views on Russian civilization extending beyond her current borders.

Gubarev concludes by presenting this vision for the future of Eastern Ukraine: "Novorossiya will be a country of new soviets, a country of ceaseless people's power and as such will be a country of economic democracy. It will be a country in which Justice prevails." (ibid.).

John Mearsheimer believes that the West's analysis, or narrative, of Putin being to blame for the crisis in Ukraine is wrong. According to Mearsheimer, the West says that Putin used the Euromaidan Revolution as a pretext to annex Crimea in a grand scheme of reestablishing the Soviet empire. Mearsheimer, though, puts the blame on NATO and EU enlargement which he says is part of the West's larger strategy of removing Ukraine, and other countries in the post-Soviet space, from the Russian orbit, in order to integrate her politically, socially, economically, and militarily into the West.

As for the actions taken by the Russian President, Mearsheimer states that: "For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president—which he rightly labeled a "coup"—was the final straw. He responded by taking Crimea, a peninsula he feared would host a NATO naval base, and working to destabilize Ukraine until it abandoned its efforts to join the West." (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 77).

In this regard, Mearsheimer points out that the elites in the USA and Europe who solely think in terms of liberal principles, or rather neoliberal, in international relations are the real culprits. Their rejection of the logic and importance of realism and realpolitik in relations to Russia is what made things escalate in Ukraine.

The Russian government since Yeltsin has been wary of NATO's expansion to the East, and after NATO's bombings of Russia's Serbian allies in the Balkans during the 1990's, these fears triggered a reaction from certain "nationalist" elements within Russia.

NATO's eastern expansion has been taking place during the Clinton, Bush Jr. and Obama administrations - the latest being the inclusion of Albania and Croatia in 2009. In April 2008, the Bush administration gave an open endorsement for the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO (Gilmore 2008).

Mearsheimer goes on to point out that the USA have spend \$5 billion since 1991 on support to pro-Western individuals or organizations inside Ukraine in order to spread "Western values" and "promote democracy" (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 80). Thus the suspicion that Gubarev have on this matter seems to be verified. Mearsheimer even believes that the Euromaidan Revolution was backed by Washington, pointing out that Victoria Nuland, the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, and Senator John McCain participated in the antigovernment demonstrations. Nuland had been advocating for regime change in Ukraine, and even pointed out that she wanted Ukrainian politician Arseniy Yatsenyuk to become Prime Minister for the new pro-American Ukrainian government, which he, interestingly enough, eventually did (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 81). Therefore, when the Russians and East Ukrainians openly talk about the Euromaidan being a Western supported coup there seems to be some legitimacy to that claim.

Putin's strategy of pressuring the Kiev government has been in the form of supplying arms, advisors and diplomatic support to the rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Also, Mearsheimer points out, there is a large Russian military buildup at the border which could be put into use if Kiev cracks down too hard on the rebels. Moreover, Russia has raised the price for the gas it is selling to Ukraine as well as demanding payment for past exports. Thus, Moscow has the power to wreak Ukraine as a functioning state if she steps too far out of line.

As for the geopolitical aspect of the West going into Ukraine, Mearsheimer explains that: "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory. After all, the United

States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying military forces anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, much less on its borders. Imagine the outrage in Washington if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico in it. Logic aside, Russian leaders have told their Western counterparts on many occasions that they consider NATO expansion into Georgia and Ukraine unacceptable, along with any effort to turn those countries against Russia—a message that the 2008 Russian-Georgian war also made crystal clear." (ibid., p. 82).

Mearsheimer explains that after the end of the Cold War many liberals in the USA believed that a new, post-national order had replaced the old realist logic in international politics. As the sole hegemon, the USA set out to make the entire European continent look like the rest of the West. The USA and its Western allies began promoting democracy, economic interdependence and embedding the countries of Eastern Europe in international institutions (ibid., p. 84). The idea was that geopolitics no longer mattered in Europe and that the liberal order could maintain peace.

