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Putin's *Westpolitik*: Back to the USSR¹

Over the past two years, Vladimir Putin's aggressive policies towards his western neighbours have reached a crescendo, extending now also to the Western strategic community as a whole and even including non-NATO members like Sweden and Finland. The Russian President makes tactical concessions to more susceptible European countries like Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary and Slovakia – sadly, not an exhaustive list – with a view to keeping the European Union and NATO divided. His 'energy diplomacy' – manipulating vital supplies and prices to pressure vulnerable ex-vassals into returning to the tent, or to punish or persuade countries further afield – has a continuing role. But now it is more frequently coupled with military intimidation or outright coercion.

A sharp rise in military expenditure has been accompanied by ever-greater missile rattling and threatening 'exercises'. Aggressive and frequent overflights near or even occasionally into Western countries' airspace have become a threat to civilian aircraft and indeed to peace itself. Those policies are backed by blanket anti-Western propaganda at home, and skilfully crafted and targeted disinformation abroad, all of it at levels of expenditure, reach, toxicity and effectiveness that are far greater than any later Soviet equivalents. To say that we

¹ First published in *Inside Story*, 17 Dec. 2014, insidestory.org.au/putins-westpolitik-back-to-the-ussr.

have a return to the Cold War is not an exaggeration. In some ways it is worse in that during the Cold War, there were clearer rules and understandings regulating East–West relations.

Putin's primary objective is to re-establish a version of the Soviet sphere of influence. In the first instance, that means not just halting NATO expansion, which he's already achieved, but also blocking the European Union from integrating any more former dependencies of the USSR. It seems unlikely that he will stop there of his own volition without attempting to roll back some of his earlier 'losses'. He views his Western adversaries as weaklings who can be set against one another and intimidated. An enthusiastic if ungifted student of history, he sees himself as the successor to Catherine and Peter the Greats as well as Stalin, destined to gather together all the Russian lands, very broadly understood. His actions suggest he certainly has designs on the Baltic states, for example, and may have ambitions beyond them.

He also seems to be working towards systematic weakening not just of NATO, but also of the European Union as an institution. Moscow's traditional support of the hard left in the West, as well as Russophiles of all stripes, has now been extended to diligent courtship of the hard right, especially the Eurosceptic hard right. This has been going on for some time with minimal attention from Western publics, but now the West is at last starting to notice. The recent scandal involving a €40 million loan from a Moscow bank to Marine Le Pen's National Front war chest for the French presidential and parliamentary elections, due in 2017, has focused greater attention on this aspect of Moscow's Western policy.² That handsome gesture, part of a wider pattern that includes official visits to Russia by Le Pen herself, tends to confirm that the intention is to destabilise the European Union as a whole by promoting all forms of Euroscepticism, of whatever provenance.

The Kremlin hasn't always been so hostile to the European Union. In fact, it was long thought that Russia objected only to its former satellites having any connection with NATO. By 2008 Putin's hostility to NATO expansion had become so emphatic that European members of the alliance were reluctant to test him further. At the April 2008 Bucharest summit of NATO, the pleas of the pro-Western leaderships

2 See Andrew Rettman, 'Mediapart: National Front's Kremlin loan is worth €40mn', *EUobserver*, 27 Nov. 2014, euobserver.com/foreign/126693.

of Georgia and Ukraine to secure a Membership Action Plan for NATO were rebuffed. After the summit, and after the weak Western response to the Russian invasion and annexation of parts of Georgia that followed soon after, it was generally accepted that there would be no further eastward expansion of NATO within the foreseeable future.

The European Union's Eastern Partnership scheme, launched by the European Union in 2009, was an attempt to offer former Soviet republics a softcore alternative to NATO with a form of EU integration, that fell well short of full membership. Some new EU members hoped that this process would be a stepping stone to full EU membership for their eastern neighbours, but older EU members explicitly opposed any such connection being made.

The Eastern Partnership scheme seemed well designed to assuage Russia's sensitive nature. But, as all the former western republics of the Soviet Union became involved to some degree in the scheme, Moscow's hostility became apparent. The European Union has tried to draw Russia itself into a similar process of progressive 'modernisation' through partnerships of various kinds. But Russia has been proof against any such inducements, preferring to revert increasingly to its own highly successful sociopolitical models.

In 2010, in response to the Eastern Partnership scheme, Russia set up its own nascent version of the European Union in the form of the Eurasian Customs Union, which from the beginning of next year is to morph into the Eurasian Economic Union, aka the Eurasian Union. Putin has said in the past that he wants to draw all the former republics into membership, including the Baltic states. His actions to date, and the example of the statelets set up in the various 'frozen conflicts', tend to suggest that Russia would prefer all its former vassals not only to join the Eurasian Customs Union but also to follow its own neo-Soviet, sociopolitical model.

