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Putin's parallel universe¹

After a conversation with Vladimir Putin following his country's occupation of Crimea earlier this year, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was heard to remark that the Russian President was 'out of touch with reality' and 'living in another world'.² An Australian official made a similar observation rather earlier, during a briefing in Canberra about seven years ago. The briefers had set out the characteristic features of the world of Vladimir Putin, whose increasingly aggressive demeanour and systematically anti-Western nationalism had already caught the attention of many Russia-watchers. Having begun the discussion in a jovial mood, the official became serious and reflective; at its end, he said gravely, 'He's living in a parallel universe, really, isn't he?'

In what follows, I try to set out some of the main reasons why this parallel universe came into existence. What were the main factors favouring the re-emergence of a xenophobic autocracy in Russia and the high degree of acceptance it received from a stunted and passive civil society? I am not suggesting that there was anything inevitable about Putinism. Had oil and gas prices stayed higher for Mikhail Gorbachev and the early Yeltsin reformists, things might have turned out differently, despite the strength of the reactionary

1 First published in *Inside Story*, 20 Nov. 2014, insidestory.org.au/putins-parallel-universe.

2 See 'Ukraine crisis: Vladimir Putin has lost the plot, says German chancellor', *The Guardian*, 3 Mar. 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/ukraine-vladimir-putin-angela-merkel-russian.

back-to-the-USSR constituency. Had Boris Yeltsin finally settled for some successor other than the KGB half-colonel from Petersburg Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, Russia might not have become a police state domestically and a rogue state externally. Had some Moscow-based clique, say, successfully resisted the takeover of the state by a Leningrad push that originated in a dubious enterprise known as the Ozero Dacha Cooperative in the 1990s, things might have progressed otherwise, though not necessarily greatly for the better.

But the political culture of a country does not normally change quickly or easily. Changing it for the better requires favourable winds and good leadership. Neither factor was prominent in Russia's abortive transition from state socialist empire towards market democracy.

Putin's view of the world was no doubt imbibed from a very early age in the heavily ideological Soviet environment that led him, still a teenager, to attempt to volunteer for training as a KGB officer. But perhaps the most lasting influence on his attitudes was the turbulence in East Germany that led to the collapse of the hardline East German communist regime.

On 9 November 2014, much of the world marked the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Putin wasn't among those celebrating. When the wall fell he was a middle-ranking KGB officer in the East German city of Dresden, and the breaching of the wall and the collapse of the German Democratic Republic were both a personal and professional disaster. By his own account, he was forced at one point to defend his KGB building from an angry crowd who were demanding with boundless impudence to know what was going on inside this anonymous structure in their city.

To paraphrase Graeme Allison, where you stand depends on where you were sitting – or standing – at the relevant time. For the overwhelming majority of Europeans East or West, the fall of the Wall was a joyous surprise. But for Putin, a Soviet true believer, it was a trauma.

Even worse followed for Putin when, two years later, the Soviet Union disintegrated – an event that gave rise to his famous observation that 'the break-up of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical

catastrophe of the century'.³ For most of the people in the non-Russian republics of the old Soviet Union who were not ethnic Russians, as for the overwhelming majority of Europeans, East and West, the collapse was a blessed relief.

Since Putin has become the leader of one of the world's most incorrigible autocracies, those differences of perception have taken entrenched and institutional forms. Russia's increasingly ideologised public domain is now dominated by the official Putinist view of everything, and the area of free expression is contracting to a few elite outlets and the internet (and even the internet is being squeezed). Opinion polling shows that, after a brief euphoric period in the early 1990s, during which they were encouraged to feel – and indeed felt – more positively about the West, Russian attitudes have become reserved or even hostile. Although this owes a lot to increasingly wall-to-wall propaganda, Putin has not pushed his personal perspective on an entirely unwilling Russian public.

For most Russians, the huge economic disruptions of the years of Yeltsin's presidency were traumatic. Yeltsin's young economic reformers used 'shock therapy' to convert Russia's communist economy into a market-based system, abolishing price controls and rapidly privatising state enterprises to forestall any attempt to restore the old order. They sharply downsized the huge Soviet military-industrial complex and tried to reorient the economy towards the needs of consumers. But it was a risky experiment and they had little by way of experience to guide them.

Shock therapy had been applied in Poland and in other Eastern European states, but in each case the economies were smaller and less heavily imbued with Soviet habits and attitudes. No one had any proven blueprint there either, of course, but after a very uncomfortable transition period the reforms began to pay dividends. There were winners and losers, to be sure, but for most people in Eastern Europe the increased freedoms and economic opportunities, and the new focus on the needs of ordinary consumers, made the pain worthwhile. And for all of the post-communist countries other than Russia, gaining national independence was a source of huge satisfaction in

3 Mike Eckel, 'Putin calls Soviet collapse a "geopolitical catastrophe"', *Union-Tribune San-Diego*, 25 Apr. 2006, www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050426/news_1n26russia.html.

itself. For the Russians, by contrast, the economic disruptions were much more severe, and the escape of their imperial subjects was an additional trauma superimposed on the privation.

