

# Introduction: Reclaiming the Empire

This book is not a history of Russia's relations with the former vassal states on its western borders. Most of the essays are snapshots taken between 2010 and 2016 that attempt to present some of the key developments in their interactions as they occurred. In addition, there are some more historical reflections on Poland's experience of German and Soviet dictatorship in the bloodlands<sup>1</sup> during World War II, and its efforts to escape Moscow's legacy and integrate with Western Europe thereafter (Chapters 1–9). The historical chapters offer background to the story of Russia's recent efforts under President Putin to revive its imperial glories, and why those efforts are usually stoutly resisted by former subject nations, many of which have been through experiences not dissimilar to Poland's. From Chapter 10 on, the story of Russia's domestic evolution and its relations with its former subjects in Eastern Europe unfolds more or less chronologically.

Already from the early 1990s there were growing intimations of Russia's unhappiness with the post-1991 security settlement in Eurasia. The political class had assumed that they would enjoy early prosperity, full acceptance by the Western powers and a seamless

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1 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). Snyder's book encapsulates something that Western observers often overlook about the extent to which Eastern Europeans (including the western former republics of the USSR) were the victims of the brutal and brutalising effects of three successive invasions by the vastly superior forces of two of the world's most sanguinary dictatorships in the twentieth century, Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany.

Angered by his treatment of Russia's aggression against Ukraine since early 2014, Russian propaganda has begun to target Snyder as an archenemy, wheeling out against him such distinguished historians as the pristine American Stalinist, Grover Furr. For Furr's views, see Ekaterina Blinova, 'Who controls the past controls the future: Why does West hate Stalin?', *Sputnik*, 25 Aug. 2015, [sputniknews.com/politics/20150825/1026165590/why-does-west-hate-stalin.html](http://sputniknews.com/politics/20150825/1026165590/why-does-west-hate-stalin.html).

continuation of the international importance they had once enjoyed. As they realised that much of this was not coming about, their resentment grew. Some Western observers began to fear the emergence of a 'Weimar Russia', resentful, revisionist and revanchist, with domestic policies in keeping with the external. While the later Yeltsin was prickly and difficult at times, and his Russia economically in disarray and democratically flawed, the Weimar fears were premature.

Most Western leaders accepted Yeltsin's abrupt withdrawal with equanimity or relief; and they looked to the early Putin with hope, despite his KGB background (his having been the first phone call to President George W. Bush after 9/11, and he having been the protégé of the reformist Petersburg mayor, Anatoly Sobchak). There was also satisfaction with Russia's sudden economic resurgence after 2000, and a feeling that this might lead to embourgeoisement and pressures for pluralist reform, producing another 'man they could do business with'. For their part, Western businessmen, particularly in the energy sector, were quick to grasp the expanding economic opportunities.

The contrary indications – Putin's appointments of KGB mates to most key positions, his use of energy diplomacy to coerce his neighbours (unequal contracts, arbitrary and punishing trade boycotts, extreme price discrimination on political criteria), his progressive destruction of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin democratic reforms, the deteriorating investment climate, the increasingly adversarial stance towards NATO despite Western efforts to engage and inform – should all have been warning signs.

By the time of his belligerent speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Putin was ready to forcefully spell out his resentments. But the West tried not to notice. At the conference itself, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates sought to allay the fears expressed by some that Putin was adumbrating a new cold war.<sup>2</sup> Russia's cyberwar against Estonia in May of the same year, coupled with harassment of diplomatic staff and organisation of Estonia's large Russian community into concerted street demonstrations, were

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2 See Oliver Rolofs, 'Ein Hauch vom Kaltem Krieg' [A breath of Cold War], Munich Security Conference, 2007, [www.securityconference.de/de/ueber-uns/muenchner-momente/ein-hauch-von-kaltem-krieg/](http://www.securityconference.de/de/ueber-uns/muenchner-momente/ein-hauch-von-kaltem-krieg/).

a signal of 'hybrid wars'<sup>3</sup> to come, against which NATO membership, as in Estonia's case, might not be an adequate defence. But few at that time outside the vulnerable capitals of Eastern Europe seemed to feel any great alarm.

In April 2008, with President George W. Bush pushing against Western European objections for Ukraine's and Georgia's strongly pro-Western reform governments to be given a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), Putin decided for the first time to attend the NATO summit in Bucharest. NATO was divided, a majority of the Ukrainian population at that time was against membership, and MAPs were withheld from both countries. Deeply worried by the implications for themselves and by the demonstration of Putin's lobbying capabilities in Europe, according to a senior EU official (personal communication), some new eastern members of NATO lobbied Merkel vigorously on their own account, which helped elicit a bland statement by NATO that Ukraine and Georgia would become members at some unspecified time. This assurance, however, carried little credibility.

Putin was reportedly furious with this addendum to the record, but in public spoke more moderately than at Munich and was probably pleased with the net outcome at Bucharest.<sup>4</sup> Despite the vague assurances that Ukraine and Georgia would at some time become NATO members, it was clear from the reactions of 'old Europe' that further NATO expansion to former republics of the Soviet Union was off the agenda.

Putin soon had an opportunity to capitalise on his Bucharest success. In August 2008, Moscow's long campaign of aggression against Georgia and President Mikheil Saakashvili evoked an ill-judged attempt by Saakashvili to intervene with force against the ongoing expulsion of ethnic Georgians by Russia's South Ossetian proxies. Moscow had been goading Saakashvili to attempt such a thing for some time and was well prepared militarily to seize the opportunity presented by Saakashvili's rash own goal. Russian forces immediately

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3 See Jānis Bērziņš, 'Russia's new generation warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian defense policy', National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy paper no. 2, April 2014, [www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/Publikacijas/PP%2002-2014.ashx](http://www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/Publikacijas/PP%2002-2014.ashx).

4 See Steven Erlanger, 'Putin, at NATO meeting, curbs combative rhetoric', *New York Times*, 5 Apr. 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/04/05/world/europe/05nato.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/05/world/europe/05nato.html?_r=0).

invaded much of the country, de facto annexing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia's two protectorates within Georgia. In fact, Saakashvili had undertaken no action in Abkhazia, where massive expulsion of the ethnic Georgian majority in the province had occurred in the 1990s, facilitated by Russian 'peacemakers'. The West basically accepted Russia's successful *fait accompli* in Georgia. President Nicolas Sarkozy managed to negotiate a ceasefire with Russia on unfavourable terms, which Russia has also since violated with impunity.

In the years since, the de facto annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia has advanced further, with militarisation by Russia of both the territories. And Putin has unilaterally appropriated additional slices of land, taking him within easy range of vital Georgian strategic assets. None of these land grabs has evoked a serious response from the West. While Brussels has cautiously encouraged Georgia's efforts under the more pragmatic Ivanishvili regime to draw closer to the European Union, it seems increasingly unlikely that Putin will allow Georgia's integration with the European Union to proceed further. If and when he does put a stop to it by coercive means of one kind or another, it is far from certain that there would be any significant pushback from the West.

