

Russian Foreign Policy in Eurasia and Re-Sovietisation of Ukraine under Putin

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Abstract

This research study analyzes Putin's leadership and its efforts for Russian resurgence as a great power. In its desire to achieve its great power status back; Russia has formed a more assertive foreign policy. Hence, it deemed necessary for Russian policy makers to re-Sovietize its former republics to gain its desired objectives. Ukraine appears to be an important state for the contemporary grand strategy of the Russian Federation. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, have certain key drivers, such as the large ethnic Russian population with the real grievances that had created instability, which made Russia step in and intervene. Putin desired to enhance Russia's international stature and deterring Western involvement in its sphere of influence. Russia's foreign policy goals under Putin have been formulated upon the military adventures of the country, especially in its near abroad to engage the post-Soviet periphery in geo-economic and geo-political ties with the Russian Federation. Putin seems determined to achieve a central position for Russia by using his political ideology and leadership as a source of his vertical power to affluence in the new geostrategic and economic pole of Eurasia. This study highlights Putin's keen interest in the former republic of Ukraine that holds a vital position that escalated after annexing Crimea while considering Ukraine's importance in the geopolitics of Eurasia simultaneously.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Re-Sovietization; Russia; Ukraine; Eurasia.

1. Introduction

As a global power, Russian resurgence drives from its historical legacy of Russian and later Soviet empire. This paradigm has led Russian leadership to assert and regain its hegemonic and global power role (Diesen, 2018). To achieve this objective, Russian policies look up to its historical, political, and economic factors as based on its traditional empire's past glory, and prestige (Fish, 2018). Politically, it wants to be that hegemonic actor who resolves conflicts and economically through its economic expansion and ties. Besides to this, it intends to act as a barrier to the Western projects in its areas of influence. Under Putin, Russia's growing influence in the Eurasian region postulates its desires for resurgence to reposition Russia in the emerging world order as a great power. Putin's primary strategic goals are to reestablish a single geopolitical unity for the Eurasian community, and the broader goal is to retain its world's position as a great power (Starr & Cornell, 2014). To do

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so, Putin desires to gather Russia's former republics into this community, especially Ukraine, under the Russian Federation. This would lead to Moscow facing an evolving competitive international environment and slewing domestic problems by the reluctant former republics.

The Russian Federation has followed three distinct foreign policy approaches. Siding with Western states' coalition against those who were viewed to be threatening their values and interests (Baldoni, 2016). The balancing or the defensiveness of Russia through the flexible international alliances as an external perform and the domestic revival as an internal. And finally, the unilateral assertiveness in its foreign policy in acquiring objectives abroad. Russia's foreign policy focuses not only on power, prestige, and security but also on the state's actions, including the values and varying ideology of national interest, which provides a state with a sense of purpose and ethical principles.

Two concepts had guided Russia's foreign policy since its disintegration; one is the pro-Atlantic opinion it wants the integration with the wider West. The other one is the Eurasians' opinion that defends the necessity to reintegrate the former republics and bringing back the traditional values (Timofeev & Alekseenkova, 2015). Moreover, Russia was once settled to what Mackinder termed as the world's geopolitical centre, Heartland, which holds a powerful impact and the major driving force behind its external and internal policy-making (Mikail & Yilmazchoban, 2018). This also influences its Eurasian foreign policy goals. To do so, Russia repositions itself to be a "stand-alone" pivotal power in the wider Eurasia. Its leaders are trying to create a distinct national entity amongst the diverse neighbourhood. This new geopolitical framework is the first evoked by Gorbachev, calling it a "common European home", which in the modern day is referred to as "Greater Eurasia" (Bordachev, 2018). From this "Great Eurasian Dream", it can be assumed that Russian foreign policy indicates the political and economic dominance in the Eurasian region.

Putin's foreign policy is based on the "Multipolar world thesis", which, according to Russian politician, Yevgeny Primakov, suggests that Russia's elasticity concerning other countries to address their interests, all countries excluding USA (Mikail & Yilmazchoban, 2018). The other aspect of its foreign policy is to have its lost territories back, and it is determined to do whatever it takes. Putin's first step to have its lost territories back was seen in the War in Georgia (2008), then later in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea (2014). These struggles and determination to have the territories back were coined in a term known as "re-Sovietize" that Russia wants to achieve through its military ad hoc adventures. The recapture of its lost territories lies in its leaders' sentimental perceptions especially Russia's President Putin, who exercise these perceptions in building its policies both domestically and internationally (Giles, 2017).