In terms of international politics, Mearsheimer points out that Russia and the West are operating by two different playbooks: Putin and his people are thinking and acting in accordance with realism, meanwhile their Western counterparts are adhering to liberal ideas. His conclusion is that the West unknowingly provoked the crisis in Ukraine, and that Putin's actions in Ukraine have been defensive, not offensive (ibid., p. 85).

Mearsheimer believes that in order to peacefully resolve the crisis the USA and the EU should stop trying to "Westernize" Ukraine and instead think of her as a neutral buffer state between Russia and NATO. Ukraine should be a sovereign state; neither pro- or anti-Russian or pro- or anti-Western. NATO should publicly renounce its intentions to make members of Ukraine and Georgia. The West and Russia should work on a co-financed economic rescue plan for Ukraine. The West should stop further support for "Color Revolutions". Moreover, Ukraine should be encouraged to respect minority rights e.g. the language rights of Russian speakers in the country (ibid., p. 87).

Mearsheimer concludes by stating that: "The sad truth is that might often makes right when great-power politics are at play. Abstract rights such as self-determination are largely meaningless when powerful states get into brawls with weaker states. Did Cuba have the right to form a military alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War? The United States certainly did not think so, and the Russians think the same way about Ukraine joining the West. It is in Ukraine's interest to understand these facts of life and tread carefully when dealing with its more powerful neighbor." (ibid., p. 88).

Zack Beauchamp, writing for Vox.com, has in an article titled "Putin's geopolitical trolling" (April 14 2016) voiced his opinion that the Russian President is engaging in "needless provocations aimed at signaling strength" when Russian fighter jets are flying over American warships in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Moreover, Beauchamp believes that these overflights are a perfect metaphor for Russia's foreign policy, namely: "loud, buzzy, dangerous, and actually not that great for most Russians." (ibid.)

Putin, according to Beauchamp, uses these confrontations as a method of intimidation aimed at his geopolitical adversaries in the West; specifically, the US and their NATO allies. So, by showing willingness to risk open conflict, Putin hopes to be able to make the West back down and walk away.

In relation to Ukraine, Zack Beauchamp does not understand the moves Russia has made there. Crimea was annexed and thus all Western threats to the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol were neutralized. In the Donbass region, the Russian supported East Ukrainians have secured a "frozen conflict" with the US-backed government in Kiev. Beauchamp's view is that "these aren't exactly massive strategic gains" which, to say the least, illustrates his lack of understanding for the intolerable geopolitical position Russia would have ended up in if the Kiev government had kicked the Russians out of Sevastopol and given it up to American and NATO forces. To put in into perspective, if one of the countries neighboring the USA took a hard turn towards Russia, and there was a real threat that a Russian military installation would be placed there, would it then unthinkable to believe that the US would not have acted in a somewhat similar manner? Russia

views American military bases close to its borders as a threat, and America would undoubtedly view Russian military bases close to its borders just as threatening. This is basic geopolitics.

Beauchamp then goes on to explain that Putin's "trolling" and actions in Ukraine has weakened Western military resolve, because European countries, the NATO members, are rearming due to Russia's "aggressive posture" in the region. Interestingly enough, he is not taking into account the events Russia witnessed in Europe in the 1999's with NATO's bombardment of Serbia, and the subsequent US supported independence of Kosovo, in which the Serbs had no say, and now houses the largest US military base in the Balkans. Likewise, the regime changes, or lack thereof, brought on by Western armed force in Iraq and Libya - both sovereign states - would have left Russia and other states not in favor of American hegemony afraid since they could be next. Therefore, Putin's actions in Ukraine and Syria could be interpreted as a way of telling the US and their NATO allies that they do not have a free hand to indiscriminately further their plans for the arrangement of the international system anymore.

