

Article

The Russian Pursuit of Regional Hegemony

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Abstract

During the Yeltsin era, the Russian Federation possessed neither the will nor the capability to assume a dominant role in its interactions with its neighbours. Vladimir Putin, however, assumed office with the aim of redressing the precipitous decline in Russia's presence in the post-Soviet region. Highlights of this policy include efforts to project Russian influence through the establishment (or strengthening) of regional structures, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and most recently (and most importantly) the 2015 inauguration of the Eurasian Economic Union. This article argues that these efforts simultaneously serve as a means of demonstrating Russia as the hegemonic leader of a regional bloc, a position that validates the Kremlin's claim to be a great power. This endeavour, however, has been challenged by a number of factors, including the regional and global aftereffects of the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea, as well as the Putin presidency's increasing tendency to conceive of Eurasian integration as a civilizational project.

Keywords

Russia, Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russian World, Great Power, Regional Integration, Soft Power

Introduction

Scholars of the Russian political system are close to unanimous in stressing the importance to the Kremlin that Russia be perceived as a great power, a designation that also serves as an essential component of domestic legitimation. A key question, however, has been the credentials that Russia possesses to lay a credible claim to this status. In this context, the presidency of Vladimir Putin has increasingly sought to expand Russian influence in the post-Soviet republics. The effort is being made to cast Russia as the hegemonic regional leader in a multipolar world in which power is seen as increasingly dispersed with the emergence of regional blocs that challenge Western dominance. To these ends, the Kremlin has sought to strengthen and expand the role of regional structures, including

the Collective Treaty Security Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and most recently, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In particular, the EEU has been depicted as an integration project that could serve as a counterweight to the European Union (EU) and position Russia as a major independent source of power.

This article, however, argues that this endeavour is fraught with difficulty in part because it seeks to fulfil multiple goals that are not necessarily compatible. On the one hand, the Russian leadership views extending its influence in the post-Soviet space, as a national security issue that provides a means of protection against external threats, notably those that are perceived to emanate from the West. This endeavour is also perceived to enhance Russia's position as a regional power in a world in which globalization has accentuated the trend toward multipolarity and the 'formation of new centres of economic and political power' (Foreign Policy Concept, 2016). On the other hand, the Kremlin's regional projects—whatever their intrinsic merits—have simultaneously been advanced as a means to the end of demonstrating Russia's regional ascendancy and its consequent ability to negotiate with the West from a position of greater strength. Here, the Putin presidency continues in the time honoured Russian tradition of preoccupation, and in fact, obsession with the West, as a foreign policy priority. Nonetheless, while Russian discourse is framed in response to the West, the content of the debate as to the relationship of Russia to Europe, has increasingly moved to embrace a discourse that not only celebrates Russia's civilizational identity as a great power, but has also promoted Russian values as a superior alternative to those of a decadent, hedonistic West (see Neumann, 2016).

This rhetoric aspires to a universal attraction but it is nonetheless rooted in a Russocentric vision that traces national identity to a Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) in which ethnic Russians constitute the core constituent. The Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 provided an opportunity for the Kremlin to reclaim Crimea, with Putin justifying the action as a defence of ethnic Russians. This opportunistic action was foreshadowed by the willingness of the West to selectively support independence movements—notably in the case of Kosovo in 1999—but it nonetheless violated Russia's previous steadfast mantra as to the inviolable character of state sovereignty. For Putin, events in Ukraine were not merely a foreign policy issue. They indicated a potential Colour Revolution scenario that could be replayed in Russia. Moreover, as Aleksandr Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lygtyvnenko (2012,1) noted well before the onset of the Maidan events, the maintenance of Russian influence in Ukraine has been viewed by the Kremlin as an existential (and civilizational) imperative. Both of these developments, unsurprisingly, aroused concern in the post-Soviet space, although to a differential degree. Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia, supported the United Nations Gen-

eral Assembly resolution passed in March 2014 that upheld the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The measure was opposed by Russia, Armenia, and Belarus, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan did not vote.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief discussion of the evolution of Russian policy toward the post-Soviet region since the onset of the Russian Federation. Secondly, I turn to an examination of the main institutional structures that Russia has sought to develop (or to mould) as a means of projecting influence, with a primary focus on the EEU and the SCO. The third section assesses the effectiveness of the tools that the Kremlin has sought to use in promoting its regional integration projects: these include methods that seek to employ positive incentives, such as the use of soft power techniques and the attempt to project an attractive image, economic benefits, and the offer of security guarantees, as well as hard power attempts at outright compellence. The conclusion examines Russia's regional strategy in the context of its broader foreign policy goals.