Since the beginning, Putin's leadership has been marked by his conduct's paramount characterization, leading Russia in a "third way". This third way was more of embracing Russia's national paths by Russia's means and methods, but under the state's guidance. Putin came forward with his own ideas forming a Putinite way that emphasizes bringing forth Russia's special national paths to assure the best for the country's interest and deal with problems the country was facing (Fish, 2017). The major ideology behind Putin is not adopting communism which also marks his post-Soviet identity. Instead, it consists of strategic eclecticism, which consists of varying measures of his conducts (Sakwa, 2008). The first one is to apply the liberal values and principles in the economy, conduct statism in the country's domestic policies, and carry out "Derzhavnost", a great power nationalism, in foreign policy. This is Russia's immediate near abroad means to be an unquestioned sphere of influence while implying prestige, recognition and respect, altogether (Sakwa, 2008).

The great power aspiration which Russia seeks in the Eurasian region is due to the country's vital geostrategic location and its significant presence in between the continents of Europe and Asia. Against this background, the years of Putin's administration have seen the emergence of a distinct Russian identity in correspondence to its presence in the Eurasian region, known as Eurasianism (Chausovsky, 2019). This identity includes the components of a political ideology that pursues Russia's foreign policy strategy in Europe and Asia and serves Putin's geopolitical assertiveness in the regions. This Eurasianism stresses collective stability over individual autonomy and desires to maintain regional power by keeping the former republic in its folds. The purpose is to align them into the former Soviet boundaries or have a sphere of influence in the former republics to seek or opt for a pro-Western path.

2. Putin's Foreign Policy in Eurasia

The current foreign policy of Russia has been widely associated with the personality of its President Putin. No matter what Russia's decision-making machinery decides, Putin's final decisive word would still be given on all issues that interest him, even if it means he has to go against the firmly established institutions. For instance, as seen in Putin's support for America in its War against Terrorism while providing it with bases in Central Asia, despite the Russian national security elites' opposition and resistance (Hussain & Shakoor, 2017). For this very reason, Vladimir Gel'man called Putin "flexible yet cynical", which means that if a plan or idea doesn't suit his agenda, he will amend it. It is all about what suits him and his interests in a situation. He can either become liberal if liberalism suits him or become a nationalist if nationalism suits his agenda (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2016).

Contemporary Russia under President Putin follows the Soviet System and at the same time emphasizes adopting a pragmatic approach to achieve post-Soviet development. However, the democratic path that Russia is following under Putin's presidency is observed to be a managed democracy giving a centralized executive authority. The institutionalism of these

executive powers has given the President a legal authority to practice freehand not just domestically but also in foreign policy (Rutland, 2000).

Putin keeps his influence and eye on individual policies and prioritizes certain policies such as its energy ties, protecting Ukraine from "foreign hands", and managing international crises. For instance, Russia's role and interests in the Syrian conflict and Eurasian integration to search for a balancing point in the changing paradigms of the 21st century. Russia's present determination is the assertion of itself as a major power in the international arena. It no longer aspires for a Greater Europe but instead desires for a Greater Eurasia. This major shift has been observed, especially in Putin's administration under whom Russia no longer aims towards any particular side (U.S, Europe or China) but instead of the wants to search for a balancing point in the changing geopolitical dilemma. Russia's foreign policy is confined to its backyard or the former republics and stretches towards the Middle East, Africa and North America (Hussain & Shakoor, 2017).

The geopolitical pivot towards the Eurasian continent is not only an essential policy for Russia. Eurasia is a significant region due to its geopolitical importance in the changing geostrategic paradigm of the 21st century. The importance lies in its western region of Europe, which still has much of the world's economic and political power and in its Eastern region of Asia that lately became a vital hub of rising economic growth and political influence (Brzezinski, 1997). In his book "The Grand Chessboard", Brzezinski called Eurasia the centre of the world, and who controls this region controls the world. Therefore, he called Eurasia the chessboard upon which the struggles for geopolitical and geostrategic interests for global supremacy continues to be played.

