

# FORWARD TO THE PAST?

## NEW/OLD THEATRES OF RUSSIA'S INTERNATIONAL PROJECTION

edited by **Aldo Ferrari** and **Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti**  
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI



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OF RUSSIA'S INTERNATIONAL PROJECTION  
Edited by Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti  
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# Introduction

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In light of the great challenges ahead, Russia needs to “address the large-scale social, economic and technological tasks facing the country more quickly and without delay”. This quote is from the Russian President’s Federal Assembly Address delivered in early 2019. Most probably, back then, the last thing crossing Vladimir Putin’s mind was that one year later those challenges would become even greater due to a pandemic. The Covid-19 emergency is indeed bound to put further strain on the longstanding vulnerabilities that Russia’s economy has been facing for years: excessive dependence on energy exports, Western sanctions, demographic problems and constant foreign policy overreach.

Over the last two decades, these challenges have not stopped Russia from pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy. Since the early 2000s, the drive to compete on par with global powers such as the US and China, as well as the need to capitalise on international successes at home, have gradually drawn Moscow further away from its immediate neighbourhood. What is more, over the last two decades, Russia has progressively come back to many “old” foreign theatres where the Soviet Union was also actively engaged. More than a quarter of a century after the fall of the USSR, it is clear that Russia’s President Putin made restoring Russia’s great power status a primary goal during his twenty years at the helm of the country. Political and historical links dating back to the Cold War have been capitalised upon in order to build fresh partnerships and cement or re-establish

Russia's influence. And, similar to the Soviet Union, which supported Western communist parties and ran disinformation campaigns, Russia has been frequently accused of meddling with the electoral processes of several Western countries.

The most telling example of Russia's proactive foreign policy is Syria. Taking advantage of the gradual US retreat from the Middle East, Russia intervened in support of Bashar Al Assad's autocratic government against political opposition groups seeking regime change. Many media and academic accounts of Russia's political and military backing of Assad overlook the fact that today's close relations between Moscow and Damascus date back to the Cold War era. The two parties signed a friendship agreement in 1971, while in 1980 another deal stipulated that in case of a third party invasion of Syria, the Soviets would intervene. Furthermore, the Soviet Union established its naval base in Tartus in the 1970s, and sent over 5,000 military advisors and massive amounts of weaponry to Damascus.

Further examples of Russia's assertiveness around the globe abound. For instance, Russia appears to have new aspirations in Africa, a continent where Soviet influence had strengthened during the decolonisation period, once post-independence governments were established – in Angola, Egypt, Somalia and Ethiopia, to name a few. All these countries received diplomatic or military support from the Soviet Union. Today, Russia is gradually increasing its influence in many African countries through strategic investment in energy and minerals, arms trade, political and military involvement in crises (Libya and CAR) and soft power. But while much has been written about China's role in Africa, there is far less discussion about the spread and depth of Russia's contemporary presence in Africa.

In this Report, we ask: what are the elements of continuity and change when comparing Russia's foreign policy with the Soviet Union's? What are the political, historical, military and economic dimensions of Russia's "return" to the old Soviet theatres of influence? The Report also delves into the implications of Russia's stance and strategy for the development



of a multipolar world order long-advocated by Moscow, by opposing US “unipolarity” and the Western-championed liberal order.

In the first chapter, Elena Alekseenkova explains that 2020 marks the 20th anniversary of Putin’s presidency, as well as the start of concrete steps toward political succession. The year actually started with a landmark State of the Nation address by Vladimir Putin, in which he proposed several constitutional amendments that seemingly reduced presidential powers, creating a “system” for the post-Putin era. In March, however, the Duma voted in favour of a constitutional amendment to “reset the clock” on his mandates, so that he can virtually rule until 2036: another 16 years in office would make him modern Russia’s longest-serving leader, overtaking Joseph Stalin. Why was such a complicated scheme of reforms proposed in January, instead of simply abolishing the constitutional rules limiting Putin’s presidential terms? Alekseenkova argues that the answer to this question lies in the issue of legitimacy and of personal versus institutional trust. She explains the meaning of Putin’s manoeuvre and suggests its possible consequences for Russia’s domestic and foreign policy.

In foreign policy, the most straightforward area for Russia to project external influence is its neighbourhood. Is Russia using regional integration to re-establish its hegemony, as it did in Soviet times? Indeed, Eurasianism has been interpreted as a cultural and geopolitical justification for Russian imperialism, replacing the role played by Marxism-Leninism in Soviet times. Aldo Ferrari reviews the idea of Greater Eurasia and its relationship with other recent Russian intellectual and political ventures, such as Eurasianism and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The Russian leadership’s strong emphasis on Greater Eurasia, and especially the role that Eurasianism plays within it, has grabbed international attention and is crucial to understanding Russia’s self-perception, as well as its ability to conduct an effective foreign policy.

When it comes to soft power, by contrast, a comparison with the USSR may seem inappropriate: the concept was created after the end of the Cold War and, in any case, today's Russia is perceived as a hard power country. Yet, Eleonora Tafuro argues not only that Moscow does have and indeed relies on soft power (today as in the past), but also that overlooking this leads to the West's misunderstanding of Russia's foreign policy. While calling for a neutral reading of the concept, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti claims that Russia started investing in soft power and public diplomacy from the early 2000s through media, language and cultural programmes targeted at the post-Soviet space and beyond. While it is true that some elements – such as the use of sport mega-events or anti-Americanism – may be reminiscent of the Soviet past, some novel narratives, such as conservatism, are peculiar to the “new Russia”.

Speaking of anti-Americanism, the Soviet Union had a long history of “active measures” aimed at influencing US domestic politics, including US presidential election campaigns. In recent years, the issue of Russian meddling and Russian interference is back at the centre of the public and political debate in Europe and North America. Giorgio Comai defines “Russian meddling” as a temporally delimited phenomenon that grabbed the attention of Western mainstream media starting with the US presidential elections in November 2016. After outlining some of the dynamics of this media narrative, Comai approaches each of its main parts separately, discussing evidence on their prevalence and impact on both sides of the Atlantic. Finally, he provides recommendations on how to deal with Russian interference and, in particular, with the vulnerabilities it has exposed.

Meanwhile, the myth of Russia's “return” to the Middle East has been all over the news, especially since Moscow's intervention in Syria in 2015. But how is Russia seen by MENA countries? Wolfgang Mühlberger argues that while there is a convergence of interests on a number of areas between Russian elites and those in power in many MENA countries, public opinion polls in the MENA region suggest a mixed picture when it comes to general

perceptions of Russia. Russia's economic and cultural appeal is low, and admiration for Putin is also severely limited in some MENA countries, mainly due to Moscow's military action in Syria. A detailed survey of Russia's and Putin's popularity across the region shows a nuanced picture, with strong intra-regional and temporal variations, as well as cleavages between public opinion and elite attitudes.

Despite the physical distance that separates Russia from Latin America and the Caribbean, and the weaker dynamics of trade and commerce compared with many other cases, relations with the countries of the region occupy a special place in Russia's contemporary foreign policy. As Alexandra Koval and Vladimir Rouvinski explain, this is because Putin's government has learned to appreciate the value of Russia's interactions with this part of the world for Moscow's short-, medium- and long-term goals on the international arena. Venezuela makes a good case study to observe the interplay of political and economic drivers of Russian actions in the region. Beyond energy and trade, Russia's strategy aims to provide Moscow with the capacity for primarily symbolic reciprocal actions against the United States, while promoting the idea of multipolarity and Russia's quest for status on the international arena.

The very same goals are behind Moscow's foreign policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Russian presence in the region attracted widespread international attention in October 2019, when Vladimir Putin hosted 40 African heads of state at the inaugural Russia-Africa Economic Forum in Sochi. During that event, his government finalised commercial deals with African countries and showcased Moscow's re-emergence as a continent-wide player for the first time since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Samuel Ramani examines Russia's African endeavours, arguing that they essentially consist of three pillars: energy and mining investments, security assistance and engagement with multilateral institutions. He examines the case of Nigeria, where all three pillars actually inform Moscow's outreach efforts, and highlights how European policymakers can contain

Russia's growing influence in Africa by selectively engaging with Moscow on areas of common interest.

It is hard to predict how Covid-19 will impact upon the frequency and scale of Russia's forays on the international stage. Today, in mid-April 2020, Russia is weakened by the effects of an epidemic that is starting to take its toll on this country too, with deaths already in the hundreds and mounting fast. The epidemic will likely confirm the trend that sees Moscow more and more focused on its internal problems compared to theatres farther away from home. Yet, almost like war, pandemics are predictable in their short-term dynamics, but elude long-term forecasting.

This Report shows that Russia's foreign policy is multifaceted, and that it constantly harks back to the Soviet era in order to push forward into the future. New and old theatres coexist and merge with each other. By underlining the sources of continuity and change in Russia's foreign policy, we might venture to guess that – even in this highly volatile and uncertain situation – Moscow's long-term goals are poised to remain similar well into the future.

*Paolo Magri*  
*ISPI Executive Vice President and Director*

# 1. Russia First?

## The New Constitution's Impact on Domestic and Foreign Policy

Elena Alekseenkova

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*We must create a solid, reliable and invulnerable system  
that will be absolutely stable in terms of the external contour  
and will securely guarantee Russia's independence and sovereignty*  
V. Putin, "Address to the Federal Assembly", 15 January 2020

Russia enters the third decade of the XXI century with a series of political reforms. Vladimir Putin's "Address", given on 15 January 2020<sup>1</sup>, was a landmark event for Russian domestic and foreign policy. In his speech, the President made a number of proposals for amending the constitution of the Russian Federation, adopted in 1993 and never amended since then. For the first time in the post-Soviet era, Russia is facing changes to key aspects of the distribution of power between state institutions, and to the correlation of international and national laws. Contrary to many expectations inside and outside the country, Putin did not propose to abolish the article prohibiting the President from holding office for more than two consecutive terms. In the final version of the amendment

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<sup>1</sup> V. Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", *Kremlin.ru*, 15 January 2020.

there is even no mention of the word “consecutive”, meaning that President’s tenure is effectively limited to a maximum of 12 years. Nevertheless, many foreign experts and the foreign media immediately declared that the reforms are aimed precisely at allowing Putin to retain power and influence after 2024<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast, the majority of the Russian expert community did not perceive these changes as designed solely to preserve Putin’s power after 2024. The declared goal of creating an “invulnerable system” plus the decision not to change the “two presidential terms” rule gave the impression that the ultimate aim of the reforms is to establish a more complex decision-making mechanism, i.e. to create “a system” capable of replacing the current “manual control” approach. As I shall try to explain in this chapter, there is an evident and dire need for an institutionalised system and the “Address” seemed to reflect this understanding. However, after the State Duma’s approval of the reforms on 10 March 2020, which contained a new amendment potentially allowing Putin to remain in power until 2036, the question arose: “Why put such a complicated scheme in place instead of simply abolishing the two terms rule?”. In other words, why have the reforms announced in January now become “Plan B”, replaced by a much simpler “Plan A” only two months later? In this chapter I shall try to understand the sense of this manoeuvre and to indicate its possible consequences for Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. I shall concentrate on the reasons and the logic behind the amendments proposed in January 2020 first, and then return to the issue of the switch between “Plan B” and “Plan A” later. Finally, I shall speculate on the possible effects of the coronavirus crisis and the consequent global economic downturn on the prospects of both “Plans”, though it is still too early to predict the final scale of damage caused by the pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: “Putin’s Power Shake-up: Here Are Six Takeaways”, *New York Times*, 15 January 2020; “‘Kazahskij scenarij’: kakoe budushchee predrekayut Putinu eksperty?” (“‘Kazakh scenario’: what future do experts predict for Putin?”), *BBC*, 16 January 2020.