Ostalgie of the *Goodbye Lenin*⁴ variety certainly exists in East Germany, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, in other post-communist countries. But in Russia it is a much more mainstream phenomenon. For many Russians the transition was an economic disaster, a time when life savings and jobs were often lost. An offensive caste of grotesquely rich nouveaux riches – the new Russians – suddenly appeared, made wealthy (as it was often correctly assumed) by the fruits of corruption. Freedoms undoubtedly expanded, and these were valued at first, but for most Russians they did not outweigh the pain. Few understood that perhaps the main cause of their economic difficulties was the sustained slump in the oil and gas prices on which Russia's economy rested.

Then, after the default and devaluation of 1998, the price of energy products began to rise rapidly, as if on cue for the appearance of the hitherto obscure Putin as Yeltsin's successor. Together with his bloody but popular war against Chechnya in 1999–2000, the sudden prosperity established Putin's reputation as a great tsar. The heavy loss of life in Chechnya, including among Russian residents, the long insurgency that followed the war, and the periodic bloodshed and terrorist incidents on Putin's watch have not seriously tarnished that reputation. The economic reverses since the global financial crisis and the largely intelligentsia-based revolt against election fraud and Putin's growing authoritarianism in 2011–12 threatened his approval ratings, but a combination of intense propaganda and the nationalist euphoria of 'Crimea is Ours' (*Krymnash*) have restored them this year to almost Soviet levels.

During the 1990s, ordinary Russians largely lost the interest they had briefly felt in the crimes of communism, which had been such a talking point during Gorbachev's glasnost. Despite the fact that they touched the lives of most Russian families, those crimes have progressively been swept under the carpet. And yet, the first steps of the new tsar raised similar concerns about the ruthless contempt of the state

4 Peter Bradshaw, 'Review of *Goodbye Lenin!*', *Guardian*, 26 Jul. 2003, www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/jul/25/artsfeatures.dvdreviews.

for the lives of its citizens. The *casus belli* of the war in Chechnya, for instance, was a series of mysterious bombings of apartment blocks in Russian cities in September 1999, which were officially judged to be the work of Chechen terrorists. But strong evidence suggests that at least some of those attacks, which caused heavy casualties, may have been *provokatsii* staged by the FSB (the Federal Security Service, the domestic successor organisation of the KGB, which the future president had briefly headed on his rise to the top job).

Those who tried to investigate the bombings tended to die of unnatural causes – they include Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned by polonium in London, and the fearless investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya⁵ – and the enthusiasm for doing so naturally diminished. More generally, though, Russians seem to have been so consumed by the difficulties of daily life in the 1990s, then so gratified by the sudden improvement in living standards in the 2000s, that they were happy to slip back into the attitude of cautious discretion that had been their default position before Gorbachev.

Even fewer Russians continued to take any interest in state crimes perpetrated against ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union or their erstwhile vassals in the Warsaw Pact countries. When Putin reassured them that these had always been marginal phenomena, common to all countries, and not something to be ashamed of, they seemed quite happy to believe him. Recently he has even attempted to justify the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact,⁶ whereby Hitler and Stalin secretly agreed to divide much of Eastern Europe between them, paving the way for the outbreak of World War II.

One of the most dismaying recent developments in Putin's police state is an operation aimed at banning outright⁷ the heroic and beleaguered human rights organisation Memorial, which has tried to investigate Soviet crimes and to find the remains of the victims and erect memorials

5 See Maria Tumarkin, 'What it means to be a real journalist', *Inside Story*, 28 Apr. 2010, insidestory.org.au/what-it-means-to-be-a-real-journalist.

6 See Timothy Snyder, 'Putin's new nostalgia', *New York Review of Books* blog post, 10 Nov. 2014, www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/nov/10/putin-nostalgia-stalin-hitler/.