Under Putin, Russia has developed a different identity known as the Eurasian identity distinct from the West. With the geopolitical changes and Russia's foreign policy manoeuvring between China and the West, it is believed to solidify its Eurasianist identity in the coming years (Chausovsky, 2019). This identity includes the political ideology that shapes Russia's current foreign policy aspiration and resurgence desires as a power in Eurasia (Diesen, 2019). This is to align the former Soviet periphery with post-Soviet Russia to keep them away from the foreign hands (NATO, EU), and integrate its market economy with the rising Eastern region of Asia. Although geopolitics for centuries has been the driving force behind Russian efforts of integration recently, the economic rationale has become necessary as well for the Russian hopes of integration.

Russia has established the Eurasian Economic Unit (EEU) to align with its former republics and integrate with Europe, which is said to be a part of Putin's Greater Eurasian Dream. The purpose is to make an EU style market with free movement of people, services, goods and capital with integrating transportation projects while overshadowing the purpose of EU in the Europe and diminishing the threat of former republics joining European Union. The union is carrying out Putin's goals of building ties with the "Asia-Pacific

region" in response to the Indo-Pacific, while has made several free trade agreements with Vietnam, Iran, and India and is hoping to achieve the confidence of other states as well. With the hopes of making this union a participant in to One Belt and One Road initiative of China, Russia has also signed major trade and economic agreements with China (Perović, 2018). The reason behind Moscow's decision to build regional economic integration is said to be a reaction to NATO's stretch and the economic expansion of China in Central Asia.

The consolidation of Putin's power in the country's domestic front has enabled the country to reassert itself across the former Soviet republics as seen in the Georgia War and annexation of Crimea and now in the Ukraine crises. Putin also exerts his power vertical in the former republics by appointing favourable candidates to maintain Russia's sphere of influence. This power vertical has even its impressions on the foreign affairs of Eurasia as Putin asserts the desires for Russia's aspiration and resurgence and starts it off with his Great Eurasian dream. This territory was once under the Soviet Empire. He wants to build a bloc with its characteristics and is the different from the Western bloc. Putin's rejection of the Western bloc and China's growing economic ventures increases the competition between the major powers giving the rise to the future confrontation between the great powers.

3. The geopolitical significance of Ukraine for Russia

Ukraine is the largest country located in Europe after Russia, whose geography is inextricably linked to Europe and Russia and serves as a primary transit state for the Russian energy exports to Europe whose energy sector depends on Russia's imports. Ukraine contains abundant mineral resources and fertile farmlands for agriculture, so it is called a global breadbasket. Being a "geographical pivot state" of the Eurasian chessboard, Ukraine had been contested between the past centuries' regional powers. The powers are currently playing this competition in an extreme form (Kanet & Sussex, 2016). The region's recent crises are due to its internal divisions and the prevailing East-West conflict over the country. Furthermore, with the involvement of major powers like the West and Russia, this confrontation is becoming a challenge for Ukraine to maintain its sovereignty and is posing a primary geographic challenge in the country.

The current crises in Ukraine go back to the Cold War era. The nuclear arsenals of USSR were deployed in the various regions, including Ukraine, which gave back the nukes to Russia in 1995, and wanted it to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine. Later in the year 2000, Russia made a deal with the European Union to reaffirm Ukraine's independence and sovereignty and allowed Ukraine and other former Soviet republics to make pacts with any nation; they wanted (Andreis & Calogero, 1995). Russia-the first saw the geopolitical nightmare of losing Ukraine to the West in the Orange revolution of 2004 (Huseynov, 2017). Due to such interventions from the West, Russia's strategic goal now became to weaken the US and the EU, NATO, and the

entire Western Alliance and their desires to include the former republics of the Soviet Union into their alliances.

Ukraine has always been an important country for Russia due to its strategic location. It is the country without which Russia's plans of reintegrating the post-Soviet states under the Eurasian Economic Union would lose most of its practicality and value. Russia's geopolitical ambitions on Ukraine further accelerated after his Great Eurasian dream as Russia connects itself to Europe through Ukraine. The economic potential of Ukraine has always been a significant asset to Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) due to the complementarity of its agriculture and industries (Sergi, 2018).