The Evolution of Russian Policy toward the Post-Soviet Space

The original attitude of the Boris Yeltsin presidency toward the post-Soviet region veered from indifference to outside hostility. Yeltsin was instrumental, along with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus, in orchestrating the demise of the Soviet Union. A key motivation was to remove Mikhail Gorbachev, the then president of the Soviet Union, as a competitor. But Yeltsin also shared the widespread sentiment of the pro-Western segment of the Russian political elite that the Soviet republics constituted a burden to Russia. Contrary to standard assumptions of empire, this view saw Russia as an 'internal colony' that was preyed upon by the less developed (or poorly endowed) periphery. Although the Belovezh Accord, signed at Belovezhskaya Pushcha in Belarus in December 1991, provided for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), it became clear that this was a largely powerless structure that served primarily to sever Russia from its perceived appendages. The subsequent history of the still existent CIS has been undistinguished, with former Soviet republics (apart from the Baltic states) drifting in and out of an organization that has little substantive authority.

The Yeltsin presidency soon discovered, however, that it was neither possible nor prudent to ignore the post-Soviet region. The 1992 Tashkent Treaty of Collective Security laid the groundwork for the emergence of the CSTO. The origins of the SCO lay in the 1996 Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions signed by the so-called 'Shanghai Five' (China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan). But a variety of factors, including political upheaval, economic collapse, and Yeltsin's chronic health problems, precluded the institutionalization of structural arrangements with the CIS states. The Russian leadership also soon

came to realize that, whatever their original attitudes toward independence, the regional political elites rapidly embraced the concept of state sovereignty, proving to be highly self-interested in their relationship with Russia.

Putin came to the Kremlin in 2000 with a greater sense of purpose and vision for Russian relations with the post-Soviet region. His presidency also enjoyed the benefits of a vastly improved economy with commensurately expanded Russian capabilities. The CSTO was established in 2002 with the aim of coordinating security cooperation with the CIS states (although membership in the organization has been limited to Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan an occasional member). Moscow has sought to present the CSTO as a counterpart (and counterbalance) to NATO and has pushed its somewhat reluctant partners for the development of a rapid deployment force to intervene in instances of conflict. To date, however, the CSTO has never been involved in any real military action (although it holds annual training exercises). Russia itself did not seek CSTO member states' assistance in its 2008 war with Georgia, and Russia similarly did not push for CSTO involvement in 2010 when ethnic conflict broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. Despite some interest in strengthening the CSTO as a regional organization, the Russian Federation has preferred to become involved in conflict situations unilaterally, in a manner that is presumably perceived as more demonstrative of great power status. For their part, the other CSTO states have been highly ambivalent about Russia's 2008 war with Georgia as well as its 2014 military operation in Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea (see Kropatcheva, 2016). The tensions between CSTO members, as well as the pivotal role of Russia in the structure, were starkly highlighted in the fall of 2016 when its members failed to approve the transfer of the chair of the organization from its long time Russian incumbent, Nikolai Bordyuzha, to an Armenian candidate.

During Putin's first year in office in 2000, the Shanghai Five was reconstituted as the SCO (also including Uzbekistan as a member). The Kremlin had paid very limited attention to the Shanghai Five in the Yeltsin era, leaving China as the driving force behind the organization. The Putin presidency sought to redress this imbalance, while focusing on the structure as a means to preserve Russia's presence in Central Asia. In 2000, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) was also created with the goal of creating a common economic space. Although five states signed the treaty (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), only three—Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—agreed to the conditions established after lengthy negotiations for an actual customs union in 2010. Putin subsequently outlined the concept of the EEU (although the original idea was suggested by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev in 1994) in a 2011 article in *Izvestia* (Putin, 2011). The Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Ka-

zakhstan went into effect in 2012, while on 1 January 2015 the EEU was formally established as a broader integration project that includes the free flow of goods, services, capital, and labour. Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan were the founding members, while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the union in Spring 2015. At this point, Tajikistan is contemplating applying for membership.