## **A Breach in Fortress "Russia": Lack of Trust**

### Socio-economic considerations

Unlike the 2018 Address, which impressed the world with its detailed analysis and description of Russia's military-technical achievements, the message of 2020 looked surprisingly "peaceful" and focused on the problems of the country's internal development. With the exception of a couple of paragraphs, the Address was devoted to matters of socio-economic development and domestic political reform. According to the President, two factors allowed solutions to be found for the nation's internal problems.

Firstly, Putin noted that Russia, having successfully consolidated its defence capabilities, is now able to focus on internal matters:

[...] I can assure everyone that our efforts to strengthen national security were made in a timely manner and in sufficient volume. For the first time ever [...] we are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses [...] Reliable security creates the basis for Russia's progressive and peaceful development and allows us to do much more to overcome the most pressing internal challenges, to focus on the economic and social growth of all our regions.

This makes the 2020 Address quite different from previous ones, which focused on the need to ensure Russia's external security, a task, it is claimed, that has now been completed.

Secondly, the Address stated that the task of stabilising the country macroeconomically has also been fulfilled in recent years and that this too permits a greater focus on matters of economic development and on increasing the real incomes of citizens:

In recent years, we have focused on strengthening macroeconomic sustainability [...] The federal budget has recorded a surplus again. Our government reserves confidently cover our gross external debt...We can see the problems, even shocks that citizens of other states face, where government had no such cash cushion and their financial position turned out to be unstable [...] Now, relying on a stable macroeconomic foundation, we need to create conditions for a substantial increase in people's real incomes.

This statement reflects the leadership's desire to find a way for Russia to avoid the social upheavals faced by many modern states as a result of changes to the "social contract" brought about by globalisation.

In the President's opinion, the successful solution of these two problems – ensuring the security of Russia's periphery and macroeconomic stability – makes it possible to proceed to a closer analysis of public demands and requests.

At the moment, the second component of what I call the Russian "happiness formula" (strong power + wellbeing) is demonstrably lacking and the President's statement accepted this. The 2020 Address acknowledged this call for change and development and the need to overcome territorial imbalances, reform healthcare and education, increase citizens' real incomes and improve social security, etc.

The President recognised that Russian society regards the "successes" of previous years in the social sphere, be it healthcare or any other, as statistical manipulations irrelevant to people's real lives. The gap between improving indicators at federal level and the situation on the ground in individual regions and municipalities is viewed as even more disappointing. The devastating demographic situation<sup>3</sup>, which has been understood since Putin's first presidential term, has not been positively stabilised over the past 20 years. Not enough has been done to

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<sup>3</sup> E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, *Russia's Great Disease: The Demographic Decline*, Commentary, ISPI, 4 November 2019; "Demograficheskaya situatsiya dostigla 'yamy'" ("The demographic situation has reached the 'pit'"), *Kommersant*, 13 December 2019.



improve investment and business climate. There is a dire need to increase investment in order to create and update jobs and infrastructure, to develop industry, agriculture, and the service sector, and to launch a new investment cycle. It is therefore clear why the socio-economic part of the Address accepted that insufficient effort has been made so far to ensure the wellbeing of citizens and their “worthy life”, and why it went on to set out the task of formulating new principles for the “social contract” along with measures to increase Russia’s economic competitiveness.

Russian officials today are well aware of socio-political processes in the developed countries of the West which, since the collapse of the USSR, have always been seen as a model for the development of a new Russia, a model of a “desired future” for the majority of citizens. However, in recent years, the need to revise the “social contract” to reflect the processes of globalisation has led to serious political turbulence in a number of countries. This unsatisfied social demand has been championed by the so-called “populist” movements, some of which have even succeeded in coming to power. The socio-economic agenda of the Address was therefore aimed at preventing the development of such processes in Russia.

In terms of the wellbeing of its citizens, Russia is significantly behind the developed states of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), which it has always hoped to join. It is quite natural, therefore, to expect social tensions and mass protests in EU countries to stir up public opinion in Russia, where citizens do not feel that the state is ready to guarantee social security. Moreover, the worst result of Dmitry Medvedev’s two prime-ministerial terms was a further decrease in the standard of living of Russians. Real income levels have fallen significantly and 17 million people are now earning less than the living wage<sup>4</sup>. Considering the deep-rooted paternalistic attitudes of Russian society, the state is expected to take decisive measures to improve the situation.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Ivanter, “*Zastabilizirovalis’ do zastoya*” (“Stabilized till stagnation”), *Expert*, 20 January 2020.

Against this background, the package of socio-economic measures proposed by the President resembles a set of “preventive measures” to avoid a social conflagration. The seriousness of the situation and the intentions to rectify it were emphasised by the immediate resignation of Medvedev and his entire government.

The 2020 Address, however, also reflected an understanding that socio-economic measures alone cannot satisfy the Russian public’s demands for a rotation of power and a functional law enforcement system. The political part of the President’s speech was therefore dedicated to these issues.

### Political considerations

Sovereignty remains a key concept in Russia’s official political discourse and is therefore central to the political part of this year’s Address, as indeed it has been in most previous Addresses. The emphasis this time is different, however.

Let us recall the definition of sovereignty proposed by Stephen D. Krasner, one of the most authoritative experts on the subject<sup>5</sup>. According to Krasner, sovereignty can be divided into several components: 1) “internal sovereignty”, the principle of the organisation of power within the state and control over its implementation by citizens; 2) “sovereignty of interdependence”, reflecting the ability of the state to control cross-border movements of people, capital and goods; 3) “international legal sovereignty”, which serves as the basis for the equal rights of states in the international arena; and 4) “Westphalian sovereignty”, which prohibits the intervention of external actors in a state’s internal politics.

An analysis of Putin’s speeches prior to the 2020 Address demonstrates<sup>6</sup> that he has appealed mainly to the third and

<sup>5</sup> S. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> E. Alekseenkova, “‘Vosstanovlennyj suverenitet’ kak osnovanie nacional’noj gordosti” (“‘Restored sovereignty’ as the basis of national pride”), *Russia in International Affairs Council*, no.7, 2018, pp. 98-111. Actually it was first published in *Russian scientific journal (Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn)* and that’s why I gave you this

fourth components, i.e. to aspects of “external sovereignty”, and addressed “internal sovereignty” (especially the first component) only reluctantly. In his 2017 and 2018 Addresses, Putin repeatedly emphasised that the main achievement of the 2000s and 2010s was the restoration of national sovereignty, understood as the ability to avoid the “collapse of the country”, “state dissolution” and “extinction of the nation”, and the ability “to respond to the challenges that we faced in the fight against international terrorism” and “to determine and defend our national interests”. The main issue was clearly that of the country’s “external sovereignty”. The 2020 Address announced that this problem has been solved:

Russia can be and can remain Russia only as a sovereign state. Our nation’s sovereignty must be unconditional. We have done a great deal to achieve this. We have restored our state’s unity. We have overcome the situation when certain powers in the government were essentially usurped by oligarch clans. Russia has returned to international politics as a country whose opinion cannot be ignored. We have created powerful reserves, improving our country’s stability and its capability to protect its citizens’ social rights and the national economy from any attempts of foreign pressure<sup>7</sup>.

However, the issue of “internal sovereignty” has so far received very little attention apart from in the context of maintaining territorial integrity. A key aspect of internal sovereignty is the *legitimacy of power based on trust*, understood as latent support for the current public authority and the political system as a whole.

At first glance, Russia has no problems of internal sovereignty. The regime is highly consolidated. In the last election in 2018, the President received 76.69% of the vote, with a high turnout. 56.43 million people voted for him, more than the absolute figures of 2000, 2004 and 2012. However, there are a number

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link: <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/2049>

<sup>7</sup> V. Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”, *Kremlin.ru*, 15 January 2020.

of factors that indicate a risk of erosion of legitimacy as a basis of internal sovereignty.

Several such indicators are now being widely discussed in Russian society. These include, firstly, a gradual but steady increase in the number of people moving abroad for permanent residence. These people, for one reason or another, refuse to live in the zone of Russian sovereignty and prefer to emigrate. In 2017, Rosstat reported that 377,000 people went to live abroad, a record for the past five years. Compared to 2012, the number of emigrants from Russia has more than tripled. Over 1,700,000 people have left the country in the third term of Putin's presidency<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, against the backdrop of current international dynamics and Russia's conflict with the so-called "collective West", i.e. the EU and the US, the proportion of people who *want* to move abroad is of particular importance. According to a VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) survey, as of July 2017, one in ten Russians (10%) would like to transfer their permanent residence abroad. According to the Levada Center, in February 2019 this figure increased to 17%, and indeed to 53% among young people under 24 years of age. Additionally, those actively interested in politics showed "emigration moods" most often: 24% of politically interested respondents declared readiness to emigrate. Among the reasons, Russians point to a desire to ensure a decent future for their children (45%), the economic and political situation in Russia and the high quality of medicine and education abroad<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to this outflow of human capital, it is worth mentioning the volume of capital outflow and the very modest results achieved by the policy of de-offshoring the Russian economy, also relevant to the discussion of legitimacy and state sovereignty<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> "‘Proekt’: Rosstat v shest’ raz zanizhaet chislo uekhavshih iz Rossii” (“‘Project’: Rosstat underestimates the number of people who have left Russia by six times”). *Radio Svoboda*, 16 January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "Emigratsionnye nastroyeniya" ("Emigration moods"), *Levada-Center*, 26 November 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Deofshorizatsiya otmenyaetsya" ("Deoffshorization Canceled"), *Expert*

The clearest confirmation of this crisis of trust, however, is the extremely low level of support for key political institutions. For example, over the past two years, the level of trust in government has fallen from 35% to 26%, in political parties from 19% to 16%, in the State Duma from 33% to 24%, in the Council of the Federation from 35% to 24% and the in Prosecutor's Office from 33% to 30% while trust in the courts has risen from 26% to 28%. The three leaders in terms of confidence in 2019 were the army (63% versus 69% in 2017), the President (60% compared to 75% in 2017), the Federal Security Service and other special services (48% versus 57% in 2017). The level of trust in key political institutions is therefore steadily decreasing and bordering on or even under the level of legitimacy. (In classical political science, power is usually considered legitimate only if over 30% of the population trusts it). In general, Russia in recent years has been distinguished by an extremely low level of institutional trust combined with a high level of personal trust (as confirmed by the high trust ratings of Putin himself).