The new US administration of Barack Obama came in disavowing many of the policies of its predecessor. It moved quickly to 'reset' its relations with Russia to deal with Obama priorities, for which Russia's cooperation was deemed essential, like nuclear disarmament and containment of Iran's nuclear program. By implication, Putin would have taken the reset as tacit acceptance of his actions in Estonia and Georgia, as well as his 'energy diplomacy' with its coercive trade blockades against Russia's western neighbours.

A notable example of the latter was the Gas War against Ukraine in 2009, which forced Kyiv to accept a crippling high price for essential gas imports, further weakening the pro-Western Orange leadership, and helping to bring about its downfall. Moscow exports corruption as well as gas to target countries, and it is not any exculpation of Moscow to say that corrupt members of the Ukrainian political class were complicit in these outcomes.

Simultaneously with these forward moves externally, Putin was strengthening his domestic 'power vertical' and advancing the patriotic conditioning of his subjects through heavy-handed propaganda in the education system and the media.

While views of the end of communism and the Soviet Union were more positive in the former Soviet republics, where the factor of national pride offset the disruptions and difficulties of the 1990s, in Russia much of the population came to see the transition to the market and democracy as the main source of their woes. Convincing them after decades of Soviet acculturation that the West was the cause of most of the ills that afflicted them was not difficult. Members of the political class were particularly susceptible to the idea that Russia was not being shown sufficient respect, indeed that the West had deliberately and consciously humiliated it.

Progressively under Putin, the old Soviet adversarial view of the world was restored, complete with a distinct view of the history of the years of perestroika to that held in the West or, indeed, in most of the rest of the Soviet empire. Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin had both become widely despised figures in the Russian public, a status that Putin cemented into place, though without taking punitive action against either of them. Yeltsin had chosen Putin as his successor on the understanding that his vital interests would be preserved. But the view of the 1990s that Putin successfully promoted throughout most of Russian society, depicting nothing but chaos and penury, ensured that the two former presidents' standing would not revive. In fact, the economic problems that blighted Gorbachev and Yeltsin's presidencies were largely the result of sustained low prices for oil and gas and their valiant and partly successful attempts to reform the Soviet economy. By contrast, the spectacular economic progress during Putin's first two terms owed a vast amount to a sharp increase in Russia's energy earnings, as well as the delayed positive effects of the reforms.

The parallel historical reality that Putinism has constructed (see Chapter 28, 'Putin's parallel universe') has laid the foundations for a renewed stand-off not dissimilar to the Cold War, but based on a new, anti-Western, highly nationalist ideology, which is ostensibly 'conservative', rather than Marxist-Leninist. While obviously more limited in its potential appeal to the main ethnic groups in the former

vassal states, this ideological construct makes it easier for Russia to cultivate ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in neighbouring populations as fifth columnists.

The stopgap presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–12) represented a mainly cosmetic though, in some measure, also real break from the Putinist narrative. But his influence on events was never strong enough to leave permanent marks. Even before Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, his neo-Stalinising influence from the prime ministership was palpable. And it has grown relentlessly since.

The essays in Parts 2 to 5 of this book pick up the story from early 2010, beginning chronologically with the presidential elections in Ukraine (see Chapter 10, 'Ukraine: A sharp turn eastwards?'). Thanks to the internal feuds and ineptitude of the pro-Western Orange leadership in Kyiv, and the destructive influence of the global financial crisis on the Ukrainian economy (which produced a 15 per cent decline in GDP in 2009), the populist Orange Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko lost the presidential election, though only by a surprisingly narrow 3 per cent margin to her pro-Russian rival, Viktor Yanukovich. Moscow contributed significantly to the downfall of the Orange forces by its 'energy diplomacy' and heavy propaganda in the more Russified eastern provinces.

But the Orange forces brought much of their fall from grace on themselves. The rashly anti-Moscow President, Viktor Yushchenko, alienated Putin and his pro-Russian Ukrainian sympathisers more than was wise, particularly during an economic crisis. During his last months in office, as his poll ratings fell into low single figures, he devoted most of his energy to supporting Yanukovich, hoping thereby to ensure that the Orange candidate, Tymoshenko, would lose. Yet it was Yanukovich's team who had earlier blatantly falsified the presidential contest of 2004 against Yushchenko himself, which in turn led to the outbreak of the Orange Revolution of 2004–05, forcing the rerun won comfortably by Yushchenko. Without Tymoshenko's charisma and rhetorical skills in mobilising the Orange crowds in

2004–05, Yushchenko may well have not had a chance to assume the presidency. But in 2010, it was his perverse support for Yanukovych that tipped the balance against Tymoshenko.<sup>5</sup>

When the Orange incumbency ended in electoral defeat, Western leaders and commentators shed few tears. Insiders commented on a ‘Ukraine fatigue’ pervading relevant Western official circles.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, the pro-Russian Yanukovych’s victory over the Westernising Yushchenko was received in the West almost with relief and with hope for a better interlocutor. This response seemed curiously shortsighted. The genuine achievements of the Orange years in working towards Western integration, while consolidating democratic governance and media coverage in the country, were forgotten, and the extent of Yanukovych’s contempt for democracy and his strong leaning towards Moscow seemed greatly underestimated in the West. Yanukovych’s win would, I argued, impart strong momentum to Putin’s restoration project for the former Soviet empire.

Ukraine fatigue had its own causes, but it was also part of a wider trend in Western attitudes in both the US and Europe. The economic problems of the GFC, coming soon after the big bang expansion of the European Union led to a growing reluctance by older EU members to accept the prospect of further enlargement to the East; so there was enlargement fatigue in general, and not just in relation to Ukraine. And, after the Bucharest NATO summit of 2008 and the Russian invasion of Georgia, there was a similar reluctance to accept new NATO members. Many core NATO members, both populations and political elites, feel reluctant to commit themselves to serious defence of new member states in the event of their invoking article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty that calls for all NATO members to regard an attack on any one of them as an attack on all.

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5 See Taras Kuzio, ‘Yushchenko versus Tymoshenko: Why Ukraine’s National Democrats are divided’, *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 215–40, [www.taraskuzio.net/Comparative%20Politics\\_files/Kuzio\\_YuliaVersusViktor.pdf](http://www.taraskuzio.net/Comparative%20Politics_files/Kuzio_YuliaVersusViktor.pdf).

6 See, for example, ex-US ambassador to Kyiv, Steven Pifer, ‘Curing “Ukraine fatigue”’, *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/02/10/opinion/10iht-edpifer.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/10/opinion/10iht-edpifer.html?_r=0).