Putin's 2005 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly lamented the passing of the Soviet Union as a 'major geopolitical disaster of the century' (Putin, 2005). Although this remark has often been interpreted as Putin's desire to restore the Soviet Union, his reference, rather, was to the multiple adverse consequences—humanitarian, economic, institutional—of the event. This is not to say, however, that the Kremlin elite is not concerned to restore Russian influence over the region. Then President Dmitri Medvedev gave voice to the sentiment in 2008 when he referred to the post-Soviet area as a 'sphere of privileged interest' (Medvedev, 2008). In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Western influence expanded rapidly into the post-Soviet region, an event that the Kremlin was largely powerless to forestall. The presidential administration of Bill Clinton placed an especial emphasis on democracy promotion and the construction of civil society in the post-Soviet space. The Putin presidency was deeply alarmed by the outbreak of the Colour Revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 (and to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan in 2005), which were interpreted as a deliberate attempt at regime change, that was simultaneously aimed at Russia itself (see Wilson, 2010). Even more ominous, in the eyes of the Kremlin, was the interest of Georgia and Ukraine in joining NATO, a potential outcome viewed as a security threat. Originally, Russia was neutral toward the attempts of the European Union (EU) to forge economic links with the post-Soviet states (specifically Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) through its European Neighborhood Policy. In 2004, Putin even went as far as to announce, in the midst of the events surrounding the Orange Revolution, that Russia had no objections to Ukraine joining the EU (Tsygankov, 2016a, 164). Over time, however, Moscow came to view the EU, like NATO, as a threat to its interests (Gretskiy, Treshchenkov & Golubev, 2014; Tsygankov, 2015). Putin's response was to promote the EEU as a counter weight.

The EEU as a Structure of Regional Integration

When Putin (2011) proposed the EEU (then labeled the Eurasian Union), he set forth a largely economic rationale for its existence. He stressed the importance of extensive trade liberalization and explicitly referenced the EU as a model of emulation, as well as eventual partnership. Putin denied that the project indicated an effort to restore the Soviet Union, pointedly noting that it served the national interests of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. He did, however, evoke the notion that a dynamic Eurasian Union could become a regional pole that served as a bridge

between Europe and the Asia Pacific Region. As Richard Sakwa (2015, 561) has stressed, Putin insisted that the EEU was not a competitor but a complement to European integration. This notion was strongly reminiscent of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's (1987) evocation of the 'Common European Home' and also reflected themes raised periodically by the Kremlin, calling for the promotion of a Euro-Atlantic security community extending from 'Vancouver to Vladivostok' and a parallel 'harmonious economic community stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok' (Medvedev 2009; Putin 2010). Putin's presentation was not devoid of an underlying geopolitical rationale but his analysis was set within the standard assumptions of functionalist explanations of integration.

This lofty vision has not been not matched by reality. Four years later, the EEU was inaugurated in the midst of an economic downturn that was intensified by the impact of Western sanctions. Both Lukashenko and Nazarbaev have turned out to be staunch defenders of their perceived interests. Although in some ways, its most dedicated proponent, Nazarbaev has insisted that the EEU function solely as an economic not a political structure. Citing the predominance of state sovereignty, Nazarbaev has continuously reiterated that Kazakhstan will not hesitate to withdraw from the EEU if it feels that its interests are threatened. (It was Nazarbaev as well who insisted on the inclusion of the term economic into the title of the EEU, rather than the more ambiguous Eurasian Union) (see Samruk Kazyna, n.d.; Kazakhstan 2050, n.d.) Although less emphatic than Nazarbaev, Lukashenko has similarly described Belarusian participation in the EEU as a matter of cost-benefit calculations: 'Belarus' position on the future EEU will depend on what it can derive; if it is nothing, then what is the point to this alliance?' (Cheng, 2015). The Kremlin was successful in persuading Yerevan to forego its previously concluded Free Trade Agreement with the EU in favor of EEU accession. Both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (and potentially Tajikistan as a prospective member) benefit from the EEU's policy allowing the free movement of labor as well as relying on Russia as a source of energy and subsidies. Remittances from migrants working in Russia are estimated, for example, to be about 31.5 percent of Kyrgyz GDP (Tarr, 2016, 16). For land-locked Armenia, immersed in a decades long conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the willingness of Russia to serve as a security guarantor was likely a paramount consideration in membership.