At this moment, the Minsk Agreement is still in effect and a ceasefire is in place in Ukraine. Recently, though, the ultra nationalist have threatened to overthrow the Kiev government if they make any concessions to the East Ukrainians in Novorossiya and allow them to hold regional elections (Dolzhenko: 20 May 2016). Therefore, things can quickly turn sour once more and the plight of the Ukrainian people will continue.

### **Russia in Syria: The West, fundamentalist Islam and the threat to national security**

Russia's involvement in Syria started in September 2015, after four years of civil war had already passed between the al-Assad government and various rebel groups in the country. The USA has officially been actively involved in Syria since September 2014 when they started a bombing campaign against ISIS and other radical Islamist groups, although not in a way that would help the al-Assad government. Initially, the Obama administration had decided not to get involved in Syria after al-Assad was accused of chemical warfare, but this decision was later overturned. In July 2015, Turkey also started getting involved: first by allowing the US-coalition to use Turkish air

bases, and later almost triggering a major confrontation with Russia after the Turks shot down a Russian warplane on 24 November 2015. It is significant to point out that Russia was invited into Syria by the al-Assad government, while the US-led coalition were not.

Steven Simon, writing for *Foreign Affairs*, has in his article "Putin's Long Term Strategy in Syria" (15 March 2016) commented on the Russian President's goals in the Syrian conflict. In Syria proper, the mission was to militarily stabilize the al-Assad regime and help it regain control of lost territory, as well as attacking the fundamentalist Islamic enclaves in order to deny them a stable footing. Internationally, it was an opportunity for Russia to show the world that she is again a force to be reckoned with. As for the partial withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria starting in March 2016, Simon believes that it is a sign of Russian restraint and cooperation. Russia is giving the opposition forces a chance to put forward a position which is actually negotiable, but ultimately, Putin's diplomatic goal is to secure a negotiated settlement that leaves al-Assad still in power (ibid.).

The link between Russian involvement in Syria and the presence of fundamentalist Sunni Islamists needs to be highlighted, explained and put into context. As mentioned earlier in the Chechnya section of this thesis, Russia is very concerned with the establishment of a militant Wahhabi state anywhere near its borders, since such a state would become a potential hotbed for recruitment and radicalization of Russian citizens of the Muslim faith in the Caucasus. Dagestan, which is called the "Epicenter of Muslim Terrorism in Russia" (Lawrence: 14 February 2014), is a case in point and a major concern for the Russian government.

Another writer for *Foreign Affairs*, Jeffrey Stacey, has also made related comments on Russia's intervention in Syria. In his article "Russia's Pyrrhic Victory in Syria" (20 March 2016), he argues that Russia, through its cooperation with the USA in brokering the talks in the UN, has been able to portray herself as a "peacemaker" and a "major global power". Interestingly enough, Stacey characterizes the Syrian conflict as a "proxy war", and points to Russian guarantees to the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq that their wish for the creation of a Kurdistan will be supported. The Kurds

share Russia's hostile view on both ISIS and Turkey, and are thus ideal local allies in the northern regions of Syria.

From a geopolitical perspective this is a smart move by Russia. By allying herself with the Kurds, who have been crucial allies of the West in the region, the Russian's in their support for an independent and sovereign Kurdistan would be able to place a "cordon sanitaire" on the northern border to Turkey. Therefore, by keeping Syria under the control of al-Assad, who is not a friend of Turkey either, and having Kurdistan become a reality, Recep Tayyip Erdogan will not be able to further his neo-Ottoman agenda in the Levant (Nasser: 20 November 2013). Moreover, the West will not be able to move in and build more military bases in the Middle East, something which the Russian's are also worried about, as mentioned earlier in this thesis.

Alexander Dugin views the conflict in Syria as a geopolitical confrontation between the representatives of a unipolar, the USA and her allies, and a multipolar, Russia and her allies, international system. In his article "Why we fight in Syria." (12 November 2015), he argues that a political vacuum of power appeared in the Middle East after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The USA has since then been pursuing a "Greater Middle East Project" with the aim of destroying nation-states in the region, and use the resulting chaos from this destruction as a way of projecting her hegemonic power.