Russia's growing belligerence towards NATO has strengthened that reluctance,<sup>7</sup> while greatly increasing the anxiety both of existing new members like the Baltic states, as well as countries on Russia's borders who are not members but increasingly aspire to be. Moscow's hybrid warfare rehearsals in its cyberwar against Estonia in 2007, and its invasion of Georgia in 2008, reinforced those trends rather than suggesting any need for pushback against Russia. Many Western leaders responded to Putin's increased assertiveness by accepting his policies as the new normal and trying to moderate them by 'dialogue', concessions and conciliation. This, however, has seemed only to increase the Putin clan's anger, indignation and territorial and other ambitions.

Yanukovich's presidential victory in 2010 led to an almost immediate reversal of Ukraine's Western orientation. Kyiv's concessions to Moscow on security cooperation, in particular its agreement to extend Russia's access to naval facilities in Crimea to 2042, further consolidated Putin's position in Ukraine. NATO and the European Union by now seemed reluctant to issue any more enlargement challenges and, in the course of 2010, Putin had two further successes, in Poland and Belarus, though one of those successes, with Poland, differed from the usual directly coercive pattern, and, in the event, proved short-lived.

While still a relatively new member of the EU and NATO, under the skilful leadership of Premier Donald Tusk, Poland had begun to play a major role in European affairs with an agenda that, unsurprisingly, did not tend to favour Kremlin interests. As an EU member able to invoke the help of Brussels and Berlin, Warsaw could more effectively resist Russian pressures. Despite Yanukovich's tilt towards Moscow, Poland was also actively seeking to draw Ukraine closer to Brussels. At the same time, Tusk and his Civic Platform Party were less emphatically anti-Russian than their predecessors, the Kaczyński twins and their Law and Justice Party. Both the Russian and Polish governments seemed inclined to explore the possibility of a partial *rapprochement*,

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7 On the (un)readiness of old Europe to come to the aid of a new member state under attack by Russia, see Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes & Jacob Poushter, 'NATO public opinion: Wary of Russia, leery of action on Ukraine', Pew Research Center, 10 Jun. 2015, [www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/1-nato-public-opinion-wary-of-russia-leary-of-action-on-ukraine/](http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/1-nato-public-opinion-wary-of-russia-leary-of-action-on-ukraine/).

particularly on so-called 'difficult' historical issues like the Katyn massacre of some 22,000 Polish officers by the Soviet NKVD secret police during World War II.

When in April 2010 President Lech Kaczyński and 95 other Polish military and political leaders were killed in a plane crash near Smolensk on their way to a memorial service for the victims of Katyn, the tragedy paradoxically seemed to offer a chance for strengthening the *rapprochement*. Putin, who was hoping improved relations with Poland would dissuade it from seeking Brussels's support for its anti-Russian policies, went out of his way to seem reasonable. For a time there was sweetness and light and the expectation of more to come. A serious or sustained *rapprochement*, however, always seemed unlikely to those familiar with the history (see Chapter 6, 'Poland/Russia: Peace or ceasefire?'); and it was not to be. When it became apparent that Putin's moments of partial truth in public about Russian war crimes against Poland were not going to yield sufficient rewards, Moscow rowed back from these concessions, and the relationship soured again.<sup>8</sup>

Politicised disputes in Poland about the causes of the crash and wild conspiracy theories surfacing from the Law and Justice side of politics – that the Polish Government had colluded with Russia to kill President Kaczynski and conceal their traces – were an important part of the story. But Moscow soon returned to form, withdrawing any support for an honest enquiry, refusing even to return the wreckage of the plane, and duly presenting its own tendentious findings that blamed the Poles entirely for the accident, and admitted no fault on the Russian side. Perhaps the main obstacle to maintaining the thaw in relations, however, was Poland's active engagement in initiating and advancing the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was aimed at drawing the former Soviet western republics, including Ukraine, into economic and political reforms, and a closer relationship with the European Union.

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8 See Halya Coynash, 'Russia says Poland, not USSR, was Hitler's ally and responsible for Holocaust', *Prava Lyudyny v Ukraini* (Human Rights in Ukraine), 25 Sep. 2015, [khpg.org/index.php?id=1443091855](http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1443091855).

Poland made particular efforts to interest the Belarus dictator Alexander Lukashenka in embarking on a reform course, offering him financial support through the European Union should he choose to do so. The Belarus economy was in bad shape, partly because Lukashenka had spent profligately in the hope of ensuring a clear win for himself in Belarus's December 2010 presidential elections. In the run-up to the elections, he had uncharacteristically permitted strong opposition candidates to challenge him at a time when he was at a low point in opinion polls.

Lukashenka was at this time flirting with the European Union, as he sometimes does when he feels he needs a hedge against Russian pressure. Putin, who despises Lukashenka, had been attempting to destabilise him by a scurrilous propaganda campaign accessible to Belarusian television viewers. To keep Brussels sweet and supportive, Lukashenka had allowed a little more freedom of expression in the run-up to the elections, which further strengthened the opposition challenge.

Lukashenka's performance in the poll appears to have been well below his expectations.<sup>9</sup> He decided to falsify the election results (implausibly claiming to have received four-fifths of the vote), abruptly reverse his mini-liberalisation program, suppress the resulting street demonstrations, and brutalise, arrest and imprison most of the opposition presidential candidates and many of their supporters (see Chapter 11, 'In Belarus, the leopard flaunts his spots'). This predictably led to sanctions and condemnation from the European Union, pushing Lukashenka back into Russia's grasp. In due course, Moscow helped him escape from his economic fiasco by generous subsidies and credits, but subject to certain conditions that would have enabled Russian investors to take over key strategic assets in Belarus. Lukashenka delivered on some of the conditions, but did his best to wriggle out of others, and has since wavered between greater and more limited compliance with Russia's wishes in exchange for handsome economic support from the Kremlin.

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9 On this, see Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The last European dictatorship* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 231 and ff.

Five years on, we are witnessing a not dissimilar scenario, with Lukashenka alarmed by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, worried about his own survival and that of Belarus as an independent country, and again seeking a *mini-rapprochement* with the West. So history seems poised to repeat itself in some form. But Lukashenka's crackdown on his domestic opposition in 2010, and his return to Moscow's embrace were undoubtedly a victory, if less than total, for Putin. Should Lukashenka persist with his current impertinence, a Ukrainian fate may well await him and his subjects sooner or later, at which point Western sympathy and support will doubtless again prove less than effective.