Western (as well as some Russian) analysts are divided as to whether the EEU can succeed as an economic union. Dmitri Trenin (2011, 153-158) argued prior to its establishment that Russia could never succeed in any integration projects in the CIS region in the absence of permanent subsidies. Western economists generally concur that Russian subsidies to the EEU are an attractive inducement to other members but detrimental to Russia itself, an argument with striking parallels to

those put forward by Russian Westernizers in the Gorbachev era (see Roberts & Moshes, 2016; Hartwell, 2016). The EEU is seen as problematic in forcing the other member states to conform to Moscow's relatively high tariff levels, which in the case of Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, are higher than the levels agreed upon as a condition of entry into the WTO. Tarr (2016), however, notes that Russian tariff levels are set to fall 40-50 percent as a consequence of Russia's accession to the WTO. Neo-liberal economists such as Anders Aslund (2016) further stress that the EEU fails to comply with global norms and values (as exemplified by the global financial institutions) and reinforces obsolete Soviet style standards.

Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the Russian narrative on the EEU has evolved to place an increasing stress on its civilizational component. Putin's original vision foresaw the Eurasian Union interacting with the EU in a harmonious and mutually beneficial fashion. On the European side, moreover, the project was considered, at least by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, 2012), as potentially beneficial to the region. Current discourse, however, has become far more polarized, with Russian analyses constructed in what Alena Vieira (2016, 570) has described as a zero-sum conception of relations with the EU. Commentary emanating from Moscow has come to depict the EEU as an Eurasianist structure, embodying a distinct—and explicitly anti-Western—array of norms and values. In this context, the rationale for the EEU has become more associated with a civilizational perspective that celebrates the primacy of Russian culture and values (defined in distinction to the West), in which the Russian World extends beyond Russia's borders into the Eurasian space (see Laurelle, 2015). In a speech given to the 2014 Seliger Youth Forum, for example, Putin associated the EEU with the 'Eurasian idea' and the 'greater Russian world' (Akapov, 2014). This idea is popular amongst a number of Russian political commentators. Alexander Lukin, for example, argues that a 'clash of values' exists between the West and the Eurasian region. In his view, economic considerations are important, but secondary to the Eurasian integration project (Lukin 2014, 54) What he considers really distinctive and a unifying principle is the common values shared by the peoples of the region—commitment to family, traditional morality, a belief in religion, etc.—that contrast markedly with the relativistic permissive values of the West (Also see Lukin, 2016).

The idea of the EEU as an extension of the Russian World, however, has predictably been poorly received outside of Russia by the other regional elites. Lukashenko noted that the term aroused a sense of alarm in the post-Soviet space, while stressing that Belarus was not a constituent part of the Russian World but a sovereign state (Viera, 2016, 572; Skriba, 2016, 613). The Kazakh political elite, for its part, reacted negatively to other remarks that Putin made at the 2014 Seli-

ger Youth Forum that asserted that Kazakhstan lacked the historical experience of statehood, as well as comments by Vladimir Zhinovosky, the head of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party, who called for the creation of a Russian 'Central Asian Federal Region' within the geographical territory of Kazakhstan (AkZhaiyk, 2014; RFE/RFL, 2014). Kazakhstan's interest in moving itself further from the Russian orbit is also indicated in the decision—contemplated for years—to move from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet by 2025.

Russia and the SCO

Although the Kremlin seeks to present the Central Asian region as within its exclusive sphere of influence, the reality is more complicated. Russian hegemony is currently being challenged by China, although this is still largely a prospective scenario. In response, the Kremlin has sought to construct a narrative that posits a shared Russian-Chinese division of responsibilities and roles within the framework of the SCO. Moscow is described as the guarantor of security in Central Asia while Beijing provides the capital for economic development. The result, according to a June 2015 Valdai Discussion Club paper (Bordachev, 2016) is a 'great win-win game' for both states in Central Asia. But this optimistic assessment obscures the competitive aspects of the Russian-Chinese relationship in the region. China does not object to Russian security ties through the CSTO and both states share a convergent interest in the maintenance of stability and the suppression of terrorism and insurgency in the region. However, China has increasingly chafed at Russian efforts to constrict its attempts to launch economic development projects through the mechanism of the SCO. The Chinese delegation has routinely sought the establishment of a SCO development bank, as well as the implementation of a regional free trade zone. The Kremlin, however, has continuously sought to dampen these initiatives (see Gabuev, 2015a).