7 See Daisy Sindelar, 'Russian human rights group faces threat of closure', *Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/14/russian-human-rights-group-faces-threat-closure, first published as 'Five important things that Memorial's done (and is still doing) for Russia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 13 Oct. 2014, www.rferl.org/content/russia-memorial-five-things/26635356.html.

to them. Long persecuted by the Putin regime, Memorial is now the subject of an Orwellian demand by the Russian justice ministry that the Russian supreme court disband the organisation. With characteristic servility, the court immediately listed the matter, but has now postponed the hearing, perhaps in response to a flood of international disapproval. The Kremlin may yet decide that an outright ban would be bad PR, and that it would be better to let Memorial struggle on under constant harassment. The collective amnesia of Russians about these matters is both amazing and depressing.⁸

In addition to seeing their pay packets expand, and presumed Chechen terrorists justly chastised, the Russian public had further cause to appreciate Putin. Russians are an imperial people, just as the British and some other Europeans once were. People in modest walks of life are devoted to the idea of national greatness. The loss of empire was painful for Russians, and still is. Like the Germans after World War I, they felt the victory that was rightfully theirs in the Cold War had been plucked from their grasp by some kind of treachery or trickery. They must have been stabbed in the back by someone. And they were ready to believe that it was the West, which they'd been taught to hate from mother's milk onwards. Nowhere was this sentiment more pronounced than in the ranks of the KGB, Putin's finishing school and adult vocation.

Similarly, Russia's economic misfortunes must surely be the result of the Western ideas – market reforms and democracy in particular – that flooded into the country with perestroika and glasnost. *Demokratiya* (democracy) was dubbed by some Russian wit as *dermokratiya* (shitocracy), and *privatizatsiya* (privatisation) rebranded sardonically as *prikhvatizatsiya* (grabitisation), an allusion to the widespread corruption that was observed at the time. Both forms of social organisation became identified in the popular mind with economic chaos and imperial loss.

That loss was all the greater because more than 20 million ethnic Russians suddenly found themselves living in new countries where local nationalisms, hitherto kept under strict limits, were burgeoning and, in some cases, making them feel uncomfortable. The large Russian

8 On the reasons for that amnesia see David Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

diasporas in the other republics of the Soviet Union had grown used to enjoying a higher status than the natives; now, stripped of that status, many of them chose to return to Mother Russia, where they found privation and disruption. The new freedoms, including the freedom to travel, were all enveloped in bitter experiences.

I have tried to set out here what might be regarded as the canonical Russian view of the transition from communism, the view that is constantly drummed into Russians who watch television (where over 80 per cent get their news). Understanding that narrative helps us grasp the nature of the growing standoff between Russia and the global West, which turns on diametrically opposed views of the key developments in Russia's recent history. Someone coined the term 'values gap' to characterise the growing mutual estrangement between Russia and the West; since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, that gap has become a chasm. It has been deepened further by Putin's touting of Russia as the true custodian of traditional European religious and family values, an ideological innovation aimed both at attracting the far right to his cause, in Europe and elsewhere, and pillorying his supposedly 'effete' domestic opponents.

But the values gap was not apparent at first. While most in the West rejoiced at the demise of communism and the end of the Cold War, the reactions of key Western leaders to the implosion of the Soviet empire were not what one might have expected or what Russian propaganda now maintains. It is true that Ronald Reagan called on Gorbachev to 'tear down this wall' in Berlin in 1987.⁹ But many Western commentators and officials were dismayed at the time by what they saw as a grossly provocative, even reckless, public statement by the US President.

And when, two years later, the people of Berlin took up Reagan's suggestion, some Western leaders seemed almost as much taken aback as the Russians. The French President François Mitterrand and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were both sorely troubled by the prospect of German reunification, Mitterrand joining many others in quoting the bon mot of the senior statesman of French letters, François Mauriac: 'I love Germany so much that I'm glad there are two of them.' I can recall trying to reassure a slightly anxious meeting of Australian

9 See www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/speeches/reagan_berlin.htm.

officials that reunification was not something to be worried about, and that West German democracy was hardy, moderate, reliable and very much in our interests.

In any case, reunification was all but unavoidable once the wall and communism had both fallen. Whether a reunited Germany could continue to be a member of NATO loomed as a difficult issue, and Western leaders felt called on to assure Moscow, in private, that there would be no NATO deployments further east as a result. This has given rise to the belief in Moscow's political class that a binding commitment had been given that NATO would never deploy further to the east, and that any expansion of NATO was therefore a breach of faith. No such commitment was ever entered into, though NATO has continued to avoid stationing troops or weaponry in the new member states.

As the rot spread from Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union itself, Western leaders became even more concerned about the instability that might result. They feared that this would be bad for their highly valued partner Gorbachev, that it could lead to serious bloodshed, and that it might even compromise control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. The signs of impending break-up in Yugoslavia were another cause of great concern. Some Western leaders, like US President George H. Bush, worried that the example of a fragmenting Yugoslavia might exert a regrettable influence on similar trends that were already evident in the Soviet Union.

