

# 22

## Putin's re-Sovietisation project and the Ukrainian jewel<sup>1</sup>

Largely unnoticed by the media in Australia, a lengthy geopolitical tug of war has been taking place for dominance in Eurasia. Though he and his propagandists periodically deny it, President Vladimir Putin is clearly bent on restoring some kind of successor organisation to the Soviet Union that Moscow (he) can control. The European Union took a long time to react to this development, and the Obama administration seems to pay only modest attention to it.

Just before retiring as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton labelled Putin's efforts an attempt to re-Sovietise the region.<sup>2</sup> The high priority these words seemed to imply for Washington has not been particularly apparent since. But alarmed by increasingly bellicose rhetoric from Putin, the cyberwar fought by Moscow against Estonia in 2007,<sup>3</sup> the shooting war in Georgia in 2008 (provoked by Moscow and its South Ossetian proxies and unwisely triggered by Georgia's pro-Western President Mikhail Saakashvili), some Eastern and Scandinavian EU members lobbied successfully for some EU (and NATO) pushback.

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1 First published in *The Interpreter*, 21 Nov. 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/21/Putins-restoration-project.aspx?COLLCC=2000020440&](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/21/Putins-restoration-project.aspx?COLLCC=2000020440&).

2 See 'Clinton Calls Eurasian Integration An Effort To "Re-Sovietize"', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 Dec. 2012, [www.rferl.org/content/clinton-calls-urasian-integration-effort-to-resovietize/24791921.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/clinton-calls-urasian-integration-effort-to-resovietize/24791921.html).

3 See 'Estonia hit by "Moscow cyber war"', BBC News, 17 May 2007, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/europe/6665145.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/europe/6665145.stm).

In Brussels, this led to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, which was aimed at the former western republics of the USSR: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Launched in 2009, the EaP is an attempt to integrate these countries into the European Union via trade and enhanced bilateral contacts in exchange for their undertaking reforms to bring them into line with EU values and practice. Many within the elites in those countries are in fact minded to head in a European direction, though some would prefer to go just far enough to secure advantages for themselves and a hedge against Moscow.

The NATO equivalent has been November 2013's 'Steadfast Jazz' exercise, involving over 6,000 NATO troops (only 250 of them from the United States). This was a response to an aggressive Soviet-style exercise called Zapad (West) 2009, led by Moscow with participation by troops from Belarus, and another Zapad exercise this year that, according to some accounts, saw up to 70,000 troops deployed. Zapad 2009 turned on what Moscow identified as a 'terrorist' scenario involving the suppression of an uprising by a 'national minority' group in Belarus and culminating in a simulated nuclear strike on Poland.

Fearing the EaP might produce a reprise of 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century',<sup>4</sup> Moscow has set up a rival project of a Eurasian Customs Union aimed at the former Soviet republics, which is to develop over time into a Eurasian Union.<sup>5</sup>

This is presented as a benign EU equivalent ostensibly aimed at forming a cooperative building block together with the European Union and China of a new multi-polar Eurasian security structure. The former republics have mostly been sceptical of Putin's insistent invitations to join Moscow's various new multilateral bodies, including the Customs Union, seeing them as a thinly disguised device for restoring Moscow's dominance. Even those that have joined the Customs Union (Kazakhstan and Belarus) or signalled their intention

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4 See Claire Bigg, 'World: Was Soviet collapse last century's worst geopolitical catastrophe?' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 Apr. 2005, [www.rferl.org/content/article/1058688.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1058688.html).

5 See 'Putin calls for "Eurasian Union" of ex-Soviet republics', BBC News, 4 Oct. 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15172519](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15172519).

of doing so (Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) continue to cultivate links with one or more of the European Union, United States and China, and resist many of Moscow's initiatives.

Putin has had to resort to press-gang tactics to herd the reluctant former republics into his Customs Union and away from the European Union. Meanwhile, the EaP has been pushed ever closer towards the moment of decision, with a special EU summit to take place in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, on 28–29 November 2013. Lithuania, which currently occupies the rotating six-monthly EU presidency, has been active in promoting the EaP, and the Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, a one-time Soviet party official, has been one of its most forceful advocates.

It has been expected that at Vilnius, the key EaP candidate, Ukraine, would sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union, giving Ukraine freer trade with Europe while falling short of foreshadowing full EU member status.

It has also appeared increasingly likely that if President Viktor Yanukovich finally committed unequivocally to signing the AA, the European Union would respond with economic aid to save Ukraine from pending crisis and protect it from the effects of the punitive trade sanctions Russia has been overtly threatening. But recently, the autocratic Yanukovich, who has been tacking west strongly for several months, seems to be hedging or even reconsidering his options. In particular, he has failed to free his domestic archenemy, ex-premier Yulia Tymoshenko, whom he narrowly beat for the presidency and who has been in jail since 2011. If she is not released under reasonable terms or pardoned outright, the chances of an AA being ratified by EU members will be slim.

Which side of the mountain Yanukovich finally lumbers down will be of great strategic significance. After European Russia, Ukraine is the largest European country by territory, and the fifth largest by population (45 million), with a substantial resource endowment and great economic potential. It was a vital part of the Soviet military–industrial complex, and Russia is keen to regain full control of those assets.