The Ukraine, Georgian and Belarus stories of 2008–10 illustrate the overall pattern of events in Russia's relations with its western neighbours: Moscow attempts to convert the economically based partial dependence of the former vassals into greater subordination by various forms of inducement and military or economic coercion, but the vassals resist. Often there is a strong nationalist or democratic, Westernising element in the resistance, but at a minimum there is a reluctance by any of them to sacrifice the sovereignty and independence that they had won with the collapse of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The Obama administration and most EU leaders were not initially greatly disturbed by Moscow's increasingly coercive policies towards its neighbours. But, under pressure from new member states fearful of the implications for their own security, NATO and the European Union slowly began to see Putin as representing a challenge that needed a response. With the partial exception of the western Balkan states (post-Yugoslavia plus Albania), enlargement has been effectively off the NATO table since the Bucharest summit of 2008. The outlook for new EU accessions has become similarly unpromising. The West has reached, instead, for less than adequate alternatives. The most prominent of these has been the EU's Eastern Partnership, in which Poland and Sweden were the key movers. After a long delay during which, in deference to Russia's sensitive feelings, NATO did nothing, it too has also finally resorted to policies of 'reassurance' for its new eastern member states on the Russian frontline, strengthening air patrols around the Baltic region, and increasing military exercises and small, non-permanent deployments of NATO forces in the East.

In 2016, further modest measures have been announced or foreshadowed. On 10 February, NATO defence ministers agreed to strengthen their presence in Eastern Europe member states, though still on a rotational basis and not with the permanent boots on the ground that most new members have been wanting for years. The numbers to be deployed and from which NATO countries they are to come are still to be negotiated, but are likely to be relatively small, probably no more than 3,000. On 2 February, US Defense Secretary Ash Carter unveiled a US\$3.4 billion plan to increase prepositioned US heavy equipment in Europe, sufficient to equip a third US heavy armoured brigade to add to the two such units based in Italy and Germany. But, again, the US forces involved will be rotational, and mainly deployed to the Eastern members in small units for training purposes. For comparison, during the Cold War, NATO had 20 fully equipped divisions along the West German border with the Warsaw Pact countries, which is roughly the same length as the combined borders today of the Baltic states with Russia and Belarus (whose military is closely coordinated with Russia's).<sup>10</sup>

These measures, while welcome, are inadequate. A RAND study released on the same day as the Carter announcement reported that a series of wargames conducted in-house by RAND, in which Russian attacks were simulated against Baltic state targets, indicated that Russian forces could be in Riga and/or Tallinn within two to three days. Moreover, if US and Baltic forces tried to resist the Russian advance with the forces that they had available in theatre, they would be quickly overwhelmed and take heavy casualties. The study found that a force of at least seven brigades, including three heavy brigades, would be needed in the area to prevent such an outcome.<sup>11</sup>

Inadequate as they all have been, the softer alternatives to EU and NATO membership, and the cautious Western responses to Russia's increasingly threatening military posture have enraged the Russians as much or more than the original expansions of NATO and the European Union did. Russia has, to take the most obvious

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10 John-Thor Dahlburg & Robert Burns, 'NATO ministers approve new force for Eastern Europe', *Globe And Mail*, 10 Feb. 2016.

11 David A. Shlapak & Michael Johnson, 'Reinforcing deterrence on NATO's eastern flank: Wargaming the defense of the Baltics', [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html); Dan De Luce, 'If Russia started a war in the Baltics, NATO would lose – quickly', *Foreign Policy*, 3 Feb. 2016.

example, fought numerous trade wars and, now, also a military war of choice against Ukraine over Kyiv's decision to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union. EU seniors never fail to emphasise that an AA is not a prelude to EU membership. In early March 2016, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared that Ukraine would not be joining the European Union or NATO any time in the next 20–25 years. He may have been trying to help his Dutch colleagues cope with domestic unease about whether the Netherlands should ratify the EU's AA with Ukraine. But his casual comments will add to the demoralisation of Ukrainians generally, and the beleaguered government in particular. The authority of a Luxemburg EU politician, however senior, to speak on NATO's behalf is problematic, but Juncker's remarks probably reflect a strong and growing feeling among many in Brussels and the European Union of 'Ukraine fatigue' – that Ukraine is becoming one problem too many for them, alongside the migration crisis, Brexit and Syria. As Juncker often does with his statements relating to Russia, he certainly would have gladdened hearts in the Kremlin.

But, despite such reassurances, and even in tandem with 'resets' and periodic efforts to 'repair the relationship with Russia', Moscow presents AAs and other modest and peaceful forms of Western outreach as dire threats to its security though, in truth, the only countries whose security has been visibly threatened in recent years have been Russia's western neighbours.

In fact, the struggle over Eastern Europe since the 1990s has always been highly asymmetrical: reluctant expansion by Euro-Atlantic organisations (see Chapter 28, 'Putin's parallel universe') in response to insistent efforts to join by would-be new members, coupled with attempts by Western leaders to reassure Russia and draw it into some sort of broadly equivalent partnership in an unthreatening win-win situation. The problem, however, is that Russia doesn't believe in win-win situations, and responds with anger, threats and various forms of coercion. The West, in turn, then curtails further access to its Euro-Atlantic clubs, refuses increasingly desperate appeals from new members for some weaponry and significant forces to at last be deployed permanently on their territory, and offers concessions to assuage Russia – for example, cancelling particular ballistic missile

defense projects, and inviting the Kremlin to help Brussels reconsider an EU AA that has allegedly damaged or offended Russia. But none of the above works.

If it all amounts to a cold war, it has been a cold war conducted, at least until very recently, by one side only. The West has been reluctant to view Russia as an adversary. And most of its interventions on behalf of the former republics and, arguably, also the new member states from the old Warsaw Pact, have been too little and/or too late. Putin behaves as though he is confident that, if Russia issues direct challenges to the post-1991 order, the West will not defend it with much unity or resolve.

While they do not say so overtly, some Western leaders in the European Union and Washington seem to believe that the post-1991 settlement in Europe is something about which the West should try to be flexible. Despite the shock at Russia's lightning invasion and annexation of Crimea, for example, and the sanctions that were imposed in response, the subject of Crimea seldom comes up. Similarly, despite US, UK and French signatures (as well as Russian) on the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994 assuring Ukraine of freedom from coercion of any kind in exchange for its divesting itself of nuclear weapons, that instrument has been dishonoured by all signatories and is not normally mentioned in official discourse.