Bush senior also deplored the emergence of forces in Ukraine pressing for national independence, warning the Ukrainians in his celebrated August 1991 'Chicken Kyiv' speech against 'suicidal nationalism', a phrase highly offensive to Kyiv that Bush himself had added to the final version of his remarks.¹⁰ So not only was the role of Western governments in the break-up of communism and the Soviet Union extremely modest, they were actually more dismayed than triumphalist about what was happening.

10 'Bush Sr. clarifies "Chicken Kiev" speech', *Washington Times*, 23 May 2004, www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/may/23/20040523-101623-2724r/.

Despite all this, Putin and his followers have imposed a narrative, currently accepted by most Russians, that the United States and its satellites are the eternal enemies of Russia, always scheming to cut it off from its natural sphere of privileged interests (its empire). Moreover, the narrative continues, NATO has deceptively drawn the nations of Eastern Europe into NATO, expanding the organisation aggressively right up to Russia's borders in breach of binding commitments not to do so. Putinist patriots never acknowledge that the central reason for the enlargement of NATO was not aggressive Western expansionist recruitment but, rather, the desperate desire by Eastern European nations to avoid a return to Moscow's rule.

Nor is the Putin narrative a good fit for the early years of the post-communist era. Initially, much of the Russian political class rejoiced in unison with their Western colleagues, looking forward to a new era of amity and cooperation. Australian diplomats in Moscow at the time recall a veritable explosion of mutual goodwill, trust and understanding, and a desire to socialise freely without any of the traditional constraints. The new Russian Foreign Minister in the early Yeltsin years, Andrei Kozyrev, was probably the most pro-Western foreign minister Moscow has ever had.

I recall seeing a government document at that time that dared to hope for the possible emergence of a new zone of shared values and common strategic purpose extending from Vancouver to Vladivostok – not in any spirit of triumphalism, rather one of warm welcome to a Russia returning to its European values. Coral Bell and some other Western strategic thinkers spoke at the time about the possibility not just of close cooperation, but also of inviting Russia into NATO itself.

But it was not to last. The first symptoms of Russia's disillusionment with its new Western friends and the unfamiliar ways of market democracy became apparent well before the end of the Yeltsin era. With a few fluctuations, the sense of grievance has persisted ever since, deepening over time. The same people who had presented as born-again democrats in the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin era re-emerged a few years later as among the most aggressively anti-Western of the Kremlin-friendly apologists of the Putin era – among them the political scientists Sergey Markov, Andranik Migranyan (now the head of an official propaganda unit in New York) and Aleksei Pushkov (now a senior figure in the extravagantly anti-Western Russian Duma).

Even the most intelligent and moderate establishment commentators like Dmitry Trenin and Fyodor Lukyanov now find it extremely difficult to say anything that deviates from the aggressive orthodoxy of the current Putin presidency. Russia and its political class seem to have fallen victim to a collective case of relevance deprivation syndrome. Their insistent demand for respect appears to reflect above all a need, even a longing, to be feared.

Already in the 1990s some Western Russia-watchers worried about what was sometimes referred to as Weimar Russia: a Russia that, like post-imperial Germany, had lost its empire and had convinced itself that some foreign enemies and/or homegrown traitors must have betrayed it. Some observers feared that something not too unlike the Nazi regime might emerge in Russia: that severe economic distress would lead to domestic tyranny, cultivated xenophobia and external aggression aimed at restoration of empire. Despite some worrying symptoms, under Yeltsin and the early Putin this did not seem to be coming to pass. But, perhaps, in a longer retrospect, the Weimar Russia theory is now being at least partially borne out.

In their current state of aggressive self-righteousness, the Putinists see themselves as incapable of doing any wrong. Stalin's crimes are increasingly whited out, as are the democratic achievements and important liberal economic reforms of the Yeltsin period. In all the regime's rhetoric, media, propaganda and increasingly also in educational materials, Russia's 1990s are presented as an unredeemed disaster caused by the false Western gods of democracy and the market and their misguided or malign Russian disciples.

In recent years, Western defence budgets have been almost everywhere in decline: only three European members of NATO are currently maintaining military expenditure at or above 2 per cent of GDP. By contrast, the Kremlin has sharply increased its outlays, embarking on an ambitious rearmament program that will have cost US\$750 billion by the end of the decade. In 2015 alone, expenditure on the Russian military is to increase by 35 per cent. To paraphrase Robert Kagan, Russians, it seems, are from Mars, while Westerners, especially Europeans, are from Venus.