The Customs Union and the Eurasian Union have not exerted much genuine attraction on the six Western republics, apart from Belarus. But all six displayed some interest in cooperating with the Eastern Partnership scheme, though for various reasons Belarus and Azerbaijan never pursued an Association Agreement (AA), and Armenia reversed its decision to do so. The other three – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – have now all negotiated and recently signed AAs. For all three it has

been a tortuous process, with Russia employing every means it can, including military force, to block any progress. Even post-signature, full and sustained implementation promises to be very difficult.

Putin seems to think he can stare down the AA candidates by a mixture of violence, propaganda, trade boycotts and intermittent invitations to Brussels to seek a 'political solution' to the 'problems' in Ukraine, Moldova or wherever else. We may soon see whether he's right.

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Despite some wobbles caused by Brussels's objections to their highly undemocratic systems, Belarus and Azerbaijan continue to be low-grade participants in the Eastern Partnership scheme and both use the connection as a hedge against Russia and a means to pursue mutually advantageous trading and other links with the European Union. While Azerbaijan has hitherto leaned more to the West, Belarus is Russia's closest ally, despite President Alexander Lukashenka's tiffs with Moscow and fear of Russian domination. There is no interest in either case or from either side in an AA. Nonetheless, Moscow is constantly working to draw both countries into closer communion with itself and to sever the Brussels connection.

Belarus joined Putin's Customs Union, and will be a founding member of the Eurasian Union. Although Lukashenka wriggles at times as he observes the increasingly dictatorial behaviour of the Putinist regime towards its neighbours, he does not want to meet the European Union's minimal requirements on governance or most other things. So Belarus is probably destined to be dragged further into Moscow's embrace.

Azerbaijan's dictator Ilham Aliyev is the son and dynastic heir of Heydar Aliyev, a former head of the republican KGB, who was Azerbaijan's communist and then post-communist boss. The younger Aliyev has continued his father's pragmatic autocracy, vying strongly with Russia in domestic oppression, but seeking links with the European Union as far as his own domestic imperatives permit, and particularly in trade and investment. The European Union, for its part, has a strong interest in Azerbaijani energy exports as an offset for its dependency on Russia, a policy direction that Moscow has been trying, with some success, to block. But, during 2014, Aliyev has shifted ground. Sensing EU weakness and Russia's growing resort to hard power, he has tilted markedly back towards Moscow.

Armenia, though not a model of democracy, is slightly more prepossessing in that respect than Belarus or Azerbaijan. It is heavily dependent on Moscow for security against Turkic Azerbaijan (from which it seized by military force the mainly Armenian territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s) and against the Turks, the authors of its greatest historical disaster, the Armenian genocide of 1916. Nonetheless, Armenia, which has one of the most ancient Christian churches still in existence, sees itself as belonging to the West in some general sense. It also has a large Western diaspora (including up to an estimated 50,000 Australian residents claiming Armenian ethnicity).

For an extended period, Armenia was active in the Eastern Partnership and seemed to be working steadily towards an AA. Then, in a single day, Armenia abruptly changed course. Putin had earlier applied heavy pressure, agreeing to sell the Aliyev regime weaponry to the value of US\$4 billion. Without prior announcements, on 3 September 2013, Putin received Armenian President Sargisyan in Moscow, where they jointly announced that Armenia was withdrawing from negotiations for an AA and seeking to join Putin's Customs Union instead. Russia's threats and inducements were not made public, but they were clearly persuasive.

Putin sees the Eurasian Union as becoming a fully fledged equivalent of the European Union, part of a multipolar world system in which the poles will include the United States, the European Union, the Eurasian Union, China and India. Not only will it be able to pre-empt integration into European Union structures by any former Soviet republics, it may even, in the Kremlin's eyes, be capable of attracting into its orbit other prospective members. But at this stage the Eurasian Economic Union has done little to enhance the dwindling trade among its members and is still generating disputes, even conflicts, about basic, yet-to-be-agreed trading provisions. And, with the economic slump in Russia, the attractions of the Eurasian Economic Union decline further. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that its whole rationale is much more imperial-political than economic.

While the other three Eastern Partnership members – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – have all now signed AAs with Brussels, Putin is not giving up on blocking any of them. In 2013, both before

and after his Armenian triumph, he was progressively stepping up pressure on Ukraine to withdraw from its laborious but well-advanced AA negotiations with Brussels.

President Yanukovich was hoping he could somehow gain advantage from both sides without fully committing to either. Putin was not, however, going to give him that chance. On 21 November 2013, Yanukovich suddenly followed Sargisian's lead, performing a 180-degree turn without any prior attempt to prepare the Ukrainian public.