Many Western commentators find a rich variety of reasons why Moscow deserves special compassionate treatment, unlike its escapees. It is often argued that Russia was treated unfairly and humiliated by the West at the end of the Cold War,<sup>12</sup> and that it is time we showed more understanding for their 'legitimate interests' in wherever. Similarly, 'Russia' won World War II for us at tremendous cost to itself, and we should be eternally grateful for that (in this narrative, no credit is due to its western neighbours Ukraine and Belarus for that outcome, by the way – their contributions and sacrifices, which per capita were much greater than Russia's, remain invisible and Moscow's regularly expanding estimates of the USSR's war losses are routinely attributed to Russia alone). And other arguments are deployed: the

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12 See Anne Applebaum, 'The myth of Russian humiliation', *Washington Post*, 17 Oct. 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-nato-pays-a-heavy-price-for-giving-russia-too-much-credits-true-achievement-under-threat/2014/10/17/5b3a6f2a-5617-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-nato-pays-a-heavy-price-for-giving-russia-too-much-credits-true-achievement-under-threat/2014/10/17/5b3a6f2a-5617-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html).

countries to Russia's immediate west are not real countries (Putin's view, but *sotto voce* accepted by many in the West); or not important countries; or certainly are less important than Iran, Syria, Iraq, or Islamic State; or belong to Russia's eternal sphere of influence; or are a bit, let's face it, fascist; or are strategically indefensible; or may irresponsibly trigger a nuclear attack on us of the kind Putin and his senior officials keep threatening us with; or would be far too costly to support economically, much less militarily; or mean far more to Russia than to us; and so on.

The threat posed by Putin's agenda of corralling as many former vassals as possible back into his sphere of influence through coercive means has become clearer to Western leaders and observers since he returned to the presidency in 2012. And it is a far-reaching agenda, which includes rehabilitating not just the 1945 Yalta settlement in Europe, but also the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the incorporation of the Baltic states, the Winter war against Finland in 1939–40 and the apparently permanent Finlandisation of Finland and, both domestically and (more cautiously) externally, the rehabilitation of Stalin as a great if at times somewhat harsh leader who saved Russia and the world.

Recently, the Kremlin has again initiated some modest measures commemorating the victims of Stalinism in this or that locality. But this endless cycle of official de- and re-Stalinisation has been rolling on for many decades under various Kremlin incumbents. Moscow uses this mechanism instrumentally (as with Poland in 2010) and, when the dividends decline, it reverses course again. The present highly selective mini-thaw on Stalin's repressions is probably part of Putin's overall campaign (including by evoking the era of the grand wartime coalition with Stalin) to appeal to the West for sanctions relief, to achieve a favourable outcome in East Ukraine and, more generally, to revise the Eurasian security order in Moscow's favour.

Despite the increasing glimmerings of comprehension, the Western response continues to be marked above all by disunity, lack of leadership, notably from Washington but also from Europe itself, and irresolution. As a result, Russia's probing of the limits has progressively expanded and, on present indications will probably continue to do so, with occasional pauses for a peace offensive.

With the invasion and annexation of Crimea and its hybrid war on eastern Ukraine, Moscow caught the West's attention more than with any of its earlier manoeuvres. The sanctions that were applied, initially not much more than symbolic, over time gathered in strength and bite. Though many influential Western leaders and governments, both to the left and the right, have wanted almost from the outset to phase out the sanctions, contrary to Moscow's reasonable expectations they have actually been expanded and extended. That was largely the fortuitous result of the shooting down of flight MH17 on 17 July 2014. Fortuitously again, but happily, the slump in energy prices and the consequent fall in the rouble and rise in inflation in Russia have greatly strengthened the sanctions' economic impact. The Russian leadership pretends that sanctions have not and will not lead to a change in its policies; and opinion polls in Russia suggest that Putin's high popularity has not yet been greatly affected. But there are numerous signs that he is eager to find a way to ease the sanctions, and that it is because of them that he has been holding back from bolder efforts to further extend his occupation of Ukrainian territory.

Nonetheless, over the longer run, Putin may not be satisfied with anything short of a compliant government in Kyiv, and control over a substantial part of Ukraine's eastern and southern regions such as would give Russia guaranteed access to Crimea and to Ukraine's battered military industrial complex. In the meantime, he will settle for a frozen conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, and constitutional changes that would enable him through his proxies in the 'people's republics' to block any westward strategic integration by Kyiv.

He probably calculates that what he not unreasonably sees as the weak, divided and naïve leadership of the West will finally agree to a settlement largely on his terms. As the Georgian case has repeatedly demonstrated, a frozen conflict can be unfrozen and further land or sovereignty sequentially confiscated at short notice. And, if frustrated in his expectations of the negotiation process, and/or if the moment were propitious owing, for example, to a Middle Eastern contingency or a sharp rise in the oil price, Putin could yet risk violent destabilisation of further provinces, followed by hybrid military incursions to 'restore stability'. Even if such moves were not a military success, they might be enough to finally force Ukraine into bankruptcy and internal disorder, which, in Putin's mind, would

be a great improvement on a Ukraine successfully reforming itself and integrating with Europe. It could also set the scene for further operations at a later date

The geopolitical tug-of-war over Ukraine has been at the heart of the broader contest between Russia and the West since Putin returned to the presidency. But there have also been skirmishes over other former republics, notably Georgia, Moldova and Armenia (see, in particular, Chapters 19 and 20, 'Towards a greater Putistan?', Parts 1 and 2; and, Chapter 29, 'Putin's Westpolitik: Back to the USSR'). Moreover, Russia has increased its efforts at destabilisation further afield, particularly in the Baltic/Scandinavian region: threatening overflights, military build-ups in adjacent territories, calls to ethnic Russian 'fellow-countrymen' (*sootchestvenniki*) to assert themselves, and financial and other support to anti-EU hard-right and hard-left parties.

But the main focus continues to be on the western former republics of the Soviet Union. Putin has been trying to build up counter-structures to the main European and Atlantic institutions, into which he would like to herd his balking former vassals, and over which he intends to maintain dominance and control. He would prefer to have in place in the former republics securely autocratic systems, preferably led by pro-Moscow strongmen who would be free to enjoy their own domestic power verticals but should, at the same time, respect the power vertical within Putin's new Soviet Union-lite.

Putin has apparently succeeded in pressuring Armenia back into the fold by playing on its justified fear of Azerbaijan's growing arms build-up. The most recent developments in Georgia and Moldova, the two former republics apart from Ukraine that are still actively pursuing European integration and which have been under pro-Western leaderships for over 13 and seven years respectively, will have given Moscow considerable encouragement. Its long campaigns against the ruling coalitions in both countries have eaten away at their popular support, while the poor economic performance of the European Union and the laborious process of integration reduce the attractions of the Brussels connection. The political elites have themselves undermined their cause by engaging in unedifying factional struggles and corruption. In Moldova, a sum equal to one-sixth of the country's GDP was spirited out of the banking system in one gigantic heist. These scandals and internecine jousts are typically murky, the hand of

Moscow is often suspected, but the involvement of pro-EU politicians is also apparent, and the population certainly so perceives it. If a pro-Western course is to be maintained in either country, a good deal of luck and some dubious tactics may be required. Meanwhile, Brussels is losing enthusiasm for the struggle, and the onset of a similar fatigue in relation to Ukraine is also becoming apparent.