Beijing's frustration with the SCO as a means of economic cooperation was apparently a factor in its decision to launch the Silk Road project (also known as One Belt One Road [OBOR] or *yi dai yi lu*) (Gabuev, 2015b; Lukin, 2015, 4). It was presumably not a coincidence that Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the land based segment of the initiative during a 2013 visit to Kazakhstan. Unlike the EEU, which seeks to function as an economic community within a prescribed geographic area, the Silk Road initiative is better conceived, as David Arase (2015, 33) has noted as 'policy led trade facilitation.' Much of the emphasis of this still incipient development has been on the construction of large scale infrastructure projects, financed by the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Initially, the Kremlin chose to ignore the Silk Road project, while it declined the Chinese invitation to join the AIIB.¹ Eventually, however, Moscow

¹ In this sense, the response of the Kremlin paralleled that of the United States, which also chose to ignore the Silk Road initiative. The United States, however, has been openly antagonistic toward the

realized that its options were limited, and that it had no realistic alternative but to seek an accommodation with Beijing. At their May 2015 summit meeting, Putin and Xi released a specific joint declaration that noted their commitment to coordinating the planning processes of the EEU with that of the Silk Road initiative, as well as to implement joint ventures (in reality Chinese projects within the EEU geographic space). In June 2016, China signed an agreement with the EEU (although the 2015 declaration was bilaterally concluded between Russia and China) to begin negotiations on economic cooperation, with talks estimated to last at least ten years in the initial phrase (Gabuev & Shtraks, 2016).

In comparison to Russia, both Belarus and Kazakhstan reacted with enthusiasm to the Silk Road initiative. Kazakhstan is the biggest recipient of Chinese FDI in the former Soviet Union, having received some US 22 billion dollars in investment from 1991 to 2013. In 2014-2015, China and Kazakhstan signed two additional packages of agreements, the first for 14 billion dollars, and the second worth 23.6 billion dollars (Almaganbetov & Kurmanov, 2015; Lim, 2015). Kazakhstan is also a founding member of the AIIB, and is on line to receive funding from China for its Nurlı Zhol (Way of Light) infrastructure initiative, which is envisioned to form OBOR's northern transit corridor. For his part, Lukashenko has viewed Sino-Belarusian economic cooperation as a means of decreasing its trade dependence on Russia. China is Belarus' largest Asian trade partner. After upgrading their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2013, Belarus and China have considerably expanded their economic linkages. This includes an estimated 15.7 billion dollar cooperation agreement and some 5.5 billion dollars in loans provided by China during Xi's 2013 visit to Belarus. A key component of this deal is the construction of the Great Stone Industrial Park near Minsk, which will provide Chinese manufacturers with easy access to EU markets (Lim, 2015).²

Beijing's decision to focus on OBOR in Central Asia, and in fact, throughout the broader post-Soviet space, is a tacit acknowledgement of its lack of interest in the future direction of the SCO. It appears that the Chinese leadership, having failed to achieve its goal by working within the organization, has selected to bypass it. This has left Russia as the biggest promoter of the SCO, which it has attempted to shape to its preferences. The 2016 meeting of the SCO in Tashkent approved India and Pakistan as incoming members of the organization, with Iran also expected to join in the future. Russia has been the staunchest advocate of the expansion of the SCO, a measure that China has opposed, although not officially. The expansion of the SCO raises questions as to the motivations of the Kremlin, as well as the extent to which this body will evolve into a platform that provides

AIIB, while Gabuev (2015c) argues that Moscow's initial rejection of the invitation to join the bank was a result of the inability of mid-level bureaucrats to realize its geopolitical importance.

² Richard Griffiths (2017), however, notes that the Great Stone Industrial Park has been the site of numerous delays and mismanagement, with only two fertilizer plants operative in 2016.