The strange thing about the geopolitical struggle for the heart of Eurasia is that Moscow seems to be the only contestant taking it fully seriously. The European Union is divided and, though its resolve has been stiffened somewhat by Putin's bellicosity, it still is not resolutely determined to prevail. Putin, on the other hand, is very focused. For many Russians, including Putin, Ukraine is a wayward and rather comical provincial backwater of Russia itself, occupying areas that the Russians regard as vital to their military strength and cultural and historical identity.

The Russian leadership, whatever weaknesses it may have, is always closely attentive, almost obsessively so, to its strategic advantage. Putin thinks about these matters intelligently, carefully and constantly. Unlike his democratic Western counterparts, many of whom he views with at times ill-concealed contempt, he has plenty of experience in the job, plans much more of the same in the future, and is capable of thinking long and to good effect. He can fine-tune his coercive 'energy diplomacy' manoeuvres, skilfully dividing and manipulating his target counterparts. And no one ever calls him to account.

Western leadership and unity, by contrast, does not present well. Obama had (and largely still has) rockstar status with European publics, and therefore with their leaders, but has made very little use of it to repair the rifts of the Bush years.

Irritated by its European allies' miserly and declining spending on defence (by contrast, Putin has embarked on a US\$700 billion rearmament program over 10 years,<sup>6</sup> and will, on one estimate, increase his defence spending by a quarter next year alone), Washington is 'pivoting' away from Europe to Asia, and calling on its European allies to do more for themselves. The protracted economic stagnation and resulting social stresses, the growing divergence in strategic perceptions, even the long-running Snowden media entertainment skilfully promoted by Kremlin impresarios all greatly weaken Western effectiveness. The Transatlantic Free-Trade Area negotiations are a welcome light in the distance, but the journey towards it could prove long and arduous.

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6 See Matthew Bodner, 'Putin tightens grip on Russian defense industry', *Moscow Times*, 10 Sep. 2013, [www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-tightens-grip-on-russian-defense-industry/506803.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-tightens-grip-on-russian-defense-industry/506803.html).

Against this none-too-promising backdrop, how the EaP project turns out is all the more important. It's not an easy thing for Brussels for a number of reasons. Ukraine's Yanukovich may in the end decide not to sign an AA but rather to accept another bribe from Putin, as he did in 2010 when he extended the Russian Black Sea Fleet's leasehold on naval facilities in the Crimea for 30 years, in exchange for a lowering of Moscow's extortionate price for Kyiv's gas imports. Even if Yanukovich signs, and the EU ratifies, he may well subsequently renege on the political and economic reforms agreed as a *quid pro quo*. He is likely, in any case, to continue trying to play off Moscow against Brussels and vice versa.

Accepting Ukraine at this stage cannot be seen as a reward for its adoption of 'European values'. It can only be justified on strategic grounds as a step aimed at ensuring that those values may have a greater chance of being implemented some time in the future.

On the other hand, it does seem highly likely that if Yanukovich is shown the door by Brussels this time, he will rebound into the arms of Moscow. In that event he would seek and probably receive enough economic and political support to win re-election in Ukraine's 2015 presidential elections, if necessary by jailing as many of his opponents as he chooses, and doing whatever else is required to meet the objective. Moscow would certainly not object or withdraw aid in protest.

Yanukovich would not then become a complete vassal of Moscow, any more than the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan are at present. But Ukraine would nonetheless become the jewel in Putin's neo-imperial crown, the indispensable province restoring the proud Soviet patrimony he recalls nostalgically from his days as a patriotic schoolboy when the world stood in awe and fear of the mighty Soviet Union.

Putin's vision is that this area of 'stability' and 'traditional values', which he latterly presents in almost Huntingtonian terms as true Orthodoxy, should stand steadfastly against decadent Western values as part of a new geopolitical balance in Eurasia, in which Russia and its satellites would become one pole of at least equivalent weight, in Putin's eyes, to the other two.

The sharply anti-Western propaganda he has stepped up domestically since the *lèse-majesté* he suffered on the streets of Moscow in 2011–12 fits well with this external strategy of creating a Russian-dominated autocratic entity between Europe and China. His own pivot to the East is focused above all on the strategic and economic partnership he proclaims and promotes with his like-minded counterparts in Beijing.

It must be doubted that Russia has the economic, ideological, political or even the demographic strength to sustain itself as an equivalent pole to Europe, much less to China, on the Eurasian continent. Already some of the former Soviet Central Asian states are increasingly looking to China, particularly for trade and investment purposes, but also to some degree as a hedge against Moscow. In the longer term the real threat to Russia's standing and influence is from China, not from the hated West. But while a concealed anxiety about China's rise occasionally shows through, much more often Putin seems to see getting closer to his giant Eastern neighbour as in some way increasing his strategic weight in relation to the United States.

If a new line of demarcation is drawn on the Eurasian landmass that is intended to ensure that democracy, human and minority rights, free markets, decent governance, and freedom of expression and assembly are shut out beyond the eastern borders of the European Union, it will be a major strategic defeat for the West.

Nor will those EU members nearest to that line necessarily be secure from attempts at subversion or penetration. Putin wants to reverse the outcome of the Cold War. Western absent-mindedness and pusillanimity have helped him significantly in his endeavour thus far, and could yet come to his aid again.

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