Ukraine's civil society proved less submissive than Armenia's. In response to Yanukovich's abrupt change of course, several months of demonstrations in Kyiv – the so-called Maidan or Euromaidan – began that night. In the weeks that followed, as the protests persisted, the regime began to resort to 'disappearances', arrests and forceful crowd control tactics against demonstrators. All this was a shock for public opinion as, hitherto, there had been relatively little lethal violence of that sort in Ukrainian politics. But the shock only served to radicalise and strengthen the protest movement, which maintained its pressure until Yanukovich finally fled the capital on 21 February. As his ruling Party of Regions began to crumble, a reformist and pro-European successor government was quickly formed. Despite Russian propaganda that this was a 'fascist coup', the legitimacy of the transition has never been seriously challenged and has been fully confirmed since by early and orderly elections to the presidency and parliament.

Putin's response was so quick, it clearly had been well rehearsed and prepared. Within a month, Crimea had been invaded and 'annexed'. The story in Crimea since the annexation, however, has been bleak: steep economic decline, loss of most links to the Ukrainian hinterland, forced and disruptive adoption of detailed Russian administrative routines, corruption and criminality,³ petty tyranny, and persecution of non-Russians (notably the Crimean Tatars, who had been deported

3 See Laura Mills & John-Thor Dahlburg, 'Change of leadership in Crimea means property grab', *Salon*, 2 Dec. 2014, www.salon.com/2014/12/02/change_of_leadership_in_crimea_means_property_grab/.

by Stalin with mass casualties during World War II).⁴ Appropriately, the new 'prime minister' gifted to Crimea by Moscow was Sergey Aksyonov, a Russian patriot from Moldova who originally came to Crimea as a teenager hoping to join the Soviet military, but transited into criminal activity and then politics, where he led a minor party with 4 per cent support at the last free Crimean elections.⁵

Having subdued Crimea, Moscow instituted similar operations in much of south-eastern Ukraine. But there, unlike in Crimea, Russia had no regular forces stationed, and the ratio of local zealots and cross-border volunteers to Russian professionals in anonymous uniforms was greater. This often led to administrative chaos and crude abuses and criminality by the Russian and proxy forces, stiffening local resistance as well as military pushback from the new Ukrainian Government.

Over time, the grossly underfunded and ill-equipped Ukrainian forces managed to mobilise their resources and, with the support of volunteer detachments and much help from the public, began to gain the upper hand over the so-called 'separatists'. By August 2014, they had pushed the Russians out of most regions in the east, and were even making big inroads into the two most pro-Russian provinces, Donetsk and Luhansk. Faced with the possible defeat of their proxy forces, Moscow decided on another large injection of perhaps 6,000 crack troops with high-tech weaponry. Within a few days, this further cross-border incursion had completely changed the course of the conflict.

Under growing pressure from Western sanctions, which had sharpened appreciably in late July after the downing of Malaysian flight MH17, and having recouped the situation of his proxy forces, Putin was now disposed to agree to a ceasefire. For his part, President Petro Poroshenko had realised that Moscow would not allow him to restore Kyiv's authority in the east by force and that, given the dire state of Ukraine's economy, he could no longer afford the casualties or the destruction the conflict was generating.

4 See Paul Goble, 'Volga Tatars demonstrate against Russian persecution of Crimean Tatars', *Window on Eurasia*, 28 Sep. 2014, windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com.au/2014/09/window-on-eurasia-volga-tatars.html.

5 See Simon Shuster, 'Putin's man in Crimea is Ukraine's worst nightmare', *Time*, 10 Mar. 2014, time.com/19097/putin-crimea-russia-ukraine-aksyonov/.

Hence, the ceasefire that never really was, brought about by the so-called Minsk Protocol of 5 September. In fact there were, by December 2014, over 1,000 further fatal casualties, with armed clashes occurring on a daily basis. The proxies have been attacking strategic points in Ukrainian hands, especially Donetsk airport and the major port city of Mariupol. The pattern of their attacks suggests Moscow would like at least to establish a secure land corridor to Crimea, and could be contemplating a further major incursion into Ukrainian territory. During November, Russian forces and high-tech weaponry were again infiltrated across the porous border. Hardline nationalist circles in Russia continue to speak threateningly of ‘Novorossiya’,⁶ a historical term for a large part of southern and eastern Ukraine, the seizure of which official Moscow has occasionally hinted at broadly as an objective. If Russia were to do this, it could leave Ukraine landlocked, with Russia taking over its entire Black Sea littoral. This would also enable Moscow to link up with its protectorate of Transnistria in Moldova, further threatening Moldova’s fragile existence as a sovereign state and surrounding a rump Ukraine from three sides.