But Moscow is not finding things all smooth sailing, either, as is demonstrated by the difficulties it is experiencing in drawing the former republics into its network of institutions. These counter-institutions, like erstwhile Soviet organisations, are made up to look like something they are not. The Eurasian Customs Union, the Eurasian Commission (EC) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) or Eurasian Union are intended to simulate the appearance of EU institutions, even to the point of usurping acronyms.<sup>13</sup> They are meant to seem as attractive and respectable as EU institutions, and are presented as constituent parts of Putin's broader vision of a multipolar world, with the EU, the Eurasian Union and China as three of those poles. To date, Putin's Customs Union has acted not as a trade-facilitating but as a trade-busting organisation, often highly prejudicial to the interests of the non-Russian members unless, as in Belarus's case, they are being specially favoured by Moscow. With the sharp slide in energy prices and the rouble, Eurasian Union members, particularly in the former Soviet Central Asian republics, have suffered further severe economic difficulties arising from their close connections with Moscow.

On the military/security side, there is the Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO, a poor man's successor to the Warsaw Pact. Currently only six of the former 15 Soviet republics are members of the CSTO, though Moscow continues to hope for foreign adherents. Under all of its leaderships, Ukraine has steadfastly refused to join the CSTO, and most other former republics have been similarly reluctant, or ambivalent at best.

What all these organisations share, apart from a strong whiff of Moscow's Soviet nostalgia and evident intent to dominate them, is a tendency either to shed members or to signally fail to attract them in

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13 For a measured survey of some of these institutions, see Nicu Popescu, 'Eurasian Union: The real, the imaginary and the likely', *European Union Institute for Security Studies Chaillot Papers*, no. 132, 9 Sep. 2014, [www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely/](http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely/).

the first place. Some of the Central Asians, poised between China and Russia and close to dangerous Islamist currents and disorder further to the south, feel more heavily dependent on Russia for security, as well as employment opportunities and remittances. While they broadly welcome China's burgeoning economic presence amongst them, they also want to be able to have a hedge against Beijing and, with Washington's diminishing profile in the region, Russia remains the only option for that role. But the western republics, even the less Westernising of them, have been more reluctant to sign up for Moscow's projects and, when they do join, are fairly determined not to be rubber stamps. So, in Putin's contest with the West, the acronyms have been less than a dazzling success. But getting all the former republics into the Eurasian Union nonetheless remains Putin's central objective, which he is pursuing with dogged, coercive and at times brutal determination.

Despite the evident unattractiveness of Russia's imperial structures, especially for its western neighbours, the East–West contest for Ukraine continues to be asymmetrical. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has not elicited a response in kind from the West, even to the extent of providing Kyiv with some serious weaponry with which to reduce the military advantage the proxy forces enjoy.

Since early 2015, nonetheless, Russia's war in Ukraine has slowed, thanks to the increasing effectiveness of Ukraine's military, and the slump in the Russian economy stemming from the collapse in oil and gas prices, which has accentuated Moscow's fear of further sanctions. Another limit on the fighting has been the Minsk process, which has produced two ceasefire agreements, though both of them have been extensively violated, mainly by the Russian and proxy forces. Given its desperate economic plight, Ukraine badly needs that partial respite.

But Minsk I and II are flawed documents, which force Kyiv into accepting the partial legitimisation of the self-styled 'people's republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk (a designation that is strongly redolent of Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe at the end of World War II – something that passes curiously unnoticed in Western media and, one suspects, further up the line). Minsk also concedes legitimacy to the police states erected in the people's republics, and to the brutal militias and security formations they operate. Moreover, Minsk II requires that Kyiv should reach agreement with the 'people's republics'

on various modalities of their operations, including their 'elections'. Minsk II seems to envisage this legitimisation as a pre-condition for Ukraine's regaining control over its eastern border with Russia, which is currently largely controlled by the proxies, in cooperation with Moscow.

In the meantime, which may last for years or decades, Moscow is able to introduce military reinforcements and weaponry whenever it chooses to do so, while denying the purported enforcers of the agreements in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) access to the area to observe what is going on. The Minsk agreements also require Kyiv to introduce constitutional changes to 'decentralise' their regional administration, which Moscow and its proxies are aggressively trying to interpret as 'federalisation'. Why an attacked country should be under pressure from the international community to change its constitution to accommodate its attackers remains a mystery. Minsk II additionally mandates that, despite its eastern regions having been devastated by Russian and proxy aggression, Kyiv should pay for the upkeep of the people remaining there whose lives and livelihoods have been disrupted by the fighting. (For more on the shortcomings and operations of the Minsk agreements see, in particular, Chapter 30, 'Peace in our time' and Chapter 34 'Ukraine, out of sight'.)

What the weak Western negotiation at Minsk and the even weaker enforcement of the agreements indicate is that Western support for Kyiv is half-hearted and, more generally, that the West under current leadership is not determined enough to defend the post-1991 security order (see Chapter 31 'Ukraine conflict exposes Western weakness on Russia'). As in the negotiations after Russia's invasion of Georgia, the Western response is primarily in the hands of the European Union, former French President Sarkozy in Georgia and now, in the case of Ukraine, German Chancellor Angela Merkel with President François Hollande of France as her 2iC. Merkel highlights the weakness of her position by repeatedly intoning that there can be no military solution to the conflict, despite the obvious fact that Moscow has repeatedly and successfully imposed military solutions of its own in Ukraine as well as elsewhere. Hollande, for his part, regularly betrays his eagerness for an early easing of Western sanctions in pursuit of a political 'solution'.

Merkel has, however, shown determination in defending the sanctions, despite the wobbling on that subject in a number of EU countries as well as within German business lobbies and her domestic coalition partners, the Social Democrats. But she, too, seems at times to weary of the struggle and to wish to restore normal relations with Moscow.

On 4 September 2015, the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom reached agreements with a consortium led by two large German companies and one related Austrian company to build a second Nord Stream gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. Like the first one, which was controversially sponsored by former German Chancellor and close Putin crony, Gerhard Schröder, this second gas pipeline has no economic justification. It will, however, increase Russia's ability to use gas deliveries (and pricing) as a weapon to coerce and economically damage Ukraine and other Eastern European states. It will enable some German as well as other big Western European energy companies to make money, but will also increase Germany and Europe's dependence on Russian gas. This appears to be in contravention of EU legislation and policies favouring diversification of energy supplies. Ukraine and Slovakia, among other countries, protested angrily against what Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, often a pro-Kremlin voice but in this deal a loser, described as a 'betrayal'.<sup>14</sup> It also appears to be flagrantly out of step with the EU's sluggishly ongoing anti-trust case against Gazprom. In short, this is Putin's 'business as usual' at its geopolitically most damaging, with German actors including Schröder and the ex-Stasi agent and close Putin crony, Matthias Warnig, prominently involved.<sup>15</sup>

For his part, President Obama has seemed happy to outsource this aspect of the Western agenda in large part to Merkel and Hollande, while the United Kingdom, which was once a Western leader, and Poland, which was active in resolving the Orange crisis in 2004–05 and in launching and maintaining the AA negotiations with Ukraine, are both sidelined from the process altogether.