It should be remembered that the low approval rating of protest activity, though up from 18% to 24% between 2012 and 2019, reveals a general unreadiness of Russian citizens to openly manifest discontent<sup>11</sup>. However, according to some experts, the number of protests in Russia may increase, and social unrest may become politicized. Commentators also note a trend towards greater popular involvement outside politics. In the first half of 2019, several hundred protests took place, but these were mainly of a social nature. At the same time, protests against pension reform turned out to be weaker than expected, and the largest actions occurred where environmental risks were added to social problems, as in the case of garbage collection reform.

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Online, 10 March 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “*Protestnyj potencial*” (“Protest potencial”), *Vserossiiskij tsentr izučeniya obščestvennogo mnenija* (VTsIOM), 2019.

The text of Putin's 2020 Address recognised that the main breach in today's "fortress Russia" is lack of trust in law enforcement and the political system as a whole. That is why the key task identified by this Address was to reform the entire political system with the aim of legitimizing it and, thereby, consolidating internal sovereignty. The key concept running through the Address remained that of sovereignty, but the emphasis shifted from the components of "external sovereignty" to "internal sovereignty".

If the Address really reflected an awareness of this deep crisis of trust, then the constitutional changes it proposed could be perceived as a reasonable attempt to get away from the "manual control" system and convert the President's own high level of personal trust into institutional trust in the "system" over the next four years.

### **The Essence of the Reforms: Pretending To Build Trust**

What were the main instruments for restoring trust according to "Plan B"? One of the steps towards increasing trust in political institutions and the country's leadership was to propose a so-called "nationalisation" of the elite and, in particular, a ban on holding foreign citizenship, residence permits, or other documents that permit permanent residence in another state, in an attempt to stop Russia's elite questioning the legitimacy and internal sovereignty of the Russian Federation. The foreign assets held by Russian politicians as well as the acquisition of foreign citizenship by their family members and studies at leading foreign universities are being actively discussed after various scandalous revelations naturally provoked a great deal of distrust and frustration among citizens.

Improper implementation by local authorities of measures for the social protection of citizens is a second factor eroding trust in the system. The enshrinement in the Constitution of the principles of a unified system of public authorities and

municipal bodies was therefore presented by the President as a way to guarantee uniform protection of citizens' rights across the country. The absence of such guarantees at the moment, according to Putin, poses a direct threat to the integrity of the country. In particular, the state's social obligations should be guaranteed nationwide.

A third tool for increasing legitimacy is the creation of a system of "checks and balances" between the different branches of government. Putin proposed defining the role of the State Council in the Constitution and providing the Federal Assembly with an opportunity to take on greater responsibility for the formation of the Government. According to the reformed Article 112, the President can no longer refuse to appoint deputy chairmen to the Government of the Russian Federation or federal ministers whose candidatures have been approved by the State Duma, though he may still dismiss them. At the same time, the President is given the right to dismiss any minister without prior consultation with the prime minister. According to the new Article 83, the President "forms the State Council [...] in order to ensure the coordinated functioning and interaction of state authorities, determine the main directions of the domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation and priority areas for socio-economic state development"<sup>12</sup>. This reform seems to demonstrate a desire to share responsibility for determining the main directions of domestic and foreign policy with representatives of the State Council. However, no specifics concerning the structure or composition of the State Council or the role the President will play in its work have yet been published, apart from the sole fact that the State Council will be formed by the President.

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<sup>12</sup> [Zakonoproekt № 885214-7, Zakon Rossijskoj Federacii o popravke k Konstitucii Rossijskoj Federacii "O sovershenstvovanii regulirovaniya otdel'nyh voprosov organizacii publicnoj vlasti"](#) ("Bill no. 885214-7, The law of the Russian Federation on the amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation "On improving the regulation of certain issues of public authority organization"), *Sistema obespecheniya zakonodatel'noj deyatel'nosti*, 20 January 2020,

The Federation Council positions representing the regions, are being strengthened: the President will be able to appoint the heads of all the so-called “power ministries” (defence, state security, internal affairs, justice, foreign affairs, emergency prevention, natural disaster and public safety) following consultation with the Federation Council. Such an approach, according to its initiator, should make the work of law enforcement agencies more “transparent and more accountable to society”, which again can be seen as a measure to increase confidence in the law enforcement system. The same applies to the appointment of regional prosecutors, who will now also be assigned after consultation with the Federation Council – a measure aimed at eradicating “homegrown rule of law” in the regions.

The President and the Federation Council strengthen their control over the judicial system. The Federation Council is being given the right to remove judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts as a result of the President’s initiative, and the President himself will have the right to submit federal laws to the Constitutional Court to check its compliance with the Constitution before signing them.

Nevertheless, according to Putin, Russia must remain a strong presidential republic. Just a few days after delivering the Address, the President again emphasised that he considers the parliamentary form of government unsuitable for Russia<sup>13</sup>.

The real meaning of these reforms was difficult to assess. On the one hand, it seemed that a certain system of “checks and balances” was being introduced to share power between the Legislative Assembly and the State Council, and attempts were also being made to increase trust in the political, law enforcement and judicial systems.

On the other hand, the increased power of the executive branch over the judicial branch – the Constitutional Court

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<sup>13</sup> “[Putin zayavil o necelesoobraznosti parlamentskoj respubliki v Rossii](#)” (“Putin declared inappropriate parliamentary republic in Russia”), *RIA-Novosti*, 22 January 2020.



and the Supreme Court – raised serious concerns. In addition, the speed of the ongoing changes, the absence of public dialogue about the nature, goals and objectives of the proposed amendments indicated that Putin was again following a “special operation scenario”<sup>14</sup>, whose final goal remained unclear. Though the working group set up to examine the proposed amendments to the Constitution had only just started work, the State Duma adopted the amendments in their first reading on 23 January, only a week after the Address. Nevertheless, it was promised that, after approval by the Federal Assembly, the amendments would be approved by referendum, scheduled for 22 April but postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The amendments were also formulated in such a way that the new “checks and balances” will increase the level of trust only if there is a political will to use them, and only if there are state entities ready to implement them. Taking into account how unanimously the State Duma approved first the new cabinet and then the amendments, it is difficult to believe that this particular state body is determined to play a major part in “checks and balances”.

Yet, dialogue with society is indeed necessary and the fact that state institutions need to “earn” the trust of citizens must be clearly expressed. Otherwise, as often happens in Russian reality, “the severity of the law will be compensated for by its non-obligatory execution”, or by its frivolous interpretation, as many Russians believe.

Thus, the proposed reforms seemed to prepare Russian society for a transition of power in 2024, but not from one

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<sup>14</sup> The term “special operation” was used by a journalist of the TASS news agency during an interview with Putin to characterise the speed of government change and its unexpectedness. The term probably refers to the legacy of Putin’s KGB service, as “special operations” are usually conducted by the security services. In this context, “special operation” means that the goals, tactics and details of the operation should be kept secret from everyone except for the President himself. Interview with Vladimir Putin “20 voprosov Vladimiru Putinu” (“20 questions to Vladimir Putin”), TASS.

person to another, rather to a new “system” in which roles and names are yet to be established. It was obvious that Putin would not leave the stage in 2024, but there was yet no hint as to his possible future position. Everything seemed to show that Putin was hoping to go down in history by performing a most ambitious task – that of building a legitimate, functioning political system. Yet society itself has not been assigned any major role in the latest changes and without this the system’s legitimacy is unlikely to improve.

The immediate change in government also seemed to serve the purpose of increasing trust to the political system. Dmitry Medvedev was replaced by a technocrat, Mikhail V. Mishustin, a former head of the Federal Tax Service, and more than half of the previous government’s ministers were replaced too. The new cabinet is purely technocratic. Never before has the Russian government been as “non-political” as it is today. According to the experts, “the new government is the first under Putin, where there are no old friends of the president”<sup>15</sup>.

Most new ministers have experience in administrative structures at both the federal and regional levels, and so far, have no political baggage. This gives Putin two advantages: first, if the socio-economic tasks of the Address are successfully completed, this government may well win the trust of Russian citizens. This in turn would mean that the transition of power in 2024 will take place in a stable and calm social environment. Secondly, if the President has not yet formed a concrete preference for a successor, he now has four years to find one from among the new ministers.

Russian media has already labelled the new cabinet a “government of economic breakthrough”. A plan has been announced to spend 2 trillion rubles in the near future on social needs. First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov has been tasked with updating the plan to implement national projects

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<sup>15</sup> T. Stanovaya, “Universal’nost’ i molodost’. Chego zhdut ot obnovlennogo pravitel’sstva” (“[Universality and youth. What to expect from a renewed government](#)”), *Moscow Carnegie Center*, 22 January 2020.

in one month. Prime Minister Mishustin has also placed him in charge of the financial and economic block (the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Development), the ministries responsible for achieving national development goals before 2024 (set by the presidential decree of May 2018). All of this allows us to conclude that the country's leadership is indeed hurrying along socio-economic and political measures to restore citizens' trust in order to ensure social stability and allow a successful transition of power in 2024.

Despite this logical beginning to a political transition process and the declared intention to create a trust-based system, the situation changed dramatically on 10 March. In his speech to the State Duma<sup>16</sup>, Putin agreed that even after the constitutional reforms, the President in charge can indeed be elected for another two terms. The State Duma approved this amendment only a few hours later on the same day, while the Constitutional Court gave its green light on 16 March 2020. This means that Putin may in fact remain in power until 2036. The question is how to explain this turn-around?

Several aspects need to be mentioned here. First of all, it should be noted that the issue of legitimacy is still important for Putin. He has declared that he wants to be elected through democratic elections with "choice" and he also required the agreement of the Constitutional Court. Secondly, he has emphasised that any future vote on these amendments will actually be a vote permitting him to stay in power for two more terms. This means that he is again relying on people's trust in him; the vote will serve as an indicator of its strength. Even the potential weakening of Russia's economy in the light of reduced global oil prices will serve the purpose of boosting trust in Putin so long as the population remembers that it was he who "saved" the country in several previous crises. The timing of this switch to "Plan A" is therefore perfect and the bet is that popular "fear" will make further decisions easy. The majority of people are concerned with

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<sup>16</sup> V. Putin, "Speech at State Duma plenary session", *Kremlin.ru*, 10 March 2020.

the falling value of the ruble and low wages and have no appetite for political change. It is no coincidence that the examples of the Great Depression and WWII were brought up in the President's speech as proof that it is better to have political stability during turbulent times when the "fortress is under siege".