But the Ukrainians have managed to hold firm to their positions through the phoney peace. Feeling some pressure from Ukrainian military resistance as well as Russia’s economic downturn, Putin seems again disposed to settle for at least a temporary lull in military proceedings. Poroshenko has reached an accommodation of sorts with the Donetsk and Luhansk leaders, and on 9 December Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov even spoke of a ‘postwar phase’. Since that date, for the first time since the September ceasefire, there has been an unambiguous reduction in clashes.

Sensing he may never get adequate military or economic support from the West, and with the Ukrainian economy teetering ever closer to the abyss, Poroshenko has no choice but to grasp any ceasefire on offer. Though it is much stronger than Ukraine’s, Russia’s economy is also heading precipitately south. While sanctions have made some contribution, the plummeting oil price and rouble have been a great deal more important. Russia’s Finance Minister, Anton Siluanov, recently estimated the cost to the Russian economy of the oil price

6 See Adam Taylor, “‘Novorossiya’, the latest historical concept to worry about in Ukraine”, *Washington Post*, 18 Apr. 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/04/18/understanding-novorossiya-the-latest-historical-concept-to-get-worried-about-in-ukraine/.

slump at up to US\$100 billion, compared with US\$40 billion for the current sanctions.⁷ While Putin likes to declare that his loyal subjects will suffer as heroically as their forebears have often done, he seems reluctant to push them too hard.

All Moscow really needs at this stage in pursuit of its core objectives is a secure 'frozen conflict' in eastern Ukraine, like the ones it established in the early 1990s in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in Moldova. These structures enable Moscow to exert great influence on the involuntary host country, deploying 'peacekeeping forces' there to support the 'rebels', and blocking national governments from joining the European Union or NATO, neither of which want as new members countries in which there is an ongoing civil conflict or standoff. And, as in Georgia in 2008, such a bridgehead can easily be used at short notice in any all-out assault on the host country if the opportunity presents itself.

Ukraine is in a dire state, weakened by the incompetence and venality of past governments, and devastated and polarised by Putin's geopolitical vandalism. Its efforts to defend itself largely unaided against an infinitely stronger enemy have had a surprising degree of political and military success, as well as strengthening national identity and morale in much of the country. But they have also added to the damage and polarisation. At least it now has a fully legitimate and reasonably coherent administration to address these challenges.

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Moldova's circumstances are complicated in a very different way. This small, impoverished state – despite high growth in recent years, it is still commonly described as the poorest in Europe – has an intricate ethnolinguistic makeup and eventful history. In modern times, its population has been predominantly Romanian, but with a substantial Russian-speaking minority enhanced since tsarist times by Moscow's encouragement for people from elsewhere in the empire to migrate there. Part of Romania between the wars, it was occupied by Moscow again in 1940 on the basis of the secret provisions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, whereby Hitler and Stalin divided Eastern

⁷ See 'Russia loses \$140bn with sanctions and falling oil prices – Finance Minister', *Russia Today*, 24 Nov. 2014, rt.com/business/208263-russia-losses-sanctions-oil/.

Europe between them. Russia's control of the territory was brutally reimposed by the Soviet Army and NKVD secret police at the end of World War II but, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova became an independent state. Putin clearly wants it back, like other Molotov–Ribbentrop acquisitions. He is not too embarrassed by the defects in his deed of title, recently telling an audience of young Russian historians that he couldn't see anything bad about the Pact.⁸ Indeed, he appears to feel nostalgia for it.⁹

He has extensive material to work with in Moldova: a large Russian-speaking imperial minority; a heavy economic dependence on Russian trade and energy supplies; a high degree of dependence on remittances from an estimated 400,000 Moldovan migrant workers in Russia; a large communist party (still so-called) that tries to balance between the European Union and Russia but leans increasingly towards the latter; other large political parties financed or sponsored by Russia, one of which (the Socialists) unexpectedly topped the polls in the 28 November parliamentary elections; and Transnistria, an enclave between the Dniester River and the western border of Ukraine, where Russia has supported a corrupt breakaway regime of pro-Russian patriots and maintains a 'peacekeeping' force that acts, in fact, as an agent for Moscow.

The politics of Moldova are also complex but, since 2009, there has been a coalition government of ethnically Moldavo-Romanian parties that has charted a consistent course towards the European Union and has now signed and ratified an AA with Brussels. In the run-up to national elections last month, there were huge pressures from Russia aimed at convincing the public to support parties that favour joining Putin's Customs Union. Moscow has successively blocked Moldova's key agricultural exports on bogus sanitary grounds, issued Russian passports to its local supporters, and threatened both to expel its Moldovan guest workers (whose remittances are vital to Moldova's economy) and to arbitrarily curtail vital gas exports to Moldova in winter.