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14 See Georgi Gotev, 'Slovak PM calls Nord Stream expansion deal "a betrayal"', *EurActiv*, 10 Sep. 2015, [www.euractiv.com/sections/energy/slovak-pm-calls-nord-stream-expansion-deal-betrayal-317531](http://www.euractiv.com/sections/energy/slovak-pm-calls-nord-stream-expansion-deal-betrayal-317531).

15 For a meticulous analysis, see Vladimir Socor's series of articles in The Jamestown Foundation *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10, 14, 15, 17, 21 Sep. 2015, [www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/).

Given the short-winded Western approach to the issues, Putin probably feels that a bit of patience and skilled manoeuvring on his part will be enough to get the sanctions off his back, without his making any major concessions on Ukraine. And now the long-running disaster in Syria and the European migration crisis have presented him with rich new possibilities to shift the agenda and undermine the fragile Western unity on Ukraine.

Putin is not just eager to restore Moscow's sphere of interest, but also to dismantle his opponent's. As he is reported to have told a NATO secretary-general, his interest is not in having a good relationship with that organisation but, rather, in destroying it. Brussels's growing set of crises and chronic governance dilemmas must give him hope of doing something similar with the European Union. In addition to driving wedges, as Moscow leaders have always done, between Western Europe and the United States, he is actively supporting all the disruptive Eurosceptic forces within the European Union to both right and left on the political spectrum.

Clearly Putin's military intervention into Syria has its own regional rationale – to defend the Assad regime, to strengthen the Russian presence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, to demonstrate his capacity for loyalty to old allies (by contrast with the United States in Egypt, for example, another country that he is courting) and, perhaps, even to inflict some pain on Islamic State. But it is likely that any effort he makes against Islamic State will be intended to be sold as a service for which a large fee can reasonably be sought, including linkage to other issues, probably involving Ukraine and the security architecture of Europe. For its part, the present US administration, whose strategy for supporting 'moderate' Sunni forces to combat Islamic State in Syria has sustained serious reverses, seems prepared on occasion to accept Russian linkages, for example on missile defence, and to use Eastern Europe coinage to pay for them.

The refugee crisis in Europe is also manna from heaven for Putin. Anything that preoccupies, sorely troubles, divides and imposes costs on the European Union, is in his interest, and the migration issue does all of that handsomely. It is also likely to strengthen hard-right political forces within European countries with which he is keen to engage politically. The Schengen zone and mechanisms, to which former Western Soviet republics desire intensely to be granted access,

are under threat, and Western Europe's enlargement fatigue is always prone to being exacerbated by signs of Polish plumbers or other undesirables swarming across European borders. Despite the looming threat from Russia and desperate lobbying from Eastern member states and would-be members, at the Riga EU summit in May 2015, visa-free travel agreements were not delivered or even clearly foreshadowed for Georgia and Ukraine; nor did the summit hold out any prospect of their becoming EU members.<sup>16</sup>

The chaotic procession of large crowds of people through successive countries on and just inside the EU perimeter has touched off a new round of recriminations between some western and eastern EU states, particularly Hungary. The Orban regime in Budapest is understandably seen as unattractive by other EU capitals, not least for its flirtation with Moscow and its backsliding from democratic values. But the fear of large, uncontrolled inflows of Middle Eastern migrants is not peculiar to Viktor Orban or Hungary. Many other countries in Eastern Europe have a similar reluctance to open their borders to elemental migration movements, especially from Muslim countries, and similar attitudes are widespread and growing in much of Western Europe, even in those countries once renowned for their liberal tolerance.

Unfortunately, the debate within Europe on what to do about the crisis quickly took on tones of recrimination, haughty condemnation and competitive moral beauty. Germany, proud of its *Willkommenskultur*, seemed to see an opportunity to finally put paid to its burden of historical guilt by making a dramatic gesture of atonement, with various remarkable figures for an annual intake in 2015 being invoked

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16 Since then, there has been progress towards freer travel by citizens of both countries, who thus join Moldovans, who have had access to visa-free travel since 2014. But implementation for Ukraine and Georgia still has to be completed, and even then there will continue to be some restrictions and downsides. After the recent immigration turmoil in Europe, the prospects of any breakthrough to free movement may continue to be clouded (Robert Schwartz, 'Visa-free travel for eastern Europe, but with a lot of question marks', *DW*, 26 Dec. 2015, [www.dw.com/en/visa-free-travel-for-eastern-europe-but-with-a-lot-of-question-marks/a-18933243](http://www.dw.com/en/visa-free-travel-for-eastern-europe-but-with-a-lot-of-question-marks/a-18933243); Tamar Svanidze, 'Visa-free travel with EU: Green light to Georgia, but not for unlimited travel', *Georgia Today*, 29 Jan. 2016, [georgiatoday.ge/news/2804/Visa-Free-Travel-with-EU%3A-Green-Light-to-Georgia,-but-not-for-Unlimited-Travel](http://georgiatoday.ge/news/2804/Visa-Free-Travel-with-EU%3A-Green-Light-to-Georgia,-but-not-for-Unlimited-Travel)).

with apparent confidence, though sober reflection has since started to kick in.<sup>17</sup> In the event, the total figure for immigration into Germany in 2015 approached one million.

Eastern EU members and non-EU border states, in particular, were called upon to take fair shares of the burden. But virtually none of them have recent traditions of or infrastructure for major immigrant flows, and they are fearful of sourcing them from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> Some smaller front-line countries proclaimed their noble intentions, but wilted when tens of thousands descended upon them. ‘Old Europe’ seemed at times hasty and overzealous with its moral indignation. Austria’s President Werner Faymann condemned Orban for sending trainloads of would-be migrants off to camps to be registered, which, he declared, was comparable with the darkest pages in Europe’s recent history; i.e. Orban was behaving like Himmler dispatching trainloads of people to Nazi death camps.<sup>19</sup>

The migration avalanche found the European Union unprepared, politically and organisationally. The public discussion seemed at times to lack considered ethical and pragmatic principles. It cannot yet be an internationally justiciable and inalienable human right that all citizens of the world should live in Germany if they so desire. Nor is it sustainable if they choose to do so in their hundreds of thousands by direct action in breach of the laws of various transit countries, with a chant of ‘Germany, Germany, Germany’ by way of an asylum application. Little is known reliably of the precise composition of the flows: some, perhaps many, may prove to be economic migrants from as far away as Pakistan or Bangladesh, and many others ‘asylum shoppers’, who have left safe but unattractive camps in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon. Be that as it may, there is obviously an urgent

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17 See Bojan Pancevski, ‘“Moral” Germany cracks as the world turns up on its doorstep’, *Sunday Times*, 20 Sep. 2015.