Outlays on domestic security have also risen sharply under Putin, and the Russian bureaucracy has expanded greatly since the early post-communist years. Education and health, on the other hand, have been increasingly squeezed, despite Russia's poor performance in both of those areas. Spending on propaganda is rising sharply from already high levels, with a recently announced increase of over 40 per cent for the external propaganda arm Russia Today.¹¹ A new network of foreign-language propaganda outlets called *Sputnik*¹² was launched earlier this month, with bureaus in over 30 countries, all built on the bones of what was till recently Russia's last surviving professional news agency, RIA Novosti.

These are not the policy patterns of a country at peace with itself and its neighbours, bent on cooperation and spreading sweetness and light. Yet, even now, much of the public Western discourse continues to be directed towards showing Russia greater understanding, accepting that it is primarily the West that has been at fault, and arguing that Moscow's demands should be met at least halfway or better. Many are the calls still to 'reset the reset' or 'repair the damaged relationship'. But do such well-meaning Western opinion leaders really have a partner ready for honest and creative dialogue?

Among most Western policymakers, there has only been slow recognition of the nature of their adversary. The invasion of Ukraine and particularly the downing of MH17 – a totally adventitious event on the path of policy development – have brought a greater sense of realism and a slightly greater readiness to face up to Moscow's reckless behaviour. But, after the Russian assault on Georgia in 2008, with destruction inflicted well beyond the area allegedly requiring Russian 'peacemaking', and Russia's occupation and de facto annexation inter alia of half of Georgia's Black Sea littoral, EU countries were quick to forgive, forget and resume business as usual. Now, too, despite Russian support for absurd 'elections' in the 'people's republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk, and clear evidence of further Russian armed incursions

11 See Paul Goble, 'Moscow to dramatically increase spending on "Russia Today"', *Window on Eurasia*, 30 Sep. 2014, windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com.au/2014/09/window-on-eurasia-moscow-to.html.

12 Marc Bennetts, 'Russia launches *Sputnik* to silence dissent, combat West's "information war" against Putin', *Washington Times*, 16 Nov. 2014, www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/nov/16/sputnik-launched-by-russia-to-silence-dissent-comb/?page=all.

into Ukraine, members of the European Union are looking eagerly for any hint of Russian 'de-escalation' that would permit sanctions to be eased.¹³

Shortly after Russia's dismemberment of Georgia, the new administration of Obama embarked on its 'reset' of relations with Russia, which implicitly accepted both Moscow's behaviour in Georgia and the justice of Russian reproaches about the policies of the Bush administration. For its part, Germany has continued until very recently¹⁴ to regard an updated version of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as the model for Western policy towards Russia. The original version was a timely and well-judged policy that, together with US/NATO containment of Russia, the bravery of communist-bloc dissidents and opposition movements and other factors not applicable to the present situation, contributed to bringing about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

Ostpolitik II has involved endless dialogue, diplomacy and partnership for modernisation that Berlin hoped would bring about an inevitable convergence; and, *sotto voce*, the belief that German reunification is something for which we should all be eternally grateful to Gorbachev and Russia, and which must not be risked by the West's being too assertive towards the Kremlin. But Putin is not Gorbachev. Obama is not Reagan. And 'diplomatic solutions' are not an adequate response to aggressive wars of coercion and territorial acquisition.

This sort of unrequited friendliness has long been characteristic of the West's approach to post-communist Russia. Even its supposedly ruthless expansion into Russia's backyard took place apologetically. At first hesitantly, the key Western institutions, NATO and the European Union, entered into communion with the former satellites through the softcore medium of the Partnership for Peace program that was launched in early 1994. Later they began to accede to the insistent efforts of former Warsaw Pact countries to become members.

13 See Daniel Tost, 'Mogherini, Steinmeier denounce black-and-white foreign policy', *EurActiv*, 12 Nov. 2014, www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/mogherini-steinmeier-denounce-black-and-white-foreign-policy-309925; see also, Andrew Rettman, 'EU countries keen to rebuild Russia relations', *EUobserver*, 17 Nov. 2014, euobserver.com/foreign/126550.

14 See Nikolaus Blome et al., 'Merkel concerned about Russian influence in the Balkans', *Spiegel Online*, 17 Nov. 2014, www.spiegel.de/international/europe/germany-worried-about-russian-influence-in-the-balkans-a-1003427.html.

At the same time, they tried to allay Russian resentment of the process by strengthening links with Moscow. Russia, however, claimed with increasing stridency that any expansion of Western institutions was a grave threat to its security.

In deference to Russia's concerns, and in accordance with the NATO/Russia Founding Act of 1997, NATO refrained from deploying significant weaponry or troops on the ground in the new member states. A variety of other bilateral instruments were concluded between the two in which it was always emphasised that neither partner saw the other as an adversary. While Russia's aggressive hostility to the West and to Eastern Europe was palpable by 2007, if not before, most Western countries continued until very recently to have the greatest difficulty in seeing Russia as a real adversary, much less an enemy.