Putin himself has recently stressed that the chaos in the Middle East not only poses a threat to Russia, but to the whole world. As to the origin of this chaos, his opinion is not too far removed from Dugin's, saying that: "We all know why that happened. We know who decided to oust the unwanted regimes and brutally impose their own rules. Where has this led them? They stirred up trouble, destroyed the countries' statehood, set people against each other, and then 'washed their hands', as we say in Russia, thus opening the way to radical activists, extremists and terrorists." (Putin: 3 December 2015).

Dugin believes that ISIS is a product of this Western imposed chaos and that it was deliberately created as a template for US military intervention in Syria. Moreover, groups with the same

sponsors and ideology as ISIS are also present in the Caucasus and Central Asia, directly on the border to Russia. Therefore, Putin understands that if he does not contain the chaos generated by the West in these regions, he will soon have to fight these terrorist groups inside the Russian Federation itself. In other words: "Syria is [Russia's] external line of defense" (Dugin: 12 November 2015).

Putin himself has made comments to this effect as recently as the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly in December 2015. He stated that: "The militants in Syria pose a particularly high threat for Russia. Many of them are citizens of Russia and the CIS countries. They get money and weapons and build up their strength. If they get sufficiently strong to win there, they will return to their home countries to sow fear and hatred, to blow up, kill and torture people. We must fight and eliminate them there, away from home. This is why it has been decided to launch a military operation there based on an official request from the legitimate Syrian authorities. Our military personnel are fighting in Syria for Russia, for the security of Russian citizens." (Putin: 3 December 2015) Therefore, Russia has a very selfish reason to intervene in Syria besides just helping one of her last regional friends.

Zack Beauchamp views Putin's Syrian campaign as a success, since Russia had a clear cut goal, namely to secure the continued existence of the al-Assad government by helping them regain control over crucial areas within Syria. But for Russia to secure a complete victory in Syria, a political, and not just military, resolution is needed. Maintaining the Russian naval base in Tartus is presented as an important aspect of Putin's plans in Syria, and this, according to Beauchamp, "won't happen without being able to reach some kind of negotiated settlement with the United States and other regional powers." (Beauchamp: 14 April 2016).

The cooperation between Moscow and Washington on brokering a ceasefire in Syria is an example of Russia not using intimidation to reach its goals. Instead, she turned to diplomacy where a consensus between the actors involved in the conflict agree to terms based on mutual interests.

Among the things Putin has accomplished in Syria is showing al-Assad that he is dependent on Russian support for survival. This could later be used as leverage by Russia to secure future interests in the country.

Russia's strategies in Ukraine and Syria are different but, according to Beauchamp, they serve the same goal, namely to make the West accept Russia as a global power. So the actions of Putin are simply different means to reach the same end. The Russian adventure in Syria worked in this regard.

Beauchamp's conclusion on Putin's foreign policy acrobatics is that he is simply trying to gain votes at home, referring to the protests which erupted in Moscow after he got reelected in 2012 due to allegations of vote fraud. Thus, it is more a case of self interest than Russian national interests that are responsible. So, by confronting the West abroad, Putin is showing the Russian people that he and the country is strong. Beauchamp's ends by stating that Putin's "trolling" policies are "acts of an insecure dictator, equipped with a weak military, doing what he can to assert his place in the world. They're acts of weakness." (ibid.).

The current work being done on securing a lasting ceasefire in Syria is resting on unstable ground simply due to the fact that so many possible spoilers are present and involved in the fighting. But Putin is, despite the partial withdrawal of troops, still actively present in the region, and he was to be, since: "The fall of Libya was a defeat for Russia. The fall of Syria will be yet another failure." (Dugin 2014, *Eurasian Mission*, p. 178).

## Conclusion

Russia's geopolitical strategy under Putin spring from the realities that she has had to face since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The driving circumstances behind the composition of this strategy has been both internal and external, domestic and international.