18 For thoughtful reflections on the East/West divide within the European Union on this issue, see the article by the Austrian analyst Gustav Gressel, ‘Understanding eastern European attitudes on refugees’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 11 Sep. 2015, [www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_understanding\\_eastern\\_european\\_attitudes\\_on\\_refugees4019](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_understanding_eastern_european_attitudes_on_refugees4019); see also Radko Hokovský, ‘What Central Europeans want to know about the refugee crisis’, *EU Observer*, 18 Sep. 2015, [euobserver.com/opinion/130321](http://euobserver.com/opinion/130321).

19 See ‘Österreichs Kanzler vergleicht Orbáns Flüchtlingspolitik mit Holocaust’ [Austria’s chancellor compares Orban’s migration policy with the Holocaust], *Spiegel Online*, 12 Sep. 2015, [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/werner-faymann-ueber-ungarn-fluechtlingspolitik-erinnert-an-holocaust-a-1052448.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/werner-faymann-ueber-ungarn-fluechtlingspolitik-erinnert-an-holocaust-a-1052448.html).

need to reduce the inflow to manageable proportions; and to pursue pre-emptive solutions, for example, by more generous international funding of UNHCR and refugee facilities in the region of origin. For the European Union to establish a well-crafted policy will take time, and less moral posturing. Germany may need to limit publicity for its generous *Willkommenskultur* to eliminate the huge pull factor that has been generated in the existing refugee camps of the Middle East. And much else will be required. Even the drastic solution of imposing compulsory migrant quotas on unwilling EU members by majority vote is inadequate to deal with the numbers who are already in Europe.

In the meantime, there will be a widely shared longing for a quick fix. And that is where Putin's Syria policies will enjoy further scope. For the Obama administration to again find much-needed support from Moscow in its struggle with another flailing Syria policy, and for the European Union to see some chance to stem the human tide will be strong temptations to do business with Mr Putin. Ukraine has been poised for some time already on the brink of bankruptcy and has received only modest direct support from the European Union, less than one-tenth that granted to Greece. The huge expense that the existing flow of migrants will generate will meanwhile weaken both the will and capacity for the European Union to do more. Putin will wish to exploit this opportunity to present Russia as the key to resolving all of the West's Syrian dilemmas in exchange for sanctions relief for his struggling economy, and a new approach to Eurasian security that recognises Russia's 'legitimate interests' in neighbouring states.<sup>20</sup> If things were to develop along those lines, it will be even more difficult to maintain the present fragile status quo in Ukraine into the future, much less to resolve it in a way that will preserve Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity, and prevent other countries from sharing its fate.<sup>21</sup>

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20 See Pavel Felgenhauer, 'Vyrastet li Yalta na oblomkakh Sirii?', *Novaya Gazeta*, 21 Sep. 2015, [www.novayagazeta.ru/politicvs/70024.html?print=1](http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politicvs/70024.html?print=1).

21 The foregoing paragraphs on Putin's Syria involvement and the migration crisis in Europe, like most of this chapter, were written in September 2015. As with other chapters in the book, I have refrained from altering judgements, and have focused more on editorial adjustments for style, clarity and conformity with other parts of the text, as well as a few factual updates. There is further discussion of Syria to December 2015 in Chapter 33, 'Making nice and making enemies' and on the migration crisis, also to December 2015, in Chapter 34, 'Ukraine, out of sight'.

The essays in this book will supply a longer and more substantiated version of the argument set out here about Russia's efforts to reclaim its Western neighbourhood. It should be noted that they were written not only at different times, but also for different audiences. Some were aimed at scholars, some at senior officials concerned with relevant policy matters, and some at the international affairs community more broadly. But some, probably most, are aimed at the general reader, who may follow international affairs regularly out of interest, while lacking a closer understanding of the particular countries under scrutiny. To avoid assuming too much knowledge, the basics about the people, places, conflicts and wider international backdrop involved were sketched in and recapitulated in sequential articles. The articles represent a mixture of genres: some are terser and aim to be punchier; some are longer, more measured, and spelt out in greater detail; some were footnoted or hyperlinked; while others, intended for journals of opinion rather than scholarly publications, were not.

There is inevitably some repetition. But, given the limited coverage of Eastern Europe in much of the West, and the fog of misunderstanding that skilful and intense Russian propaganda has succeeded in producing, especially in recent years (see Chapter 27, 'Russian disinformation and Western misconceptions'), some repetition may not be entirely a bad thing. I have in any case decided not to revise the original documents much, above all to avoid any suspicion of seeking to insert retrospective wisdom. Some minor inaccuracies, typos, infelicities and other lapses have been excised or corrected, but judgements have been left to stand, or not, the test of time.

The articles present the way it all looked when they were written. The overwhelming message of the story is that the largest country on earth has been bent for some time on righting what it sees as the wrongs of the post-Cold War settlement to the detriment of its western neighbours, of Europe as a whole and the West as a whole; and that the West has been doing too little to contain that threat.

Under Putinist rule, Moscow's objective has been explicitly to achieve a dominant position for itself on the Eurasian continent not as a modern, securely post-imperial and enlightened power, but as a hypernationalist neo-Soviet state with fascist characteristics, intent on preserving much of Stalin's legacy in the heart of a Europe that had hoped, and indeed assumed, that its follies and disasters of the

twentieth century had been finally put behind it. Till very recently, the West was not paying enough attention to this undisguised challenge from Moscow, and perhaps either did not see, or refused to face up to, the blindingly obvious. It still fails to do so adequately. The West's sustained economic weakness since the global financial crisis, and the populism, short-termism and cumbersome and indifferent decision-making (think EU responses to Russian policy or the US Presidential election circus) that increasingly characterise its governance, all suggest that its performance is unlikely to improve any time soon.

It is to be hoped, that Kyiv's reforming coalition, which is wilting and flailing under the pressure of the war, the severe economic downturn of 2014–15 and its own declining popularity and internal divisions, can see out its travails, which will not end soon,<sup>22</sup> and that Ukraine can rise above its colonial miseries, including the many millions dead as a result of Moscow's past policies, and escape into a decent, modern European normal, not yet another retrograde and reactionary version of Russian imperial domination. It can perhaps also be hoped, if not with much confidence, that Kyiv may even tug Moscow westward in its wake, rather than vice versa.

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22 Since this was written, the Poroshenko-led governing coalition has reconfigured itself with Yatseniak being replaced as prime minister by Poroshenko's close ally, Volodymyr Groysman, a cautious reformer and observant Jew (Cnaan Liphshiz, 'Jewish wunderkind turned Ukrainian Prime Minister – who is Volodymyr Groysman?', *Haaretz*, 14 Apr. 2016, [www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.714532](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.714532)).

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