Of course, society's expectations of reform, formed over the previous two months, could lead to some dissatisfaction, but since Moscow has banned all gatherings of more than 5000 participants for one month starting on 10 March (immediately after the new amendment was passed, but formally because of the coronavirus) all protests are effectively illegal. There is little desire to protest in any case. The drop in oil prices after Russia's withdrawal from the OPEC+ deal in March 2020 and the rapid spread of the coronavirus in the second half of March and early April 2020 are two more factors that should logically lead to the preference of "Plan A". In times of deep crisis, people are more likely to place their trust in a strong political leader or "saviour", especially if he has "saved" the country on several previous occasions. This time, however, the outcome is particularly hard to predict because the real level of economic decline is still unknown, although it is already clear that if quarantine is not lifted in a month, several million people will lose their jobs. Besides, the measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus are inconsistent and contradictory; as a result, they are often perceived as too weak or needlessly strict. The economic support for families and businesses announced by the government is also far inferior to that offered by the EU and the US. Thus, together with the drop in oil prices (which Russian decision-makers are blamed for) the coronavirus pandemic may lead to an unpredictable loss of trust in Russia's leadership and political system as a whole. The counter-argument, of course, is that following the collapse of the USSR, Russian society has become used to economic turbulence and is not as demanding as the citizens of liberal democracies. Considering both arguments, "Plan A" still seems the more probable because of one simple truth: in an emergency or crisis, institutional

trust is very difficult to build from scratch. As Carl Schmitt pointed out in “Dictatorship”, in national emergencies, normal institutions are usually suspended and replaced by the logic of sovereign decision-making based on personal trust.

## **Consequences for Foreign Policy: Responsibility for Rebuilding Trust?**

What are the implications of the current political situation for Russia's foreign policy? The text of the Address declared that Russia “does not threaten anyone” and does not impose its will, that Russia is ready for partnership and ready to take responsibility for the world order as one of the permanent member states of the UN Security Council. Much has been said about responsibility in the field of climate change and readiness to assume obligations and cooperate multilaterally. This can be understood as a declaration that Russia no longer wishes to be “angry”<sup>17</sup>, but finally wants to focus on itself and, above all, to stop wasting effort and resources on mutually exhausting confrontations with other global powers, and direct them instead to increasing capacity for domestic economic development. It seems that the Address reflects an awareness of internal weaknesses – distrust in the “system” and lack of economic growth – that are indeed a major breach in the wall of “fortress Russia” and that leave the country highly vulnerable. To ignore this internal vulnerability and the basic needs of Russian people in a context in which an increasing number of states, driven by public discontent, are beginning to apply the logic of “America first”, would mean falling into the same trap

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<sup>17</sup> “Russia is reproached for being isolated and silent in the face of facts that are not in harmony with either law or justice. They say that Russia is angry. Russia is not angry; Russia is focusing on itself”. This is a well-known phrase that the head of the MFA of the Russian Empire, Alexander M. Gorchakov wrote in a circular dispatch, sent shortly after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. At that time, the country's relations with the opposing powers became very tense and the foreign press commonly characterised Russia as “angry”.

that many of the most developed states in the world have failed to avoid. So, regardless of whether Putin will stay or not, during the next four years he will have to tackle the need to rebuild trust in the political regime. This will be done mostly through economic means, i.e. by increasing the budget for social services, but the economic situation will hardly allow Russia to become involved in new adventures that may lead to new sanctions or cause further economic troubles.

It is interesting that, following the logic of America and a number of European governments, determined to protect the interests of their own citizens and to review international treaties and supranational EU norms etc., the Russian leadership is insisting on the priority of the Constitution over international law. Article 79 of the Constitution states that “decisions of international bodies adopted on the basis of the provisions of international treaties of the Russian Federation that are contrary to the Constitution of the Russian Federation will not be implemented within the Russian Federation”. As Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained<sup>18</sup>, this does not mean that Russia is going to withdraw from international organisations or treaties. But it is obvious that from now on, each new decision taken by international bodies will undergo a “check” for compliance with the constitutional norms of the Russian Federation.

We should not expect a significant reduction in Russia’s involvement in international affairs in favour of concentrating on internal development. The fact that Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu retained their posts in the new cabinet means that the President is satisfied with the current foreign policy course. Russia, according to Putin, has assumed its rightful place in the world: its voice is listened to. In coming years, while we can probably expect that the Russian leadership will stop making additional efforts to *achieve* this “rightful place”, as it did during the previous decade, it will obviously continue to

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<sup>18</sup> Acting Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia’s diplomatic performance in 2019 Moscow, *ME4*, 17 January 2020.

take all necessary measures to *maintain* and *secure* it. Russia is highly unlikely to become inactive in the international arena.

This is already evidenced by Putin's first foreign policy initiative after the Address, namely, the proposal to organise a meeting of the leaders of the UN Security Council members and a joint security event<sup>19</sup>. The value of this initiative cannot be overestimated. Firstly, Russia again takes the initiative as a global player and emphasises its place among the great powers. Secondly, the proposal clearly reflects the desire of the Russian President, in the last four years of his tenure, to achieve a change in the perception of Russia on the world stage – as a responsible stakeholder capable of contributing to the creation of a new multipolar world order.

It is clear that the Russian leadership will actively develop this discourse in 2020 in connection with the 75th anniversary of victory in the Second World War in May and the creation of the UN in September, as well as in connection with Russia's chairmanship of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), two organisations viewed as contributors to the formation of a fairer, multipolar world order. It can be assumed that the Russian leadership views the task of increasing trust in Russia on the world stage as a key foreign policy task for the next four years.

These intentions can also be seen from recent positive developments in the direction of Ukraine, namely the exchange of prisoners, the restart of "Normandy format" talks and the resumption of gas supplies through the country. The readiness of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to intensify negotiations in the "5 + 2" format to resolve the conflict in Transnistria also signals that Russia is interested in the successful resolution of at least one frozen conflict in post-Soviet space in order to demonstrate its intention to become a peace-provider rather than a conflict-provider in Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> "Putin predlozhit Sovbezu OON provesti obshchee meropriyatie po bezopasnosti" ("Putin invited UN Security Council to hold joint security event"), *RLA Novosti*, 23 January 2020.

Other symbolic gestures have been made against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. Russia's leadership has sent medical personnel and equipment to Italy, Serbia and even to the US. These steps are obviously intended to confirm Russia's readiness to cooperate with political opponents, even NATO members and America itself, in the event of a real emergency or humanitarian catastrophe. Russian politicians have also called for all sanctions to be lifted in the context of the global pandemic.

Nevertheless, at least one factor can be identified that could prevent the rebuilding of trust between Russia and the EU. This is the active use of historical memory in political struggles, i.e. the reassessment of the role played by the USSR in World War II. Officials in some Eastern European states<sup>20</sup>, for example, have accused the USSR not only of starting the War, but also of facilitating the Holocaust. For the Russian leadership and for the whole of Russian society this is a red line, a morally sensitive topic with the potential to reverse positive dynamics in relations with states in Eastern Europe and the EU as a whole.

For the EU, with its current numerous internal crises, all internal bonds that can promote solidarity are objectively important. The identification of an external enemy and appeals to the community to share a common perception of its role in the history of a united Europe are perfectly suited to this purpose. However, one must be aware that solidarity around a new assessment of the events of 75 years ago may become detrimental to the present and the future. The anniversary of the end of World War II and the creation of the main institution of international cooperation for peace – the UN – may become the starting point for a restoration of trust between Russia and Europe, but it may also become the point of its total loss. It all depends, as always, on a concrete political will.

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<sup>20</sup> M. Morawiecki, "Moscow's Holocaust revisionism", *Politico.eu*. 21 January 2020; "Vladimir Zelenskij obvinil SSSR v razvazyvanii Vtoroj mirovoj" ("Vladimir Zelensky accused the USSR of unleashing World War II"), *Kommersant*, 27 January 2020.



## 2. Greater Eurasia. Opportunity or Downsizing for Russia?

Aldo Ferrari

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In recent years the idea of Greater Eurasia seems to constitute the main strategic reference of Russian foreign policy. However, as many analysts observe, the outlines of this idea are still largely uncertain, if not contradictory. In particular, it is difficult to clearly distinguish its relationship with other recent Russian intellectual and political ventures such as Eurasianism, Eurasian Economic Union (EUAU) and Turn to East<sup>1</sup>. The emphasis with which Greater Eurasia is used by the Russian leadership and its diffusion in political research testify to its relevance. Furthermore, the role of Eurasianism in the Greater Eurasia grabbed international attention and even rang some alarm bells: indeed, Eurasianism could be interpreted as a cultural and geopolitical justification for Russian imperialism replacing the role Marxism-Leninism in Soviet times. Considering all of the above, this topic of Greater Eurasia should be addressed very carefully in order to try to define Russia's self-perception as well as its ability to produce an effective foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Lo, *Greater Eurasia. The Emperor's New Clothes or an Idea whose Time Has Come?*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), July 2019, p. 11.

## From Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia

A long time has passed since 2001, when the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi proposed common economic space between the EU and Russia. A proposal that seemed entirely utopian in the absence of a free-trade agreement, but which showed that the Brussels leadership was willing to take this perspective into consideration. On the other hand, Russia too appeared amenable to the project of a Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Putin himself referred to this idea in his speech at the 2005 EU-Russia summit<sup>2</sup>.

As a matter of fact, even in those honeymoon years of the Russian-EU relations Moscow was not fully willing to accept EU norms and standards. The political deterioration between the EU and Russia in the years that followed made such a development less realistic<sup>3</sup>. Moscow then began to develop a Eurasian integration project that provoked both contempt and alarm in the West<sup>4</sup>. While there are fears that Russia may use Eurasianism to replace Marxism-Leninism as a new imperial ideology in the post-Soviet space, its ability to achieve this goal was completely denied. In any case, the results of this Russian project have so far been modest: in July 2011 a Customs Union was born, including only Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan; it became the Common Economic Area in 2012 and the EAEU in 2015. While covering three quarters of the post-Soviet space, this project was strongly hindered by the failure to include Ukraine, which after the 2014 crisis turned decisively towards the West. Indeed, the rivalry between Russia' Eurasian project

<sup>2</sup> A.V. Tsyk, "'Greater Europe' or 'Greater Eurasia'? In search of new ideas for the Eurasian integration", *RUDN Journal of Sociology*, 2018, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 262-70.

<sup>3</sup> A. Kortunov, "[One More Time on Greater Europe and Greater Eurasia](#)", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 5 October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> S.F. Starr and S.E. Cornell, *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington D.C.; N. Popescu, *Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely*, Chaillot Paper, no. 132, 9 September 2014.

and the European Eastern Partnership project should be seen as the main cause of the Ukrainian crisis and of the conflict between Russia and the West<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, the growing reluctance of Belarus and Kazakhstan to engage politically as well as economically within the EAUE weakens the integration process enhanced by the Kremlin. The entry into the EAEU of economically and politically weak states such as Armenia (October 2014) and Kyrgyzstan (May 2015) has hardly changed this rather disappointing situation<sup>6</sup>.

Russia's persistent economic weakness and the diffidence of many post-Soviet countries to fully adhere to a project largely dominated by Moscow make it difficult for the EAEU to meet its initial ambitions. Besides, the Eurasian integration project also has to deal with the much more dynamic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 by Beijing.

Indeed, Moscow put up a good facade before the Chinese project, probably because it had no choice. The conflict with the West that followed the Ukrainian crisis and the unstoppable growth of China actually forced Russia to strengthen strategic cooperation with its great Asian neighbour<sup>7</sup>.