First, domestically, Putin had to put a stop to the downward spiral Russia was headed down during the 1990's. He started by combating the militant separatists and Wahhabi Mujahedeen in Chechnya, which gave him the support of the patriotic elements in Russia.

Next, Putin put a leash on the oligarchs, who had enriched themselves by shipping off Russia's wealth, making them serve Russia and not just themselves.

Russia's media, natural resources and some important industries have been nationalized again under Putin, thus strengthening the state and excluding foreigners and pro-West oligarchs from spoiling Russia's revival as a strong sovereign state in the international system.

As have been illustrated in this thesis, many of the factors working against Putin and Russia's road to regain status as a great power have been coming from the West, Russia's historical geopolitical adversary. NATO expansion, "Color Revolutions" and the attempts to isolate Russia have put the Russian's on guard and left them with no illusions as to what awaits them if Russia does not puts it foot down and stands up to the Atlanticists.

Putin can be described as a nationalist in the sense that he is aware of Russia's historical, cultural and religious - in other words civilizational - uniqueness, and refuse to surrender his country's sovereignty to appease foreign interests and aspirations. A stance which he is willing to take further and further, and what initially started as a plan for the reestablishment of national power is now being projected to the international arena.

The liberal powers in the West believes in the universality of its political and economic systems, its values and dogmatic notion of eternal material and social progress and development. The states, and state leaders, opposed to the globalization of the Western system are treated as hostile.

In the international system, Putin is trying to combat this liberal globalization process, and for this he is demonized. Geopolitics is still alive, and Putin's mission for stopping the West in its tracks is first by creating a Russian civilizational bloc, a Eurasian Union, consisting of the post-Soviet states, and then by cooperating with the other great civilizational powers who are against American unipolarity. The BRICS is one example of this tendency, but Russia is also fostering good relations with Iran in the Middle East, and Putin's support for Syria is also a way of ensuring that he does

not lose all his potential Arabic Muslim allies against America - remembering the fate of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi.

As for Russian interference in Ukraine and Syria, Putin is not an imperialist in the Western sense of the word, meaning he is not trying to subjugate other nations against their will with the aim of economic exploitation.

In Ukraine, Putin was following the pattern of neoclassical realism in the sense that he is trying to have an influence, and thus a certain amount of control over, Russia's near abroad. But it must be emphasized that Putin only intervened militarily after the Atlanticist-sponsored Euromaidan coup was threatening to turn Ukraine into an openly anti-Russian state, oppress the East Ukrainians and continue building the cordon sanitaire around Russia. Ultimately, Putin's geopolitical mission in Ukraine is to counter the Atlanticist tendencies operating in the country, and if this does not work, then it seems very likely that Russia would fully back the autonomy, and possible separation, of Novorossiya from Ukraine proper.

In Syria, Russia is dealing with the dual threat of Islamic fundamentalism and Atlanticist destabilization of the Middle Eastern region. Turkey, in this regard, should also not be underestimated since she could benefit from the chaos in Syria by possibly gaining some of the lost territory of the old Ottoman Empire. For Putin, his mission is to ensure the survival of a friendly nation; the continued existence of the Russian naval base in Tartus; neutralize the prospect of an Islamic Caliphate that could act as a base for radicalization of Russian citizens; and showing the USA that the days of unipolar global hegemony is over.

Putin's solution to the current imbalance of power in the international system is multipolarity. The realization of a multipolar international system is what Russia, and China for that matter, is seeking to establish. Regionalism, the creation of large civilizational spaces, the framework to realizing this and the BRICS bank are interesting initiatives to bypass global Atlanticist hegemony and their international financial organizations.

But the realization of this plan is far away in the horizon, and Putin only has until 2018 before he will have to step down again from the position as President of the Russian Federation. Will Russia be able to keep its current course for renewed great power status or will the coming President make a turnabout and accept the "end of history", as prophesized by Fukuyama the last time the Russian behemoth fell to her knees.

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