When Mitt Romney suggested in the 2012 presidential race that Russia had become the United States's enemy number one, this was widely held to be a gaffe. When Hillary Clinton finally declared that Russia was embarking on the attempted re-Sovietisation of its western neighbours, this was also deemed a bit hardline, and she only ventured to say it when she was about to leave office. Yet, to most Russia watchers who've been following events unfold under Putin, the unambiguous enmity felt by the Kremlin and Putin's resolve to reverse the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century have been clearly evident for many years.

One of the key reasons for the West's tolerance of Russia's increasingly revisionist and aggressive behaviour is that Western leaders and publics have difficulty in seeing how aggressive it is. They seldom know Russian well enough to have direct exposure to the combative and mendacious propaganda that Moscow emits, and they continue in mirror-imaging their own conciliatory attitudes on to Russia. How could Russia not wish to reduce dangerous levels of nuclear armaments (Obama)? How could Russia not wish to pursue modernisation through closer integration with advanced Western economies (successive German governments)? Despite occasional relapses, surely Russia will sooner rather than later recognise that the legacy of one of the most bloodthirsty tyrannies of the twentieth century, Stalinism, is best abandoned and regretted? Surely Russia will accept the need for well-off first-world countries to use their diplomatic and military capabilities to curb brutal and genocidal conflicts or regimes – Syria, for instance,

or Islamic State – in accordance with the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect?¹⁵ Despite constant disappointments, the persistent belief that Russia can be a valuable partner for the West in the world's worst trouble spots motivates Western governments to avert their gaze when the Kremlin yet again chooses to bully a neighbour or to block efforts to check egregious behaviour somewhere.

Despite all the determined good will, Russia was not to be conciliated, cajoled or co-opted into the Western consensus. Perhaps the earliest striking illustration of this came in 1999 in the former Yugoslav province of Kosovo. Russia's angry attempts to block or condemn NATO's efforts to put an end to bloodshed in the province are worth recalling because they illustrate much about the antagonistic relationship with the West that was already beginning to emerge.

The Serbs – whose position in the former Yugoslavia bore strong similarities, if on a much smaller scale, to Russia's in the Soviet Union – have always seen Kosovo as the historic heartland of their state because of its role as the centre of Serbian culture in medieval times. (The parallel with Russian views of Kyiv and Ukraine immediately suggests itself.) Despite having strong views on Kosovo, modern Serbs tend to have slightly hazy ideas about what has been going on in their historical heartland in more recent times, just as Russians are vague about developments in Ukraine.

When I lived in Belgrade in the late 1960s, my Serbian friends would often provide me with history lessons about the province and passionately explain its crucial importance to their homeland and themselves. I visited Kosovo on multiple occasions to photograph and admire the historic Serbian monasteries there, many articles about which I'd read or translated. On my return, some friends were somewhat puzzled to learn that I'd been to Kosovo at all, and when asked, often acknowledged that they'd never been there themselves.

Despite the efforts of successive Belgrade governments over decades to strengthen the Serbian ethnic presence in Kosovo, sustained emigration and differential fertility trends meant that the Albanian majority, which had been dominant since at least the

15 Philip Cunliffe (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: Interrogating theory and practice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2011).

nineteenth century, rapidly became overwhelming. Serbs were emigrating to escape the relative poverty and the ethnic tensions. Given the strength of ethnic Albanian nationalism and the extensive territories of Albanian settlement adjoining Kosovo, Serbian control of the province was fraught with uncertainty.

Tito's solution to this dilemma in his later years had been to follow a conciliatory policy towards the Albanians, granting greater local autonomy to Kosovo and allowing ethnic Albanians to secure a powerful position in the local party/state hierarchy. Not surprisingly, the Serbs, who had been the paramount force in Kosovo life over many decades, saw this as a threat to their position.

Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian nationalist and emerging strongman of Yugoslavia in its last years, made his career out of the Kosovo dilemma, appealing directly, in a divisive and populist way, to the ethnic Serbs in the province and throughout Yugoslavia. In 1989 he abruptly rescinded Kosovo's autonomous status. This made him immensely popular in Serbia and put him in a powerful position to pursue ethnic Serbian interests during the fragmentation of Yugoslavia that was to follow.