3.1 Re-Sovietisation efforts of Russia

After the collapse of the USSR, the independent state of Ukraine was represented as a vital geopolitical setback for Russia. It came out as a challenge for the Russians to reassess the nature of their political and ethnic identity. For Russia's imperial history, Ukraine independence was a loss of a large country with a potentially vital agricultural and industrial economy and the ethnic and religious people close to Russia, making it a large and confident imperial state. Ukraine's independence also deprived Russia's dominant position in the Black Sea. Odessa had served as a vital gateway for Russia's trade with the Mediterranean and the rest of the world. The loss of Ukraine was a loss of a geographical pivot for Russia, limiting Russia's geostrategic choices. With the control over Ukraine, Russia could seek its strong position as a Eurasian empire as without Ukraine; it would become more Asiatic and less European. This self-determination of Ukraine to become independent stunned Moscow and set an example for other Soviet republics who timidly also followed it.

For Putin, the USSR collapse was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, and he desires to reintegrate the post-Soviet space, representing his neo-Soviet narrative. When he came to power, and he seemed quite determined of revitalizing Russia as a strong state. His presidency invoked the positive images of the USSR for Russia's interest in returning to the former greatness, leading towards a renewed strong state power in Russia. He also got a domestic approval from the majority of Russians who were inspired by his foreign policy of establishing Russia as an aspiring great power in the international arena.

For Putin, the Ukrainian revolution resulted from the West's growing influence in Russia's near abroad and succeeded due to Western backing and sponsoring. Consequently, Putin's government has increased its military presence in the region to expand its political impact in the near abroad, particularly to pressure Belarus and Ukraine. Putin has tried to control Ukraine through Kremlin-friendly officials and pursue the Russian foreign policy goals. He was very much successful in doing that until the new wave of the revolution came in Ukraine. His imperialistic ways were also one of Russia's involvement in the Ukraine crises as the Orange Revolution threatened his

country's authoritarian ways, fearing a spill-over in the country (Kagarlitsky et al., 2019).

4. Problems and Prospects of the Re-Sovietization of Ukraine

To exert its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, Russia would be dealing with problems related to the internal and external factors prevailing in the region. The first, it has to face the internal resistance of those Ukrainian populations who pulled out two revolutions in the country, and detests Russia's involvement. Secondly, the West sees these Russian views as a contradiction to Westphalian principles of sovereignty. Thus, Russia's major problem would be the Transatlantic Alliance's presence (NATO and EU) in the common neighbourhood (Huseynov, 2016). Those states have also embraced the extending assistance of NATO and the EU towards the post-Soviet periphery to change their geopolitical orientation away from Russia's dominance (Walker, 2015).

Russian aspirations in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea were then met with the West imposing "sectorial sanctions" to target its financial sector, economic industry, and oil industry (Connolly, 2015). Although the sanctions affected Russia's economy, it could not deter its aspiration and interventionism in Ukraine and other post-Soviet space countries. Even after sanctions, Russia entered Ukraine more aggressively than before (Tyll, Pernica, & Arltová, 2018). With the turn of the millennium, the rise of ethnic nationalism started to gain faith from the Russians who were looking for an identity, and designs of Russian ethno-religious nationalism emerged. Putin's new nationalist narrative can be examined by his return to power in 2012, and the political strategy that defines it as seen in the justifying of the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention of Ukraine (Herpen, 2013). Putin's political strategy is called the turn to nationalism, might fall into the category termed as "moderate statism" (Tuminez, 2000). In Russia's case, this defines the Russian nation in civic terms, including ethnic Russians, Russophones (Russian speaking), the compatriots, and others who live in and outside the Russian Federation's borders.

Moreover, this geographical contestation has also created problems in Ukraine in the shape of identity crises with Ukrainians caught in between monism and pluralism. In international relations, monists believe in the oneness of internal and international system to form a unity, in the account of which monism in Ukraine has been supported under the "Wider Europe" model by the West. In contrast, as supported by "Greater Europe" model of Russia, pluralism has been derived from the country's pluralistic history and from its Russophone (Russia speaking) population, endorsed by Putin and the Russian elite. The debate now focuses upon, who has the right to decide upon the actual meaning to be Ukrainian and which model they wish to see emerging after the crises resulting in polarizing conflicts (Sakwa, 2015).

Apart from the problems Russia would be facing, and there are chances of great prospects as well for the country. As country occupying a vital position in Europe and Asia's continents; it can establish its interests within the region. Russia can exert its political and economic leverage on the Eurasian region by its EEU and its dominance over the region's gas and hydrocarbon resources. The Great Eurasian partnership goals were to re-orient its integration projects in the post-Soviet periphery to make the EU style market while overshadowing its purpose and diminishing the threat of former republics joining it (Lewis, 2018). Other prospects for Russia lie in gaining Ukraine, which for Russia is the major connectivity region for Moscow's gas supply to the European Union, about half of which transits through Ukrainian pipes. By re-Sovietising Ukraine, Russia would secure access to the network of former Soviet satellite's pipeline and access to the European market. If Putin increases focus on its Eurasian Union in such times where the dissolution of the euro is already affecting the European Union. In that case, he may succeed in creating a European counterweight.