8 See Linas Linkevičius, 'Putin has defended the Nazi–Soviet pact. Time for the west to wake up', *Guardian*, 8 Nov. 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/07/vladimir-putin-defended-nazi-soviet-pact-west-world-war-two.

9 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/.

Not content with the nuanced support of the Communist Party, which was, until the November elections, by far the largest party in the country, Moscow recently sponsored the emergence of two fully subservient pro-Moscow parties – the Socialists and Patria (Fatherland). Both were red-carpeted in Moscow, received generous subventions, and were authorised to promise the electorate that they could secure the lifting of Moscow's damaging trade boycotts and ensure the well-being of Moldovan guest workers. Their electoral bottom line was that joining the Customs Union would solve all the country's problems. Crucially, they were supported by heavy Russian TV propaganda coverage, beamed throughout Moldova.

Not to be outdone, the government responded by banning Patria from competing in the elections on the grounds that it had received illegal financial support from abroad. Patria does indeed look very much like a Kremlin project, even more so than the Socialists. But most of the Patria votes seem then to have been simply transferred to the Socialists. Using 'political technology' worthy of the Kremlin, the government also stacked the voting arrangements in the Moldovan guest worker diaspora so that it would be much harder for Moldovans in Russia to vote than their compatriots in Italy and elsewhere who usually favoured Western integration. Thus, while international observers gave the election procedures in country the thumbs-up, neither side played fair. But Russia's involvement was much greater, more menacing and unscrupulous, and also more effective.

The 30 November 2014 elections gave the three main pro-EU parties fewer votes than last time, but they did scrape through to a narrow majority of seats in the parliament. If the very pro-Russian Socialists can combine effectively with the merely pro-Russian Communists, however, they may be able jointly to defeat some key parliamentary votes, including for the presidency in 2016. Both sides of politics are fractious, but the pro-Europe bloc perhaps more so, and Russia is much better than Brussels at wielding carrots and sticks. With the Socialists already agitating for votes on rescinding the AA with Brussels and joining the Customs Union instead, implementing the agreement could prove difficult or even impossible.

Moldovans have had rich experience of brutal imperial and military occupation. The election results suggest Moscow's blunt messages about cutting off gas supplies and deporting Moldovan guest workers

gained traction. Either manoeuvre could inflict great damage on the economy, and many Moldovans have obviously decided that supporting the Customs Union may be the better part of valour. The latest opinion polls suggest that support for the Customs Union may have edged slightly ahead of support for the AA, despite the European Union's efforts to frontload the trading and visa-free travel benefits of the AA. From Moldova, Brussels looks much further away than Moscow.

In case Moldovans haven't yet got the message sufficiently, Russia is apparently preparing similar actions to the ones it has taken in Ukraine. It has been reliably reported that Moscow has recruited groups of pro-Russian enthusiasts in Moldova to travel to Russia for special paramilitary training in the civic arts of destabilisation, urban guerilla warfare and the seizing of public buildings.¹⁰ As in Ukraine, Russia could artificially stimulate conflict in Moldova by paramilitary intervention, then deploy its forces stationed in Transnistria or infiltrated into the country to act as a force-multiplier for its preferred partisans, and present its proxies later to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as legitimate combatants.

The elections may not have decided the issue one way or the other. Formation of a pro-EU government based on a parliamentary majority may only lead to the outbreak of disturbances and demands for secession from Transnistria and other pro-Russian enclaves in the country. We could see further and more decisive action in and against Moldova quite soon.

To many Westerners, Moldova and Transnistria sound like places from a musical comedy, a kind of Ruritania suddenly come bizarrely to life. But a successful hybrid war in Moldova could be seriously bad news not just for Moldova, but also for Ukraine, which would then be more vulnerable to a full-on Russian attack at some propitious future moment. And the European Union's credibility, soft power and capacity for spreading peace and stability on the continent, already seriously damaged, would be dealt a further heavy blow.

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10 See Stanislav Secieru, 'How to offset Russian shadow power? The case of Moldova', *PISM (The Polish Institute of International Affairs) Bulletin*, No. 125 (720), 31 Oct. 2014, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=18536.

Georgia has also signed an AA with Brussels, despite or perhaps because of its intensely sobering recent experiences with Russia. After Georgia regained its independence in 1991, Russia quickly stepped in to foster the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, encouraging and actively supporting the violent expulsion of ethnic Georgians from both regions (in Abkhazia, ethnic Georgians had actually been a majority before the Russian-supported expulsions). In 2008, after failing to win any real prospect of NATO membership, the pro-Western reforming President Mikheil Saakashvili unwisely tried to use armed force to put an end to the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Georgian villages in South Ossetia, perhaps mistakenly thinking the West would support him. Moscow quickly seized on this pretext to invade the country, destroying much of its modest military capability and inflicting heavy damage on its infrastructure.