The idea of Greater Eurasia was born in this context of challenges coming from both East and West. In an article published in February 2015 Dmitry Trenin, the Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, remarked that in place of "Greater Europe" from Lisbon to Vladivostok, which was proclaimed

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<sup>5</sup> E. Korosteleva, Z. Paikin, and S. Paduano (eds.), *Five years after Maidan: Toward a Greater Eurasia?*, Compass, Uptake, Lse Ideas, May 2019, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> C. Vasilyeva and M. Lagutina, *The Russian Project of Eurasian Integration. Geopolitical Prospects*, Lanham - Boulder - New York - London, Lexington Books, 2016; A. Ferrari, *Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. A Failed Project?*, in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Putin's Russia: Really Back?*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2016, pp. 115-130.

<sup>7</sup> G. Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to World order. National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East Versus West in the 2010s*, Woodrow Wilson Center, Stanford University Press, 2014; M. Lubina, *Russia and China. A political marriage of convenience*, Opladen - Berlin - Toronto, Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2017; A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds.), *Russia and China. Anatomy of a Partnership*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2019.

by Western leaders and Mikhail Gorbachev, a “Greater Asia” is beginning to take shape<sup>8</sup>. In April of that year, some analysts from the Valdai Club, including Sergey Karaganov and Timofey Bordachev, published a report in which they claimed it was time to integrate the Russian EAEU project with that of the Chinese BRI:

However, in 2015 we can speak on the birth of the “Central Eurasian Moment”, which is the unique confluence of international political and economic circumstances that allows for the renewed potential for cooperation and common development within the states of this region. The main driving forces behind the transformation of Central Eurasia into a zone of joint development will be Eurasian economic integration, led by Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as by Belarus and the Silk Road Economic Belt project<sup>9</sup>.

In another article of the same period, Karaganov highlights that “[...] large blocks are being created in the world and Greater Eurasia (Bolshaia Evraziia) will be one of those”<sup>10</sup>. Alexandr Lukin, an important specialist in Russian-Chinese relations, also contributed significantly to the formation of this idea by supporting the evidence of the formation of “[...] the system of Greater Eurasia, the states of which will not be tied by alliance relations, as are the United States and its European satellites”<sup>11</sup>. At the end of 2015, the idea of Greater Eurasia had clearly emerged in its general outline. This vision obviously does not constitute an absolute novelty, since the idea of a particular closeness of Russia

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<sup>8</sup> D. Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 February 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *Toward the Great Ocean 3 – Creating Central Eurasia*, Valdai Club, 2015, p. 8. On the “invention” of Greater Eurasia see D.G. Lewis, “Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of ‘Greater Eurasia’”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, no. 10, December 2018, pp. 1615-18.

<sup>10</sup> S. Karaganov, “*Pervye kontury Bolshij Evrazii*” (“First outlines of Greater Eurasia”), *Rossija v global’noj politike*, 29 May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> A. Lukin, *Russia, China and the Emerging Greater Eurasia*, The Asan Forum, 18 August 2015.

to Asia is already central not only in the Eurasianist thought of the 1920-30s<sup>12</sup>, but also in the “mystical” neo-Eurasism of Lev Gumilev (1912-1992)<sup>13</sup> and in that of the controversial political thinker Aleksandr Dugin, largely influenced by the geopolitical ideas of Karl Haushofer and Carl Schmitt, as well as by the positions of the new contemporary European Far Right.

The neo-Eurasist perspective, especially the radically anti-Western version elaborated by Dugin, has often been linked to Putin since his rise to power. However, this is a quite inadequate interpretation:

Dugin's networks are those of the European New Right, rooted in barely concealed fascist traditions, and with some assumed intellectual and individual affiliations with the Nazi ideology and post-Nazi elusive transformations. On the contrary, the Kremlin has progressively created a consensual ideology without doctrine, founded on Russian patriotism and classical conservative values: social order, authoritarian political regime, the traditional family etc...<sup>14</sup>

Many Western analysts probably overestimate the importance of this author, on the one hand attributing to him a non-existent political and cultural centrality in contemporary Russia, on the other hand projecting his ideological extremism onto every Eurasian project proposed by Russia. In fact, the role of a fundamental figure such as Yevgeny Primakov (1929-2015), Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Russia in the

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<sup>12</sup> M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008; D. Shlapentokh (ed.), *Russia Between East and West: Scholarly Debates on Eurasianism*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2007; M. Bassin, S. Glebov, and M. Laruelle (eds.), *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> M. Bassin, *The Gumilev mystique: biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the construction of community in modern Russia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> M. Laruelle, *Dangerous Liasons: Eurasianism, the European Far Right, and Putin's Russia*, in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Euro – Russian Relationship*, London, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 23.

late 1990s<sup>15</sup>, was much more important for the formation of the Greater Eurasia project: “Russia’s Kissinger and architect of the Primakov Doctrine espoused a Sino-Russian alliance [...] against Western unilateralism”<sup>16</sup>.

## Economic, Security and Ideological Dynamics of Greater Eurasia

In the international political scenario, which emerged after the Ukrainian crisis, the expression Greater Eurasia began to be used more and more frequently by various members of the Russian elite until Putin himself adopted it in June 2016 on the occasion of the International Economic Forum of Saint Petersburg:

We are aware of the impressive prospects of cooperation between the EAEU and other countries and integration associations. [...] Our partners and we think that the EAEU can become one of the centres of a greater emergent integration area. Among other benefits, we can address ambitious technological problems within its framework, promote technological progress and attract new members. We discussed this in Astana quite recently. Now we propose considering the prospects for more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the EAEU and countries with which we already have close partnership – China, India, Pakistan and Iran – and certainly our CIS partners, and other interested countries and associations. [...] Friends, the project I have just mentioned – the “Greater Eurasia” project – is, of course, open for Europe, and I am convinced that such cooperation may be mutually beneficial. Despite all of the well-known problems in our relations, the European Union remains

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<sup>15</sup> See *The unknown Primakov. Memoirs*, Moscow, Publishing House TPP RF, 2016; and the article by D. Novikov, “Rycar’ rossijskogo realizma” (“The Knight of Russian Realism”), in F. Lukyanov (ed.), *Konservatizm vo vnešnej politike: XXI vek* (*Conservatism in foreign policy: XXI century*), special issue of “Rossia v globalnoi politike”, 2017, pp. 119-132.

<sup>16</sup> M.L. Levin, *The Next Great Clash. China and Russia vs. The United States*, Westport-London, Praeger, 2008, p. 130.

Russia's key trade and economic partner. It is our next-door neighbour and we are not indifferent to what is happening in the lives of our neighbours, European countries and the European economy<sup>17</sup>.

The concept of Greater Eurasia is presented by Putin as a development of the EAEU and does not exclude cooperation with Europe, far from it. However, it is clear that the emphasis is no longer on the centrality of Russian-European relations, but on the possibility that Europe will also participate in the larger Eurasian project focused mainly on Russia and China<sup>18</sup>.

This is obviously a change of great importance. Ever since, Greater Eurasia has been an essential part of the official Russian discourse, intended primarily as a decisive step in the realization of a new multipolar international order based on collaboration between the main powers. According to Sergey Karaganov,

The partnership or community of Greater Eurasia is, first of all, a conceptual framework that sets the direction for interaction among states on the continent. It should be committed to promoting joint economic, political, and cultural revival and development of dozens of Eurasian countries, backward or oppressed in the past, and turning Eurasia into the global economic and political center. [...] The partnership of Greater Eurasia should be based on the traditional postulates of international law and international coexistence, and rejection of all forms of universalism, supremacy of certain values over others, and one's a priori rightness or hegemony<sup>19</sup>.

This project is clearly opposed to the political and cultural hegemony of the West and the US in particular, but its

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<sup>17</sup> V. Putin, *Speech at plenary session of the XX St Petersburg International Economic Forum*, Saint Petersburg, 17 June 2016.

<sup>18</sup> D.G. Lewis (2018), p. 1617.

<sup>19</sup> S. Karaganov, "The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 9, 2018, p. 90. See also R. Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest. The post-cold war crisis of world order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 292-293.

configuration appears to be largely fluid and open to different interpretations<sup>20</sup>. This indeterminacy can be considered a weakness, but also a strength as it makes it applicable in different fields, not only in the economic one as is the case of the EAEU<sup>21</sup>.

There is of course also an economic dimension of Greater Eurasia, which Moscow sees as a privileged space for trade between Europe and Asia, especially since the main transit routes go through Russia<sup>22</sup>.

In addition, this project should also contribute to the enhancement of the Russian Far East, which remains largely underdeveloped despite its immense potential for growth. According to most analysts, Russia is unable to effectively carry out its Eurasian economic integration project. In particular, the attempt to place EAEU at the centre of Greater Eurasia strategy has so far produced very limited results<sup>23</sup>.

The strengthening of economic cooperation with Asian countries certainly constitutes a fundamental priority for Russia, but at the same time it suffers from increasing asymmetry with China. This situation is often framed in entirely negative terms:

Instead of taking on the role of a regional integrator, Russia is rapidly turning into a subordinate element of China's own far-reaching plans. The only beneficiary is Beijing, which is aptly capitalizing on Moscow's misconceptions<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> A. Kuznetsova, *Greater Eurasia. Perceptions from Russia, the European Union, and China*, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 1 September 2017.

<sup>21</sup> B. Lo, *Greater Eurasia. The Emperor's New Clothes or an Idea whose Time Has Come?*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), July 2019.

<sup>22</sup> On this topic see G. Diesen, *Russia's Geoeconomic Strategy for a Greater Eurasia*, New York, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> R. Dragneva-Lewers, *What Role for the Eurasian Economic Union in Greater Eurasia?*, in E. Korosteleva, Z. Paikin, and S. Paduano (eds.), *Five years after Maidan: Toward a Greater Eurasia?*, Compass, Uptake, Lse Ideas, May 2019, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> S. Sukhankin, "From 'Turn to the East' to 'Greater Eurasia': Russia's Abortive Search for a Far East Strategy", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 15, no. 177, 14 December 2018.



Such a view is of course not shared by those who believe that Russia is able to successfully manoeuvre in the new Eurasian scenario. According to Karaganov, for example:

The old order is destroyed [...] We have to build a new one, which will be weakly bipolar. One pole will be around the United States, the other, Greater Eurasia, will have China as its economic leader, but this country will not be hegemonic. Beijing will be balanced by Moscow, Delhi, Tokyo, Seoul, Tehran, Jakarta and Manila<sup>25</sup>.

Moscow's strength in this new pole evidently depends on its ability to guarantee regional security. Indeed, this is the only field in which Russia outweighs China, thanks to its considerable military modernisation in recent years and the successes achieved in Ukraine and especially in Syria:

[...] Russia's contribution to the fight against the structures of Islamic terrorism and the liberation of part of Syria and Iraq from its control can be seen as a sort of examination for the role of sheriff of the Greater Eurasia<sup>26</sup>.