As various commentators wrote in the 1970s, with the ethnic Albanians increasingly dominant demographically, crude coercion seemed unlikely to be viable over the longer haul.¹⁶ In Milošević's time, Belgrade actually had a potentially constructive ethnic Albanian partner in the Kosovo Democratic League (KDL). The KDL, the largest ethnic Albanian party, was committed to non-violent methods, as was its undisputed leader, the poet and pro-European intellectual Ibrahim Rugova. But Milošević had no intention of reaching any understanding with Rugova. Both Rugova himself and the policy of non-violence were discredited by Milošević's coercive policy choices. This contributed to the radicalisation of the Albanians and the emergence of more militant and even terrorist groups, which coalesced to produce the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The KLA increasingly took precedence over the KDL as the dominant Albanian force in the struggles that followed.

16 See, for example, John Besemeres, 'The demographic factor in inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia', *Southeastern Europe*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1977): 1–31.

At the outset of the Yugoslav wars, Milošević still enjoyed support from some important countries in the Western alliance. But he used brutal methods, especially so-called 'ethnic cleansing', in his campaign to convert the strong ethnic Serb presence in parts of Croatia and Bosnia into a dominant political and military position. By 1999, a strong consensus had developed among the Western allies that, while there were many guilty parties, Milošević and the Serbs were the worst offenders and the main source of the problems in Yugoslavia. Such atrocities as the Vukovar Hospital massacre in Croatia, the shooting of 8,000 men and boys by General Mladic's Bosnian Serb forces at Srebrenica and the lengthy siege of Sarajevo, which involved huge civilian casualties, decisively shaped Western opinion. Despite the growing hostility towards him among Western governments, Milošević nonetheless managed to secure for the Serbs – who only made up a third of Bosnia's population – a 49 per cent share of Bosnian land as determined by the Western-brokered Dayton settlement of November 1995.

But in 1999, when Milošević seemed to be bent on pursuing a violent solution for the KLA insurgency in Kosovo, including much more ethnic cleansing, Western leaders decided that enough was enough. NATO forces were directed to launch a campaign of air strikes on Serbian military and infrastructure assets, including propaganda outlets and other facilities in Belgrade. Milošević responded by driving much of the 90 per cent majority Albanian population out of Kosovo, with heavy casualties.

The air campaign was a blunt instrument inflicting great damage on Serbian infrastructure. Despite efforts to limit the human costs, it also caused some 500 civilian casualties and, in the end, the Serbs had to concede defeat. This was the beginning of the end for Milošević, who was finally deposed by a people power rebellion in October 2000. It also pretty much brought an end to the wars of the Yugoslav succession, though some sporadic violence continued afterwards, mainly involving ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and offshoots of the Kosovo conflict in adjacent territories of Macedonia and Serbia proper.

The NATO action was not an ideal solution, but its results were seen by Western countries as on balance positive. Serbs, particularly in Belgrade, have naturally condemned the bombing campaign, but tend to forget that their 500 fatalities were dwarfed by the victims

of Belgrade-supported Bosnian–Serb violence at Srebrenica, or the 14,000 dead in the siege of Sarajevo, including 5,400 civilians. Infrastructure damage to Serbia was great, but there had also been very severe destruction as a result of earlier fighting in many other parts of Yugoslavia, where in the early stages the Serbs had superior weaponry and were able to prevail. Serbia, though a key instigator of the wars, had until the Kosovo campaign largely avoided damage to its own territories and residents outside Kosovo province.

Moscow was furious that NATO had acted without the approval of the UN Security Council, thus bypassing any Russian veto. It introduced a resolution of condemnation in the UN Security Council, but the resolution was only supported by China and Namibia, reflecting the widespread feeling that, for all its obvious downsides, the air campaign was a legitimate response to a difficult situation where further humanitarian disasters needed to be forestalled.

In the wake of the air campaign, Western leaders included Russia in the peacekeeping arrangements for Kosovo. But Moscow was offended that it was not given its own area of the province as a separate command. NATO leaders blocked that proposal, thinking that Moscow might seek to convert an occupation of Serb-populated areas in northern Kosovo into something more substantial, in a small-scale replay of East Germany and similar arrangements in the wake of World War II. Frustrated by this blocking of what they saw as their legitimate entitlements, Moscow ordered some of its forces in the area to carry out a unilateral seizure of Priština airport. With the support of surrounding states, NATO managed to block any reinforcement and resupply of the Russian contingent at the airport, and a compromise solution was finally reached. The Priština airport incident was a good example of the increasingly adversarial nature of Russian foreign policy that was already evident under the later Yeltsin, and was a pointer to future Russian tactics in Yugoslavia and elsewhere.

Moscow maintained and intensified its denunciations of NATO's actions in Kosovo with ever greater intensity in the Putin period. Putin and the Moscow elite clearly identify with Serbian nationalist opinion, and vice versa. If Russia found it necessary to kill tens of thousands of people (estimates vary wildly) in its Second Chechen War, then it is its sovereign right to do so. In the Russian view, the Responsibility to

Protect, like other human rights doctrines, is hypocrisy and humbug, used instrumentally by the West to undermine Russian (or Serbian, or Syrian) sovereignty and interests.