Russia increased its military presence in Abkhazia too, even though the Georgians had not taken action in Abkhazia to restore to their homes over 200,000 internally displaced ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia. The two enclaves were then encouraged to declare their independence, which Moscow actively urged close allies and the international community to recognise, but with almost no success. Only one or two old Latin American friends of Moscow and a couple of Pacific Island states extended recognition to the newly cobbled entities, the latter in return for financial incentives. Even Belarus, seeing a dangerous precedent for itself, failed to recognise them, despite heavy pressure from Moscow.

Saakashvili limped on for a few years beyond his 2008 fiasco but, in October 2012, he and his United National Movement party were defeated in what were, by post-Soviet standards, unusually free and fair elections. The victor was an ad hoc coalition of forces called Georgian Dream, led by a (then) Russian citizen and billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who had devoted his vast wealth earned in Russia to the campaign to bring down the Saakashvili administration. Since taking office, the Georgian Dream-led coalition has pursued a sustained campaign of repression against members of the former administration, despite their remarkable achievements in economic reform and suppression of corruption. At the same time, Ivanishvili has broadly continued his predecessors' pro-Western external policies, and retained some strongly pro-Western groups in his governing coalition. But he has also extended conciliatory feelers towards Moscow and

there are some observers who suspect him of being a Kremlin project. The defeat of Saakashvili was certainly cause for great celebration in Moscow.

The pursuit of Saakashvili and his United National Movement colleagues has continued to the present and, sometimes, looks like selective justice aimed against anyone pushing a strongly Atlanticist line. In early November 2014, the very popular, pro-Western Defence Minister Irakli Alasania was dismissed after several of his senior officials were purged against his wishes. Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze, together with four deputy foreign ministers and the minister responsible for relations with Europe, resigned in response, claiming that the country's Western orientation was under threat. Though strongly pro-Western, neither Alasania nor Panjikidze belonged to Saakashvili's party, which suggests that their main offence may have been to be too pro-Western.

President Giorgi Margvelashvili appears to share some of the concerns of the former ministers, whereas the current Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, a close confidant of Ivanishvili, has dismissed the resignations and complaints as political stunts. Ivanishvili, who left the prime ministership in 2013, has retired from formal political office, but is widely believed to still control Georgia's political life from behind the scenes, acting mainly through his business protégé and right-hand man, Garibashvili. Georgia's Western interlocutors were dismayed by the loss of the key officials who lent credibility to the Tbilisi Government, and have repeatedly urged Ivanishvili and his allies not to continue the campaign of selective justice, but clearly to no avail.

It seems likely that Georgia, a strongly independent country very conscious of its European identity, will continue its path towards implementation of the AA with Brussels, if with less commitment than some in Georgia and Europe would like. But regardless of any contingency plans the secretive Ivanishvili may have (he once told an interviewer that he might favour the Customs Union if that seemed the right decision for Georgia), Russia has many assets at its disposal in Georgia, including client politicians, the conservative Georgian Orthodox Church and expanded military bases in both enclaves. And it is further strengthening its presence in Abkhazia after a Moscow-facilitated coup last May, which led to a more independent Abkhazian

leader being replaced by a former KGB officer, Raul Khajimba, who is seen very much as Moscow's man. On 24 November, Putin and Khajimba signed a far-reaching 'bilateral' agreement that provides for close integration of defence, border control, customs policy, social policy and law and order.

All but the last vestiges of Abkhazia's separate existence are removed by this 'treaty'. It is likely that a similar arrangement will soon be concluded with the smaller and more subservient South Ossetia. Russian forces are already in close proximity to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, and could be easily and quickly reinforced, if that were judged expedient. So, when the time is right, Russia could easily complete the job begun in 2008. There has been some semi-muffled debate within the Moscow establishment in the past about whether it should have gone the last few dozen kilometres to Tbilisi in 2008, and about whose fault it had been (Medvedev's) that it had not already done so.

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Russia's threatening posture towards its Western periphery is primarily aimed at preventing further defections by former vassals to Western institutions. But it is also increasingly aggressive towards the entire global West, even including Japan, despite a shaky mini-thaw with the Shinzo Abe administration.