From this point of view, the military effectiveness of Russia establishes the necessary balance between the two main countries of Greater Eurasia, based on a sort of "division of labour", within which China dominates the economic sphere while Russia has a leading role in ensuring security through CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) facilities. Therefore, this "division of labour" seems to guarantee a substantially equal relationship and a win-win perception of Greater Eurasia<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> S. Karaganov, "God pobed. Chto dal'she?" ("A year of victories. What else?"), *Rossia v globalnoi politike*, 16 January 2017.

<sup>26</sup> D. Efremenko, "Rozhdenie Bolshoi Evrazii" ("The Birth of Greater Eurasia"), in F. Lukyanov (ed.), *Konservatizm vo vneshnei politike: XXI vek* (*Conservatism in foreign policy: XXI century*), special issue of *Rossia v globalnoi politike*, 2017, p. 169.

<sup>27</sup> B. Lo (2019).

The most controversial aspect of Greater Eurasia is the ideological one. Despite its declared pragmatic attitude, this project in fact represents a revival of a cultural view that first emerged in the XIX century, namely that Russia should follow a path based on the autonomous historical, geographical and social features of the country as opposed to imitating the European model: from Nikolay Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontev, who developed a vision of universal history as a plurality of autonomous civilisations (“cultural-historical types”), to the founder of Eurasianism, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, who vehemently contested Eurocentrism in his *Europe and Mankind* (1920)<sup>28</sup>, until the so-called “civilisational approach”, which spread in the post-Soviet era in neo-Eurasianist circles.

This civilisational approach is also evident in many supporters of the Greater Eurasia project. Even without contesting the essentially European character of Russian culture, the conflict with the West that has developed in recent years seems to have strengthened Russia’s search for its own specificity. In Russia the centuries-long assumption of the pre-eminence of the West is now in decline, while the simultaneous growth of the Far East leads to rethinking priorities and strategies. The crisis with the West has actually pushed Russia to intensify political and economic relations with China and other Asian countries with which it also broadly shares ideological orientations. It is not only a matter of challenging the US-led unipolar order that emerged at the end of the Cold War, but also of a *Weltanschauung* that rejects the alleged universality of Western values and instead focuses on national ones. If in his official speeches Putin increasingly defines Russia as a conservative country founded on Christian Orthodox values<sup>29</sup>, the revival of Confucian heritage in China and of neo-Hinduism in India is also a form of reaffirming the primacy of national traditions. As

<sup>28</sup> See the English translation in N. Trubetzkoy, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and other essays on Russia’s Identity*, Ann Arbor, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> A. Ferrari, *Russia. A Conservative Society?*, in A. Ferrari, (ed.), *Russia 2018. Predictable Elections, Uncertain Future*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2018, pp. 33-53.

Fedor Lukyanov has observed:

The need to preserve sovereignty – not only in a political sense, but also from the point of view on national identity – is again perceived as a norm. The liberal-cosmopolitan utopia of the late twentieth century is rejected in the shadows<sup>30</sup>.

Therefore, according to this author, Russia should pursue a self-perception based on the idea of “civilisation” that corresponds more effectively to Russia’s historic traditions and to its relations with neighbouring states<sup>31</sup>. Such a civilisational approach is also expressed in an important speech given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov in Munich on 18 February 2017:

Humanity stands at a crossroads today. The historic era that could be called the post-Cold War order has come to an end. [...]

This global model was pre-programmed for crisis right from the time when this vision of economic and political globalisation was conceived primarily as an instrument for ensuring the growth of an elite club of countries and its domination over everyone else. It is clear that such a system could not last forever. Leaders with a sense of responsibility must now make their choice. I hope that this choice will be made in favour of building a democratic and fair world order, a post-West world order, if you will, in which each country develops its own sovereignty within the framework of international law, and will strive to balance their own national interests with those of their partners, with respect for each country’s cultural, historical and civilisational identity<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> F. Lukyanov (2017), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2648249](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2648249)

Lavrov himself often refers to the Greater Eurasian Partnership. For example, in a speech held in New Delhi on 5 January, he said that “The Russian initiative of forming Greater Eurasian Partnership has become established as a concept of long-term political and diplomatic efforts [...]”<sup>33</sup>.

Assessments of the Russian project of Greater Eurasia vary greatly. Western analysts’ comments are usually hostile or dismissive. So, for example, Bobo Lo says that “Much of the ideology surrounding the Greater Eurasia concept is presentational rather than inspirational. It supplies a veneer of cultural-civilizational unity to what is really a jumble of ideas, few of which have been properly thought through”<sup>34</sup>.

This kind of criticism seems to be almost unconsciously affected by a prejudicial depreciation of any Russian cultural or political initiative that calls into question the superiority of the Western model and the universal dimension of its values. This is especially true if such initiatives are based on the Eurasian idea, which seems to be particularly irritating for almost everyone who studies it from a Western viewpoint.

Anyway, it should be borne in mind that the conceptual elaboration of Greater Eurasia does not come from outsiders such as Gumilev or Dugin, but from figures widely included in the official discourse of contemporary Russia. Indeed, its constant use by Putin and Lavrov also certifies that this is a vision now shared by Russian political leaders.

More generally, it cannot be overlooked that this discourse intercepts an indisputable reality of today’s international scenario, namely the emergence from China to Turkey of an immense political space in which Western liberal norms are widely challenged. In an international system that increasingly takes on the characteristics of a post-liberal and post-western world<sup>35</sup>,

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<sup>33</sup> D.R. Chaudhury, “Russia pushes India’s entry into Eurasian Economic Union strengthening third country coop”, *The Economic Times*, 5 January 2020.

<sup>34</sup> B. Lo (2019).

<sup>35</sup> A. Colombo and P. Magri (eds.), *The End of a World. The decline of the liberal order*, ISPI Annual Report, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2019.

the Russian idea of Greater Eurasia is far from groundless. For this reason, as some have put it, “[...] the temptation to dismiss the Valdai school as merely the latest geopolitical imaginary in Russian foreign policy is short-sighted”<sup>36</sup>.

The main point is rather to understand the effectiveness of this vision as a tool of Russia’s foreign policy. It can be observed that while Russia plays a dominant role within the EAEU, in Greater Eurasia its role is evidently downsized, primarily because of Chinese superiority. Even a supporter of this project like Dmitry Efremenko wrote “that Russia cannot avoid recognizing the general primacy of China, but maintains equal rights and freedom of manoeuvre”<sup>37</sup>. These are certainly not obvious words from the perspective of a Russia accustomed to thinking of itself as a great power, but which is hampered in its ambitions by numerous internal difficulties, first and foremost its structural economic weakness compared to the United States and China<sup>38</sup>. But also by the persistence of a Western orientation among the elite and the inertia of the bureaucracy<sup>39</sup>.

In any event, Russia’s tilt towards Asia is probably destined to continue. As Lukin wrote Greater Eurasia should be considered “[...] not as goal of Russian and Chinese diplomacy, but as an objective reality reflecting fundamental processes in world politics”<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, Russia’s distance from the EU and the United States has not diminished in recent years. Moscow’s relations with some European countries remain fraught, while Trump’s

<sup>36</sup> D.G. Lewis (2018), p. 1633.

<sup>37</sup> D. Efremenko, “Rozhdenie Boshoi Evrazii” (“The birth of Greater Eurasia”), in *Konservatizm vo vnešnej politike: XXI vek (Conservatism in foreign policy: XXI century)*, special issue of *Rossia v globalnoi politike*, 2017, p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> A. Ferrari, “Russia between the United States and China: A Possible Third Power?”, in A. Colombo and P. Magri (eds.), *Work in Progress. The End of a World, part II*, Annual Report 2020, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2020, pp. 152-161.

<sup>39</sup> See T. Bordachev, “Novoye yevraziistvo: Kaksdelat’ sopryazhenie rabotayushchim” (“New Eurasianism. How uniting workers”), *Rossia v globalnoi politike*, 14 October 2015.

<sup>40</sup> A. Lukin, “Russian-Chinese Cooperation in Central Asia and the Idea of Greater Eurasia”, *India Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2019.

presidency has not led to the Russia-US rapprochement that some have been waiting for. As noted by the Director of the Russian International Affairs Council, Andrey Kortunov, the Greater Eurasia project does not have to face these difficulties because most Asian countries do not perceive Russia as a threat. Furthermore, unlike the rigid institutional framework of the EU, the various “Eurasian” initiatives are deliberately vague precisely so as not to discourage potential partners:

Therefore, it easier for Russia to plug itself into emerging Asian mechanisms and regimes – not as a latecomer, but as one of the founding fathers and in some cases as of the leaders. This is not to say that the European project is of no significance to Russia. Quite the opposite is true. The most important comparative advantage of Moscow in Asia is exactly Russia’s “European” nature. Only by articulating this nature can Russia become a valuable building block in the new Greater Eurasia. [...] Therefore, for Moscow it is crucially important to maintain and to expand its historic human, cultural, educational and other ties to Russia’s European cradle<sup>41</sup>.

Therefore, the turn to Asia can be considered appropriate for Russia from a “European” perspective as well. Looking back in history, a similar shift occurred in the second half of the XIX century when Russia intensified the Eastern vector of its foreign policy after the disappointments of the Crimean War and the Berlin Congress. It was then that Dostoevsky wrote the famous words “In Europe we are hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we walk as masters”<sup>42</sup> which are often repeated with regard to Russia’s recent pivot to Asia<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> A. Kortunov (2018).

<sup>42</sup> F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, vol. 2 (1877-1881), Evanston (Ill.), Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 1373.

<sup>43</sup> R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 378; A.M. Chenoy and R. Kumar, *Re-emerging Russia. Structures, Institutions and Processes*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 229.

## **Conclusion**

Can the Greater Europe project be considered an effective way to restore Russia's great power status? It is doubtful, indeed. Unlike Marxism-Leninism, which had a potentially global attractiveness, it lacks an adequate ideological basis. In fact, despite the hopes of some and the fears of others, Eurasianism is not really attractive to post-Soviet countries, not even to those of Central Asia and certainly not beyond them. This project therefore does not have real hegemonic potential; it should rather be interpreted as a response to the difficult challenges imposed on Russia by today's political and economic evolution. At the same time, the Greater Eurasia project is ambitious and difficult to implement. It reasserts the persistent Russian claims of a historical-cultural specificity in an international scenario which sees Russia clashing with an apparently declining West and the impetuous rise of the Far East, led by China. This project is based on the belief that these three political dynamics will continue to develop, and that in this situation the Eurasian choice is both advantageous and obligatory for Moscow.

However, this is a risky choice, because the growing economic and demographic gap puts Russia in a clearly subordinate position with respect to China. Even without sharing the prejudicial hostility of many Western observers towards Eurasian integration projects, one wonders if this perspective is really the most convenient for Russia. But equally legitimate is the question of whether it is really convenient for the West to persist in its uncompromising and prescriptive attitude, which has greatly contributed to Russia's Eastern choice.