Russia will the opportunity to act as a great power on the world stage. Putin himself alluded to the latter scenario in describing the addition of India and Pakistan as a means of turning the SCO into ‘a very powerful international association that commands respect and is relevant both in the region and worldwide’ (Putin, 2016). If so, the result is likely to be long on rhetoric but short on substance.

Russian Influence in the Post-Soviet Region: How Extensive?

Moscow’s attempts to project power in the former Soviet republics faces a series of challenges, although the Soviet legacy continues to exert a potentially positive, if steadily diminishing, influence. The Kremlin has access to a variety of soft or hard power resources that it can apply in the attempt to achieve its interests. They vary, depending on the specific circumstances of a given state, and are by no means guaranteed to produce a favorable outcome. After 2012, the Putin leadership came to rely on three primary methods of inducing a more or less voluntary compliance amongst its immediate neighbours: 1) it significantly raised the profile of its soft power program seeking to promote a positive image of Russia; 2) a series of economic incentives were offered as a motivation to joining the EEU (this included the indirect benefits of the free flow of labor, returned to Kyrgyzstan and Armenia through remittances); 3) the Kremlin emphasized its ability, primarily through the CSTO, to offer security guarantees to states (which has been an ongoing aspect of Russian policy). The Ukraine crisis serves as a stark example of the limitations of this approach as well as a reminder that Russia is willing to move beyond persuasion to force if it perceives that its interests are vitally threatened. At the same time, the annexation of Crimea has imposed a very large cost on Russia itself, not least of which has been the negative consequences not only for Russia’s relations with the West but also with its immediate neighbours.

In the 2000s, the Kremlin began to work on resurrecting the network of public diplomacy and internationally oriented media structures—i.e. Friendship Associations, cultural exchange programs etc.—that had either collapsed or functioned in severely reduced circumstances with the demise of the Soviet Union. In the 2000s, moreover, the Western notion of soft power (usually translated as *myagkaya sila*) migrated to Russia. A 2007 document released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, called for the development of a soft power strategy for Russia as a means of diversifying its foreign policy, suggesting a greater reliance on cultural initiatives and the utilisation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Obzor, 2007). In February 2012, Putin placed his imprimatur on the topic, announcing that while certain states (implicitly the West) made illicit use of soft power techniques with the goal of destabilizing other countries, soft power, if appropriately employed, was a legitimate tool of foreign policy (Putin, 2012).

Subsequently, Konstatin Kosachev, the former chairman of the Duma Foreign

Relations Committee, was appointed to head *Rossotrudnichestvo* (the Federal Agency for the Affairs of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) in the Spring of 2012. Kosachev's appointment signified a new prominence to the agency, a signal that was reinforced by an unprecedented two day high profile conference in September 2012, which outlined a new soft power strategy that would focus on enhancing Russia's position in the CIS region. Designated policies included the recruitment of students from the CIS area (either to study in Russia or to participate in long distance learning projects), the expansion of Russian Centres of Science and Culture and *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) Centres that would promote Russian language and culture, and the reorientation of humanitarian aid from multilateral structures (primarily the World Bank) to the post-Soviet area (see Wilson, 2015).³

Despite plans for an extensive overhaul in function, *Rossotrudnichestvo* was left to operate on a shoe string budget, in the words of Kosachev, 'a limousine without gas' (Reznik, 2013). *Rossotrudnichestvo*, as its name implies, also has suffered from a lack of coherence in defining a target audience. In practice, the organization has focused on maintaining language and cultural identity amongst ethnic Russian compatriots, rather than enhancing the language skills or affinity toward Russia among the titular majority in post-Soviet states. The Ukraine events highlighted the structural and conceptual deficiencies of the Kremlin's approach to soft power. In 2012, the USAID budget allocation for Ukraine was almost two times more than *Rossotrudnichestvo's* total 2012 revenues (Khimshyashvili, 2014). As Valentina Feklyunina (2016), moreover, has noted, the Kremlin greatly overestimated the degree to which its promotion of the notion of the Russian World resonated with the Ukrainian public, including many ethnic Russians and native Russian speakers. This identity was not only inherently hierarchical but also incompatible with or only partially compatible with other identity discourses in Ukraine that posited the importance of state sovereignty. Kosachev himself lamented the failures of Russian soft power policy in Ukraine in which he attributed the success of the United States and EU in promoting the 'European idea' in Ukraine not only to financial resources, but also to a broad-based campaign that focused on the grassroots level of Ukrainian society (Khimshyashvili, 2014).