This aggressive behaviour is not new, though it has sharply increased in the last year or so. In 2009 and 2013, Russia conducted very large military exercises entitled Zapad 2009 and Zapad 2013 (or West 2009 and West 2013), with aggressive scenarios. The 2009 scenario, for example, assumed Polish support for 'terrorism' in Belarus and concluded with a nuclear strike on Warsaw. Overflights necessitating defensive reactions have also been increasing for some time but, during recent months, these have escalated.¹¹ Many have been directed at vulnerable NATO members, especially the Baltic states, and at the Nordic non-NATO members, Sweden and Finland. And Putin has recently made repeated threatening references to Russia's nuclear capabilities,

11 See Thomas Frear et al., 'Dangerous brinkmanship: Close military encounters between Russia and the West in 2014', *European Leadership Network Policy Brief*, Nov. 2014, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/09/6375e3da/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf.

continuing a trend of nuclear intimidation that was always present in Soviet times, if usually *sotto voce*, but has become more audible during his presidency.

This aggression has run in tandem with constantly expanding attacks on human rights and freedoms within Russia itself; and there is a clear link between the two. Putin has also enunciated an unattractive new principle for the conduct of foreign policy: that Russia has a right, even an obligation, to protect the rights of supposedly ill-treated Russian populations in neighbouring states, or indeed anywhere in the world. This doctrine echoes Hitler's assertion of a similar right in pursuing the Anschluss of Austria and coming to the rescue of supposedly oppressed Germans in Czechoslovakia and then Poland. It is in pursuit of this principle that Russia has been adopting the practice of distributing Russian passports to its 'fellow countrymen' (*sootchestvenniki*), for whose protection they might be later justified in interfering in the internal affairs of their country of residence.

Russian nationalists argue that because the break-up left over 20 million ethnic Russians in the former republics that then became independent countries, such policies are entirely natural. This was undoubtedly a misfortune for many of them, though not necessarily the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century. It should be remembered, however, that over the centuries many more non-Russians had become involuntary citizens of the Russian, then the Soviet empire, often in severely traumatic circumstances and with massive loss of life at the hands of Russian military and political police formations.

Russian nationalists seem unable to absorb the broader context of this issue, which can in any case scarcely justify comprehensive aggression towards the new states of the kind that is now unfolding. Moscow has been happy in the past to encourage the return of ethnic Russians to the homeland, where severe demographic problems are judged to have rendered the existing population less than sufficient. But, for now, the policy of using the diaspora as a political asset in creating some lesser version of the Soviet Union under Moscow's direction seems firmly on the agenda, with alarming implications for the new post-Soviet states and European security more generally.

Until recently, it had been assumed in the West that the safety of the Baltic states was assured by their having become successful members of the European Union and NATO. But, since the almost certainly Russian-inspired cyberwar against Estonia in 2007, and the accompanying campaigns of destabilisation undertaken by ethnic Russians in Estonia, their position has seemed less secure. Russian economic coercion and outright aggression against Ukraine over the last year or so has reinforced Baltic anxiety. Lithuania has substantial Russian and pro-Russian minorities, while Latvia and Estonia have very big Russian diasporas, about a quarter to a third of the population in each case, and more if Russophone minority groups are included.

Most of the current Baltic Russian population is a result of immigration and border changes imposed by Moscow decision-makers in Soviet times. Many are military and KGB retirees and their descendants. They often have attitudes to the war on Ukraine similar to those of Russians in Russia itself. There are areas of local majority Russian settlement near the borders of both countries with Russia, where there have been signs of unwelcome activity, including recruitment of Russians to fight in the Ukrainian conflict. And the increasingly chauvinist propaganda of Russian TV stations has been beaming into all three countries in recent years. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic states have been developing countermeasures, but their efficacy is yet to be tested.

What worries the Baltic peoples most is that, though they are NATO members, the techniques used by Russia to subvert Ukraine could easily be employed against them: recruitment and covert training of co-ethnics and any other sympathisers to take subversive action in the country on signal from their controllers; export of corruption to the country with political strings attached; encouragement or indeed systematic incitement of ethnic Russian organisations to make increasingly radical and politicised demands on national or regional authorities; intense espionage facilitated by the presence of large pools of bilingual talent; creation of 'provocations'; or artificial incidents that Moscow could use as evidence of damage to 'legitimate Russian interests' or mistreatment of Russian co-ethnics; infiltration of crack Russian forces ostensibly to protect the threatened Russians but, in fact, to lead and mobilise local collaborators; unleashing propaganda campaigns against the victim country, complete with grains of truth and half-truth and larger dollops of outright lies, all to suggest that

the victims were in reality the 'fascist aggressors'; and, deploying large and intimidatory Russian forces near the border, aggressive overflights of contiguous space, and nuclear sabre-rattling.