### 3. Branding the Country and Its Leader: Soft Power Made in Russia

Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

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At a 2018 meeting with the students of the Far Eastern Federal University, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia has been using soft power confidently, filling the gaps caused by the breakup of the USSR<sup>1</sup>. Even if today Russia appears to be "more confident using hard power measures to pursue its neighbourhood interests"<sup>2</sup>, Moscow has indeed been trying to boost its power of attraction in what it considers its sphere of influence and beyond, cultivating its cultural and historical links through specific soft power policies such as language programmes and commemorations of events of shared history, such as the USSR victory in WWII. In March 2020, Moscow sent planes of medical personnel and equipment to Italy and other countries in an effort to improve its image and flex its soft power amid accusations of spreading disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. But what do we mean when we speak about soft power and can Russia claim to have it?

Soft power is a "pop" concept. Indeed, few scholarly concepts have "transcended the ivory towers of academia" as strongly as soft power<sup>3</sup>; suffice it to say that in 2005, the British electropop

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<sup>1</sup> Sergey Lavrov, *Russia is actively using the policy of "soft power"*, Gorchakov Fund, 13 September 2018.

<sup>2</sup> E. Tafuro, *Fatal Attraction? Russia's Soft Power in Its Neighbourhood*, FRIDE Policy Brief no. 181, May 2014, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> G. Gallarotti, "Soft power: what it is, why it is important and the conditions for



band Ladytron named a song after it. Born in the US, the concept gradually went global, and today a growing number of states claim to have incorporated soft power policies into their foreign policy tools. While there has been some discussion about Russia's soft power in official and academic circles, Western academics and practitioners remain focused on a few cases, primarily the US and the EU. This oversight leads not only to a "major gap" in the academic literature on soft power, but also to a "misunderstanding of Russia's foreign policy thinking, motivations, and actions"<sup>4</sup>.

This chapter seeks to address this oversight and presents a view of Russia's soft power that takes into account the country's history and specificities. To this end, it first reflects on the main definitions of soft power, including the gaps that could complicate the concept's application to non-liberal states<sup>5</sup>. It then looks back at the Cold War era and reviews the main soft power sources of the USSR, with a view to comparing them with today's Russia. If it is true that some elements may recall the Soviet past – the use of sport mega-events is a case in point, with the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 World Cup often compared<sup>6</sup> with the Moscow 1980 Games – some novel narratives, such as conservatism, are peculiar to the

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its effective use", *Journal of Political Power*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011, pp. 25-47 (cit. p. 25).

<sup>4</sup> Y. Osipova, "Russification of Soft Power: Transformation of a Concept", *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Common categorisations of Russia's government include "illiberal democracy" and "electoral authoritarianism". Both terms indicate democratically elected regime that, despite formally adopting democratic institutions (such as elections, political parties, and a legislature), are essentially authoritarian and impose severe constraints on their civil society. See F. Zakaria, "The Illiberal Rise of Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6, 1997, pp. 22-43; V. Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia. Analyzing post-Soviet regime changes*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> R. Smith, "The World Cup Changed Russia, but for How Long?", *The New York Times*, 16 July 2018; N. Kramareva and J. Grix, "War and Peace at the 1980 Moscow and 2014 Sochi Olympics: The role of hard and soft power in Russian identity", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 35, no. 14, 2018, pp. 1407-27, doi: 10.1080/09523367.2019.1610400.

“new Russia”. While an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of Russian soft power falls beyond the scope of this chapter, this study can serve as a stepping stone to further research on a relevant yet too often neglected topic.

## Which and Whose Soft Power?

Despite its popularity, soft power is also one of the most misused International Relations (IR) concepts, to the extent that, according to its creator Joseph Nye, it became a “synonym for anything other than military force”<sup>7</sup>. But what is soft power? Coined in 1990, soft power refers to “the ability to affect others through the cooptive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes”<sup>8</sup>. A country’s culture, its values and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policies are its three sources of soft power, which is different from propaganda<sup>9</sup>. In Nye’s opinion, credibility and legitimacy are strongly related: if a country appears to be acting out of narrow self-interest, it is likely to be seen as doing propaganda rather than exerting soft power<sup>10</sup>.

A common misconception associates soft power almost uniquely with immaterial resources such as culture or ideology. Yet, the difference between tangible and intangible resources is not what differentiates hard from soft power. The former can also stem from a number of non-material sources (such as competence or status), while the latter can also be based on material hard power sources such as military might (i.e.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Nye, *The Future Of Power*, Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2011, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Propaganda is defined by Taylor as “the conscious, methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve specific goals that are intended to benefit those organising the process”. P.M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> J. Nye, *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004.

attracting weaker states that need protection). While this aspect has attracted criticism from many fronts<sup>11</sup>, drawing too clear a demarcation line between material and immaterial resources, as well as failing to acknowledge the strong links between hard and soft power, would not show the whole picture.

One of the most widely debated issues about soft power is its applicability to non-liberal, including authoritarian countries. Over the past decade, studies over the soft power of China, Russia, Turkey and even Qatar and Saudi Arabia<sup>12</sup> have proliferated. These countries, while obviously different from one another, share a common non-liberal – even authoritarian – form of government, and yet they have also adopted the rhetoric of soft power in their public discourse, sometimes emulating US and EU soft power institutions and style. However, is it possible to speak of a Russian or Chinese soft power? The concept was created around American foreign policy, and it seems intrinsically linked to democratic values. Indeed, Nye stresses the importance of *universal* and *democratic* values over *parochial* ones<sup>13</sup>, although he does not elaborate on why universal values are the *right* ones<sup>14</sup> nor does he make an effort to escape the trap of identifying Western values exclusively with liberal ones.

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<sup>11</sup> Leslie Gelb, for instance, argues that soft power has become too inclusive, as it “now seems to mean almost everything”: since economic coercion and military power have been introduced “through the back door”, soft power now includes not only such elements as leadership, persuasion, and values, but also concepts like military prowess. L.H. Gelb, *Power Rules. How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy*, New York, Harper Perennial, 2010, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> On the less studied topic of the Gulf countries’ soft power, see P.M. Brannagan and R. Giulianotti, “The soft power – soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar”, *International Affairs*, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 1139-1157, doi: 10.1093/ia/iyy125; and G. Gallarotti and I.Y. Al-Filali, “Saudi Arabia’s soft power”, *International Studies*, vol. 49, 2012, pp. 233-61, doi: 10.1177/0020881714532707.

<sup>13</sup> J. Nye (2011), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> J. Bially Mattern, “Why Soft Power Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics”, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2005, pp. 583-612.

What happens, then, when the values projected by a country are not liberal-democratic? On the one hand, Nye does acknowledge the soft power potential of states like China or Russia. On the other hand, reconciling the non-liberal outlook of some would-be soft power actors with a liberal soft power vision looks difficult. Nye himself argues that Russian and Chinese leaders “do not get” what soft power really is; hence they are not able to exploit its potential. Whereas much of America’s soft power is produced by civil society and not by government<sup>15</sup>, China and Russia, by contrast, due to their shared legacy of adherence to Communism and the political constrictions they impose on civic activism, deviate from the Western understanding, conceiving soft power mainly as the “outcome of state initiatives rather than the product of an autonomous civil society”<sup>16</sup>.

Recently, the soft power academic community took up the task of finding new appropriate lenses to decouple the soft power concept from the US-championed liberal-democratic form of government. While some scholars<sup>17</sup> simply dismiss Nye’s soft power as nothing but a masked neoliberal cultural imperialism, Zahran and Ramos, for instance, suggest reconceptualising it. They use Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony both to recognise the intrinsic link between coercion and consent and between hard and soft power, and to de-Westernise soft power by dropping the “universal values” implied by Nye. They acknowledge the “existence of a struggle over ideas and institutions in the international system” and call for “a more neutral analysis [that] would recognize that any set of principles and values cannot be universal”<sup>18</sup>. Other non-Gramscian

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<sup>15</sup> J. Nye, “[What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013.

<sup>16</sup> J.L. Wilson, “Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Readaptation of a Western Construct”, *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3-4, 2015, pp. 287-300.

<sup>17</sup> J. Bially Mattern (2005); N. Ferguson, “Power”, *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003, pp. 18-27.

<sup>18</sup> G. Zahran and L. Ramos, “From hegemony to soft power: implications of

scholars arrived at a similar conclusion and operationalise soft power in terms of narratives that manage to impose themselves internationally as “natural”, regardless of their content<sup>19</sup>. This viewpoint facilitates the application of the concept to non-liberal countries and informs the next section’s analysis of Soviet soft power.

## Back in the USSR

Talking about Soviet soft power may appear inappropriate, at first, since the concept was created after the demise of the USSR. Moreover, although some Soviet narratives built on democratic values (such as equality and solidarity) and a “universal” ideology, in practice the USSR was essentially an authoritarian/totalitarian state. Yet, it is usually acknowledged that the USSR had some powerful soft power sources, including its communist ideology, culture, and organisation of sport mega-events<sup>20</sup>. Adopting the wider perspective on soft power delineated in the previous section, what follows is an analysis of Soviet soft power aimed at enucleating the elements of change and continuity with today’s Russia.

Arguably, one of the strongest USSR soft power assets was its very existence. The utopic state – originated from a popular revolution and formally based on highly ethical values

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a conceptual change”, in I. Parmar and M. Cox (eds.), *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives*, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 12-31 (cit. p. 24).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, L. Roselle, A. Miskimmon, and B. O’Loughlin, “Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power”, *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 7, 2014, pp. 70-84; V. Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world(s)’”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2015, pp. 1-24.

<sup>20</sup> N. Kramareva and J. Grix (2018); P. Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power in Poland: Culture and the Making of Stalin’s New Empire, 1943-1957*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina Press, 2015; P. Amarasinghe, “[Reminiscence of Soviet soft power and the way it influenced the ‘Global South’](#)”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 2 November 2019.

– inspired many people and political movements worldwide, in the Global South, but also in the Western world<sup>21</sup>. In particular, the emphasis on anti-imperialism and self-determination held a special appeal among colonies fighting for national independence. In the Arab world, for instance, the Bolsheviks were said to have “brought a messianic concept of salvation, of God’s kingdom on earth, with a new, previously unknown and mysterious name – ‘socialism’ or ‘communism’”<sup>22</sup>. The USSR also provided assistance to many African countries’ liberation struggle, notably South Africa. Vladimir Shubin, a renowned Russian Africanist, recalls Nelson Mandela telling him at the first African National Congress (ANC) conference in 1991: “Without [Soviet] support, we would not be where we are now”<sup>23</sup>.

In its quest for influence, the USSR employed different strategies that, today, would qualify as soft power policies:

In addition to diplomatic contacts, the Soviets developed ties with a variety of political parties, promoted exchanges with labour, students, and cultural groups; disseminated massive quantities of print and radio propaganda; and employed tens of thousands of civilian and military technicians and advisors<sup>24</sup>.

Culture was used as a way to cement consensus at home, creating a “Soviet” nation, and among the satellite countries, as well as an attraction tool for external countries, to gain support for the Soviet-backed global order. Stalin, for instance, regarded culture as “a fertile experimental terrain for social engineering and a

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, Italy’s Communist party was the largest in the Western world and maintained close contacts with the Soviet government. L. Weinberg, *The Transformation of Italian Communism*, New York, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> A.M. Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East policy. From Lenin to Putin*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> V. Shubin, *Africa’s Unfolding Potential for Russia*, Commentary, ISPI, 15 November 2019.