Although the Russian leadership acknowledges the importance of soft power, it has been disinclined—as Kosachev's remarks indicate—to adopt a Western style approach that stresses the development of an autonomous civil society and the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the local citizenry. Here, the Russian leadership is more comfortable in engaging with local elites, largely through

³ The Russian Centres of Science and Culture are based on the Soviet Centres of Science and Culture (many of which disappeared or fell into abeyance with the Soviet collapse). In any case, they did not previously exist in the CIS states, which were then constituent parts of the Soviet Union.

the provision of financial incentives (see Skirba, 2016). The actual package of incentives (which can be combined with implicit or explicit threats) varies, reflecting a complex assessment of costs and benefits, as well as material and political capabilities, on both sides. All the states in the post-Soviet region are susceptible to Russian pressure. This includes the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which despite membership in both NATO and the EU, remain highly dependent on Russia for energy. But a number of regional leaders have calculated that they have better options than to participate in Russian dominated regional structures. At present, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have signed preferential trade agreements with the EU. This arrangement, tolerated if not welcomed by Moscow, was nonetheless considered a red line for Ukraine (which, however, signed an Association Agreement with the EU in November 2014).

Despite concerns over the maintenance of sovereignty, the leaderships of Belarus and Kazakhstan entered the EEU as voluntary participants, who were convinced of the economic advantages of membership. The energy relationship between Belarus and Russia is not entirely harmonious. Belarus benefits from refining Russia oil and gas and selling it to Europe at a profit. Nonetheless, the two states have been locked in chronic disputes over pricing and transit disputes, with Russia deploying the energy card against Belarus on multiple occasions. For Kazakhstan, the economic benefits of EEU membership are less tangible, and Nazarbaev has been critical of the continued tariff barriers imposed on Kazakhstan and its lack of access to the Russian electricity market (Tarr, 2016, 17). Nazarbaev, however, has been a steadfast adherent to economic integration as a foundational principle. The leaderships of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia appear to have been more reluctant in signing on to the EEU. Almazbek Atambayev, the President of Kyrgyzstan, summarized this sentiment when he noted in December 2013 that Kyrgyzstan, unlike Ukraine, ‘unfortunately did not have much of an alternative’ [to the Eurasian Union] (Popescu, 2014, 20). Although the Russian annexation of Crimea has instilled a wary sense of caution amongst leaders in the post-Soviet space, it has also paradoxically increased their latitude for bargaining and gaining extractions from Russia in return for continued support of integration initiatives (Krickovic & Bratersky, 2016, 190). Kyrgyzstan, for example, is asking for a one billion dollar subsidy payment from Russia to compensate for the losses incurred from the re-export of Chinese goods to Russia, while Kazakhstan is pressuring Russia to allow it to export its gas to Europe via Russian pipelines without paying export duties.

Russia’s military preponderance in the post-Soviet region places it in the position to offer security guarantees to its neighbours, although some of the post-Soviet states—i.e. Georgia, Ukraine—view Moscow itself as the threat. Armenia’s entrance into the EEU has been widely interpreted as recognition that Yerevan

perceives Russian military protection as a prerequisite to its survival (see Delcour, 2015). A similar situation pertains in Tajikistan, where Russia continues to maintain a military base, retained since the Tajik Civil War of the 1990s. The Central Asian members of the CSTO exhibit, as does Russia itself, a deep concern over the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, and its potential spread to the post-Soviet region. This does not mean that states in the region have not sought to play Russia off against the United States. Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan concluded agreements allowing for the establishment of US military installations, albeit with reluctant Russian acquiescence. Nor does the Russian military seem to be well suited to counter the sort of insurgency movements that pose a threat to the region. The Kremlin's military incursions in Syria and Ukraine, as well as its financial strains, make Central Asia an unlikely locale for military expansion in the future.