5. Conclusion

Ukraine is significant for the Russian Federation as it would connect Moscow to the European continent. However, the crises in Ukraine changed the internal and external dynamics of the Eurasian region and has changed the Post-Cold War European order. With that, a diverse and robust model has come up to the surface that projects the framework for a Greater Eurasia, which is considered the brainchild of Russian President Putin. This transformation to counter US and EU's growing influence and interests in the post-Soviet periphery occurred in two stages. The first one was under the Primakov doctrine and the second stage was seen in the Putin doctrine. These two doctrines and the Brezhnev doctrine emphasize the strategic importance of the Soviet space for Russia, due to which they consider it the right to protect these regions from the West.

The declassified document of "Defense Planning Guide" 1992, USA has estimated that the Washington should use its status to rule out the possibility of USSR being brought back in one form or another. It will prevent the possibility of Russia's hegemonic position in the Eastern Europe. Consequently; the risks of a geopolitical contestation between the West and Russia have heightened in the country which has escalated the conflict and posed a threat to European security (Raik, 2017). Ultimately, the Ukraine crisis is the symptom of a failure to establish an inclusive and equitable post-Cold War international order in the region. As in the past, an asymmetrical peace was imposed in Europe by both NATO and EU who expanded to mitigate the chances of Russia's alienation as an outcome of which Russia pivoted towards its post-Soviet periphery. The transatlantic community has failed to provide a framework of negotiation for settlement. In Russia's case, Putin's administration by no means can abandon the insurgents from the frozen conflicts in the country (Kudelia, 2019).

Russia's aspirations to re-sovietize the former republics under its influence, especially Ukraine, have its problems and prospects. The first, it has to face the transatlantic alliance and their interest towards Eastern Europe, which for Russia also perceived as a threat to its borders. Another problem would be the nationalist narrative Putin has built to protect the Russophones (Russian speaking) and to create Novorossiia (New Russia) and laid the foundation for Russkiy Mir (Russian world). Such rhetoric was to justify Putin's action in the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention of Ukraine. The problem with these narratives is that they may exhibit actions that are far beyond their realistic limits. Also, no matter how amenable population or strategic historic justification Russia may use, it would still not be able to successfully use the compatriots who do not seem enthusiastic about reunifying with their motherland.

On the other hand, Ukraine seems to be divided among its monist and pluralist population, which adds up to the Ukraine crises and the questions of being Ukrainian. Monists believe in their separate identity and are supported by the West and its allies. In contrast, pluralists believe in their existence's pluralism being related to the cultural and historical ties with Russia. This has resulted in a tug of war between the two who couldn't decide upon the nation building in Ukraine which has also affected the security of Europe and came out as a failure to the post-Cold War security order.

The analysis in the paper points to a few implications such as; the eastern enlargement of NATO and EU towards the post-Soviet countries as resulted in Russia's fear of losing the countries to the Western bloc due to which Moscow intervened to prevent it from happenings. It would be prudent to stick to the general principles of avoiding further escalation of the conflict. The measures that have heightened Russia's resentment against the West without adding real or direct benefits to US security should also be avoided. As seen in NATO's expansion to the Baltic States, that seems a dubious proposition that might legitimize Russia's nationalists' rhetoric.

It is also necessary to understand and monitor the evolution of Putin's nationalist revanchism as well as to measure the level of support; he is getting from the population at large who also support his ideas of reintegrating the post-Soviet space. Such monitoring would provide the analysis for dealing and understanding Russia's behaviour in policy-making. NATO and EU should establish a task force to coordinate the policies of these two organizations concerning Russia.

The Ukraine crisis stakeholders should also reach a common ground and adhere to the agreements made to each other, for instance, the Minsk agreement. If the EU wants to reduce Russia's influence and prevent it from creating the Eurasian Union, it would have to fix the organization's problems, including the major euro mess (Kim, 2015). Russia and the EU need to create common space through a constructive dialogue on their shared neighborhood as they can be valuable partners.

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