Moscow has also repeatedly waved the Kosovo argument in the air as justification for various self-interested neo-imperial ventures of its own. Western visitors to Moscow before the Russo–Georgian War of 2008 were often informed that, since NATO had attacked Serbia in support of Albanian secessionism, everything was now permitted, and it would be only natural for Abkhazia or South Ossetia, for example, to secede from Georgia (though not of course for Chechnya to secede from Russia). Unlike Russia in relation to Georgia’s breakaway territories (which Russia itself had sponsored and nurtured), no European country was waiting eagerly to annex Kosovo to its own territory, or otherwise to profit from the operation. Kosovo was an onerous international policing burden undertaken to relieve and, it was hoped, curtail the humanitarian disaster that had unfolded in Yugoslavia. In a similar spirit, Euro-Atlantic institutions have accepted the responsibility of trying to ensure the peaceful postwar development of Kosovo and its reconciliation with Serbia.

Why preventing a further bloodbath in the former Yugoslavia was damaging to the security or other legitimate interests of Russia, a country whose borders were by that time remote from Kosovo, is not obvious. The Russian point of view in relation to US or Western interventions in Iraq, Libya or Syria, three other cases that figure constantly in the Putinist bill of indictment, is slightly easier to understand. Moscow stood to lose money and privileged access in all those countries, and arguably, given its large, restive Muslim minority, could potentially have been exposed to some kind of terrorist blowback from any Western intervention. But their own brutal policies in the North Caucasus were a much more likely potential trigger for any such development. And again, despite Putin’s emotional reaction to the death of Colonel Gaddafi, there wasn’t really any convincing threat involved to Russian security in the Libyan intervention. Whether US/Western involvement in all those cases was wise and/or in their own interests is another matter, but not one that need detain us here.

Under Putin, Russia’s most explicit concern has been with NATO expansion, which took a further leap in 1999, the same year as the Kosovo intervention, when Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary

all joined the alliance at the NATO summit in March, and several other countries including the three Baltic states were given Membership Action Plans. Most of these countries, including the Baltic states, subsequently joined NATO in 2004. Russia's postwar claim to the Baltic states ultimately rested on military conquest (followed by severe genocidal atrocities), and the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact secret protocol, as well as the Yalta settlement. From that point of view, Putin's recent public justification of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is a particularly grim signal to the Baltic states, and illustrates graphically why they were so desperate to join NATO and the European Union.

By 2008, Russian anger and indignation that more former republics of the USSR were following the Baltic example of seeking a haven in NATO was heading towards a climax. Putin had launched his own anti-Western crusade with his bellicose speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. At the same time, relations between the Bush administration and some leading countries of the European Union were seriously strained. Georgia and Ukraine, two former republics of the USSR under strongly pro-Western and anti-Russian leadership were, meanwhile, seeking a membership path to NATO.

Bush lobbied hard for a Membership Action Plan to be granted to the two countries at the Bucharest NATO Summit of April 2008. Moscow expressed emphatic opposition to any such development both before and at the summit, which Putin attended. Key Western European NATO members were also opposed, largely because they didn't want to antagonise Russia, and the pleas from Kyiv and Tbilisi were duly rejected. In reaction to cries of alarm from some new Eastern members, NATO issued an anodyne statement without any dates (and without much credibility) that Georgia and Ukraine would at some time become members.

Putin was undoubtedly enraged by this statement, but he was certainly not deterred by it. Russia has since invaded both countries and annexed or de facto taken control of significant parts of their internationally recognised sovereign territories. Western resistance in each case was mainly rhetorical, and certainly not military, as Russia would have very confidently known in advance. There were significant arguments against extending Membership Action Plans to either applicant country, in the case of Ukraine not least because, at that time, there was nothing like a majority within Ukrainian

public opinion in favour of such a step. But Russia's opposition to the enlargement was clearly founded not on fear for its own security, but on concern that NATO membership might possibly make it harder for it to regain by force a position of dominance in the two countries in question.

The Bucharest Summit is generally seen as marking an end to further NATO enlargement to the east against Russian opposition, especially in the case of countries that had formerly been part of the USSR. And the new European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker¹⁷ has made clear that there will be no further enlargement of the European Union on his five-year watch. So those urgently pursuing EU membership as a softer alternative to NATO to counter Putin's mounting belligerence are not likely to make much progress. The message for Moscow seems to be that aggression works, so why would one resile from it?

17 See Jean-Claude Juncker, 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change', Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 15 Jul. 2014, www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker---political-guidelines.pdf.

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