Conclusion

Russia's preoccupation with great power status has long been a national fixation. So, too, has been its preoccupation with the West, which has served, either as a object of emulation or as a defining other, as a formative element in Russia's national identity construction (see Neumann, 1996, 2016). The importance of this dynamic has only intensified since the 2013-2014 events in Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea (seen through Russian eyes as its return to the motherland) has been highly popular in Russia as a source of national pride and evidence of Russian empowerment, which has also served as an important source of regime legitimacy, especially in conditions of economic distress. The turn to civilizational values in Russia since 2012 should also be seen as a response to its deteriorating relationship with the West, in which Russian identity is formed in opposition to Western civilizational norms (see Tsygankov, 2016).

A number of commentators (see Gabuev 2015d; Lane, 2016; Sakwa, 2016) have stressed that the Kremlin's integration projects in the post-Soviet space should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to realize the integration of Russia into Europe, through linking the EEU with EU markets. This raises the question as to the extent to which the Putin presidency's civilizational turn is compatible with this goal. The Eurasian concept is itself is open to a multitude of interpretations. Nazarbaev, for example, has long promoted a form of 'pragmatic' Eurasianism. But Putin's tendency to associate the Eurasian idea with a specific articulation of the Russian World is a Russocentric vision that hierarchically elevates ethnic Russians over other (ambiguously conceived) inhabitants of the post-Soviet space, as well as assuming Russian leadership over Eurasian integration. This form of ideological Russian nationalism would seem to be of limited appeal to a non-Russian audience, and contrasts markedly with the universalistic message of the Soviet period (see Way, 2015, 695).

As many observers have noted, the loss of Ukraine as a prospective member dealt a severe blow to Russian hopes for the EEU, and no doubt contributed to the intensification of civilizational rhetoric as an alternative ideational construct. At the same time, Russian foreign policy seeks to portray Russian participation in regional structures as contributing to the development of alternative centres of power in an increasingly multipolar system (Foreign Policy Concept, 2016). This includes participation in the BRICs, which the Russian leadership has enthusiastically promoted as a potential counterbalance to Western political and economic hegemony. The insistence that Russia is a great power has been underscored by an increasingly assertive foreign policy.

The Russian Federation, unlike the Soviet Union, lacks the resources to pursue a global foreign policy, but Putin has nonetheless arguably played a weak hand to Russia's best advantage. Of course, there are costs to the Kremlin's strategy—e.g. ejection from the G8, economic sanctions—but in the short run Russia has emerged from the sidelines to play a prominent international role. This is especially the case with respect to Russian policy toward Syria, in which the Kremlin has moved to assert its perceived interests while the West has been unable to commit to a decisive course of action. But Russian foreign policy has also turned to staking out claims in the Arctic, strengthening ties with Egypt, and upgrading its relationship with China (although the latter movement is also impelled by a perceived necessity). The ample evidence of populist dissatisfaction in the West with the status quo—seen in the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom—is also potentially advantageous to Russia. The Kremlin has worked to increase its ties with European right wing parties, as well as promote its traditional values as an alternative to perceived Western decadence. The unanticipated emergence of Russia as a central theme in the 2016 US presidential election campaign, especially in the near omnipresent portrayal of Russia by the political class (with the notable exception of Donald Trump) as a national security threat, paradoxically also served to enhance Russia's image as a great power.

To date, the EEU, although still in an incipient stage of development, cannot be considered an economic success. Even adherents to the project wonder if Russia has the resources to underpin this endeavor (Lukin, 2016, 109). A related issue is whether the Kremlin possesses the will to pursue economic modernization rooted in market concepts of efficiency. This is a goal of some members of the Kremlin political elite, including Dmitry Medvedev, the prime minister. But it has seemed less of a priority to the more traditionally minded Putin. The Russian leadership's discourse concerning Russia's status as a great power incorporates a 'virtual' element that can be viewed as validating to some extent the constructivist view that reality is a social construct, and that states are able to create and project their

own reality to targeted audiences. The empiricist, however, assumes that there are objective limitations to this strategy that will prevail sooner or later. Russia is destined by virtue of geography alone to exercise a prominent role in the Eurasian region. Nonetheless, its ability to succeed as a regional hegemon is dependent on its ability to move beyond the civilizational discourse to present a vibrant economic model that will present it as an attractive alternative to the European Union as well as to China.

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Bio

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