These tactics might be more difficult to deploy in the Baltic states than over the long and porous Russian/Ukrainian border, and more difficult to use against countries with stronger allies, better organised defence and intelligence agencies, and a clearer understanding of the lessons of 'hybrid warfare'. As against that, the Baltic countries have virtually no strategic depth. And, while they have powerful allies, large sections of the publics in those allies, including in Germany, have little stomach for coming to the aid of the Baltic states. As Paul Roderick Gregory asked, setting out an all-too-plausible scenario: if Russia does make a carefully crafted move against a Baltic state, which is less than a conventional military assault, and NATO does not rise adequately to the occasion, what will remain of NATO's credibility?¹²

Russia's largely successful aggression against Ukraine has had other bad effects on the security environment in Eurasia. In Ukraine, Russia has undermined, with Western connivance, a number of international agreements, perhaps most relevantly the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. The example effect for would-be nuclear countries of the flouting of the Budapest Memorandum may be difficult to assess, but can hardly be positive.

The sustained aggression encountering only a modest Western response has made Russia, whose economy is less than one-fifteenth the size of the Western economies, look the strategic equal of any or all of them anywhere near its home turf. Several Western European countries have appeared to place business-as-usual with Russia ahead of the security of fellow EU or NATO members and not just victim countries beyond the European Union's borders. Despite the political skill and patient determination of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, many in the elites of the European Union's leading country continue to suffer from an anachronistic devotion to Russophilia, heedless of Russia's actions.

12 See Paul Roderick Gregory, 'Ukraine is more of an existential threat than ISIS, because it could destroy NATO', *Forbes*, 23 Sep. 2014, www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2014/09/23/ukraine-is-more-of-an-existential-threat-than-isis-because-it-could-destroy-NATO/.

Russia's successful trashing of 'a Europe whole and free' has also led new democracies in post-communist Eastern Europe to reconsider their commitment to the Western strategic community and its values. Hungary (a right-wing autocracy with crypto-fascist tendencies) and Slovakia (a centre-left populist government) have both wobbled on Ukraine, and there are strong pro-Russian constituencies in many other new member states. Czech President Miloš Zeman, for example, supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has told Kazakh interlocutors that support for Russia's stance on Ukraine is building in Europe (not necessarily what his hosts would have wanted to hear) and has called on his Western allies to curtail sanctions and recognise Crimea's annexation.¹³ The *Washington Post* has described Zeman as a 'virtual mouthpiece' for Putin. Serbia, a prospective member of the European Union, supports Russia on Ukraine, opposes sanctions and, in general, seems to calculate that it can have excellent relations with Russia while continuing on a path towards EU membership. Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić seems to see Serbia's relationship with Russia almost as a love affair.¹⁴

The events in Ukraine have demonstrated the weakness and divisions within the EU and Western alliance. The sanctions have been difficult for Brussels to coordinate, and have been contentious at every point. Without the wake-up call of MH17, it's unlikely that the European Union would have mobilised even as much consensus as it has done. Despite Russia's renewed incursions into Ukraine in November, the European Union could only manage to come up with a few Ukrainian 'separatists' to add to its sanctions list. Moscow is now intent on finding sympathetic or self-interested EU members ready to veto further extension of the sanctions packages as they reach their expiry dates in mid-2015.¹⁵

Even the MH17 seems to evoke embarrassment rather than plain speaking. No one close to the events in the West is in any doubt about what happened, and yet the tone is often hyper-cautious, 'balanced'

13 See Piers Lawson et al., 'Buckwheat panic grips Russia, Czech leader urges "Finlandization" of Ukraine', *Transitions Online*, 27 Nov. 2014, www.tol.org/client/article/24582-buckwheat-panic-grips-russia-czech-leader-urges-finlandization-of-ukraine.html.

14 See Tim Judah, 'To Russia with love', *The Economist*, 18 Sep. 2012, www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2012/09/russia-and-serbia.

15 See Andrew Rettman, 'Russia targets Cyprus, Hungary, and Italy for sanctions veto', *EUobserver*, 11 Dec. 2014, euobserver.com/foreign/126879.

and euphemistic. The Dutch are saying that any report elucidating the causes is still far off. In the meantime, the Kremlin's various implausible counter-narratives are still treated with more respect than they deserve, even after the recent exposure of Russian TV's fake footage purporting to demonstrate that a Ukrainian plane was responsible.

Putin's 2014 has been a little less miraculous than his serial triumphs in 2013. He has had some triumphs, but also some serious reverses, including some – like his growing embrace of China and his disciplining of Ukraine – that he no doubt sees as being at the very least qualified successes. Western responses remain weak, but if the sanctions can be maintained at least until the point where, as Timothy Snyder remarked, they 'start a conversation' in Russia, that could yet lead to some restoration of sanity in Moscow.

This text is taken from *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II*, by John Besemeres, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.