<sup>24</sup> R.H. Donaldson and V. Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, London, Routledge, 6th edition, October 2018, p. 88.

convenient tool for legitimating [Soviet] power”<sup>25</sup>. The Soviets inherited from Imperial Russia a thriving music and ballet scene. The world-famous Bolshoi Ballet company came to be one of the main cultural tools of the newly-born Soviet country and even developed a new, revolution-friendly repertoire for its domestic and international audiences<sup>26</sup>. Ballet became a “cultural export”, a great source of soft power, displaying the “Soviets’ educational model, for their mastery of the traditional repertoire, a showcase for their finest and most athletic dancers, and thus for the *homo sovieticus*. It put paid to the Western cliché of the Soviet citizenry as dull and barbarous”<sup>27</sup>.

Russian literature and language were also great soft power assets. Starting in particular from the Khrushchev era, the USSR invested heavily on translating their great literary classics into local languages in South Asia, Africa and Latin America, coupling them with the Soviet anti-imperialist narratives. As a result, “the characters portrayed by pre-revolutionary Russia authors like Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Gogol invoked Asian sentiments to think about their own conditions under social inequality”<sup>28</sup>. These translations, hence, seems to have “enriched the soft power of the Soviet Union [and] were a bulwark against the critical works that sought to demystify the USSR myth”<sup>29</sup>. They also helped boost interest in the Russian language and the creation of institutions such as the Centre for Soviet and Central Asian Studies established in the 1960s at the Jawaharlal

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<sup>25</sup> P. Babiracki (2015), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> S. Morrison, *Behind the curtain: Scandal, tragedy, art and politics at the Bolshoi*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016; S. Gonçalves, “Ballet, propaganda, and politics in the Cold War: the Bolshoi Ballet in London and the Sadler’s Wells Ballet in Moscow, October-November 1956”, *Cold War History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1-16; E. Chao, “[The ballet that caused an international row](#)”, *BBC*, 28 June 2017.

<sup>27</sup> S. Gonçalves (2018), p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> P. Amarasinghe (2019).

<sup>29</sup> A. Lal, “[The soft power of the Soviet Union](#)”, *The Economic Times*, 10 March 2011.

Nehru University in New Delhi<sup>30</sup>. The establishment of People's Friendship University in Moscow, where several African and Asian leaders studied<sup>31</sup>, was also a great asset for Soviet foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Third World states.

The USSR also tried to use sport to project soft power, and several propaganda posters portray the USSR as a “sports country”.

FIG. 3.1 - “A MIGHTY SPORTS POWER”, 1962



<sup>30</sup> P. Amarasinghe (2019).

<sup>31</sup> The university's alumni include top politicians in Rwanda, Uganda, Mali, Chad, Angola, Botswana and other African countries. AFP, “[As Kremlin scrambles for Africa, Moscow university eyes soft power](#)”, *rfi*, 20 October 2019.



The 1980 Moscow Olympic Games were meant to be the best window where the country and its ideology were on display. The Games were indeed supposed to “crown the Brezhnev years with glory; [and] bring that worldwide endorsement of Soviet foreign policy, while rallying domestic support and reinforcing the communist elites’ positions”<sup>32</sup>. Although eventually, the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 compromised the country’s greatest soft power opportunity<sup>33</sup> and motivated the US’ and many of its allies’ decision to boycott the Olympics, the USSR did gain enormous visibility through the Games and the gadgets of the Soviet mascot, Misha the Bear, are still very sought after items among collectors.

FIG. 3.2 - THE SOFT POWER OF THE BEAR



*Notes. Left: Misha the Bear, the mascot of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.*

*Right: statues featuring the main characters of the Russian TV show Masha and the Bear'. It is sometimes argued that, given its global success, the cartoon is a tool of Russia's influence.*

<sup>32</sup> N. Kramareva and J. Grix, (2018), p. 1412.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

This brief review of the USSR's main soft power elements throws light on some important aspects that should be taken into account when analysing Russian soft power today. If anti-Americanism and the cultural and education/language elements are still there, the next section shows how other fresh soft power sources are relevant both in Russia's neighbourhood and in the global arena.

## Soft Power with a (Russian) Twist

What does soft power look like in today's Russia? Professor Andrey Makarychev defines it as a number of

non-military policies projecting specific dimensions of Russian power resources beyond Russia's borders, including communication and propaganda, the promotion of the Russian World as a global civilizational platform, religious diplomacy, memory politics and an external spillover of Russian conservative agenda<sup>34</sup>.

This definition captures *some* of the elements – both ideational and material – of Russia's soft power: the civilisation discourse; deep economic and social ties with neighbouring countries, the significant Russian minorities scattered globally and sympathisers of Russian culture, the so-called *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world); and Kremlin-friendly media outlets (mainly RT and Sputnik). But how do policymakers in Moscow understand it? The concept was first mentioned in February 2012 by Vladimir Putin during the presidential election campaign. One year later, it featured in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation and its 2016 revised version, which defines soft power as “an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives [including] the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies

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<sup>34</sup> A. Makarychev, “Beyond Geopolitics: Russian Soft Power, Conservatism, and Biopolitics”, *Russian Politics*, vol. 3, 2018, pp. 135-150 (cit. p. 137).

– from information and communication to humanitarian and other types”<sup>35</sup>. If soft power is acknowledged as an important tool, so are its possible negative spillovers. Putin and the 2013 version of the Foreign Policy Concept lament that soft power can be used in a “destructive and unlawful” way, pressuring and destabilising on sovereign states, by means of interfering in their internal affairs and manipulating public opinion<sup>36</sup>. This ambivalent view of soft power, according to Alexander Kornilov and Andrey Makarychev, is the cause of Russia’s inconsistent approach:

On the one hand, the Kremlin accuses the West of using soft power to interfere in the domestic affairs of third parties. [...] On the other hand, Russia’s soft-power institutions are explicitly based on their Western homologues. The Russia Today TV channel has been modelled on the BBC; the “Russia Beyond the Headlines” project started with *The Washington Post* and the *Daily Telegraph*; the Russian World Foundation is referred to as a Russian version of the British Council or the Goethe Institute<sup>37</sup>.

Similarly to the USSR, Russia is arguably strong in projecting soft power through culture today: Russian is still the *lingua franca* in the post-Soviet region, although English is becoming increasingly popular among young people; Russian directors often feature at the most prestigious film festivals worldwide; the classics of Russian literature still captivate the world’s interest and recognition, while the Mariinsky theatre in Saint Petersburg and the Bolshoi in Moscow are still key reference points for balletomanes. Yet, limiting the analysis to “classical”

<sup>35</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#) (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on 30 November 2016).

<sup>36</sup> V. Rotaru, “Forced Attraction?: How Russia is Instrumentalizing Its Soft Power Sources in the ‘Near Abroad’”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, no. 1, February 2017, pp. 1–12.

<sup>37</sup> A. Kornilov and A. Makarychev, “Russia’s soft power in the South Caucasus”, in A. Agadjanian et al. (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, London, Routledge, 2015, p. 241.

sources or indicators of soft power (such as media, culture or the number of students enrolling in Russian universities) would show only one side of the picture or even lead to the conclusion that Russia has no soft power. The next two subsections take a different approach and analyse two of Russia's current soft power sources; the first – anti-US imperialism – draws heavily from the Soviet past; the second – conservatism and religious soft power – breaks free from the Soviet tradition and constitutes a relatively recent trend in Russia's foreign policy.

### Still fighting US imperialism?

One important aspect of Russia's soft power, to some degree inherited from the USSR, is that Moscow still stands at the forefront of the opposition to US unipolarism and “normative imperialism” and is still perceived as an alternative pole of power. In tandem with other countries such as China<sup>38</sup> or individually, Russia has consistently criticised Western double standards and what it claims to be the West's use of the human rights discourse to advance foreign policy objectives.

Putin's widely-quoted speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy is emblematic in this sense. He talks about “multilateral diplomacy” as an alternative to the unipolar model, which he considers as “not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world [...] because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilisation”<sup>39</sup>. Russia's deep dissatisfaction with US unilateralism is shared by many other countries that feel underrepresented in US-dominated international organisations. Putin's accusation of the US “disdain for the basic principles of international law” and imposition of economic, political, cultural and educational

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<sup>38</sup> A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, “Russia and China: Countering the Dominance of the West”, in A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds.), *Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy”, Munich, 10 February 2007.

policies on other nations<sup>40</sup> resonates with many countries in the Global South but also with anti-imperialist movements and populist parties in the West<sup>41</sup>. For instance, Sweden's Sputnik commonly depicts EU bureaucrats and decision-makers as puppets of the US government, while NATO is portrayed as both a "US instrument of war and the chief architect of Western policy towards Russia"<sup>42</sup>. Even the Syria campaign has been described by some Russian media and analysts as Vladimir Putin "cleaning up" the mess left by "illegal Western actions in support of rebels and extremist groups"<sup>43</sup>.

The concert of the Mariinsky Theatre's Symphony Orchestra in Syrian Palmyra was a big public diplomacy operation that arguably bought Russia some soft power and inspired comments such as "civilization is back in Palmyra" in the international press<sup>44</sup>.

The Kremlin's anti-imperialist and multilateral narrative, however, is marked by inconsistencies. Russia acts as an "instrumental multilateralist"<sup>45</sup>: on the one hand, it uses international institutions to restrain US policy; on the other, it uses regional institutions and *ad hoc* agreements to legitimise its unilateral actions, including the use of military power, in its neighbourhood. Moreover, the vocal condemnation of Western

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> On the topic of Russia's and especially Putin's power of attraction *vis-à-vis* Western populist groups, see E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, "National-populism in Russia: Ticking all the boxes?", in A. Martinelli (ed.), *When Populism Meets Nationalism. Reflections on parties in power*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> M. Kragh and S. Åsberg, "Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2017, pp. 773-816 (cit. p. 782).

<sup>43</sup> C.J. Williams, "Russian analysts cast Putin as rescuing Syria from Western bungling", *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 2015.

<sup>44</sup> L. Rotoloni, "Grande concerto russo a Palmira, la città siriana liberata dall'Isil" ("Big Russian Concert in Palmyra. Syrian City liberated by Isis"), *EuroNews*; G. Doctorow, "Civilization Returns to Palmyra - While the West Scoffs", *Global Research*, 8 May 2016.

<sup>45</sup> A. Zagorski, "Multilateralism in Russian Foreign Policy Approaches", in E. Wilson Rowe and S. Torjesen (eds.), *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 46.

sanctions as a unilateral and unlawful tool<sup>46</sup> in international relations did not stop the Kremlin from imposing its own sanctions on Turkey after the downing of the Russian jet in 2015.

FIG. 2.2 - RUSSIA'S VALERY GERGIEV CONDUCTS A CONCERT IN PALMYRA RUINS ON 5 MAY 2016



## A "pious" Russia

*"Boga niet."*<sup>47</sup> There is no God – says a well-known Soviet atheist poster. God seems to have a strong presence in today's Russia, though, to the point that it also become a soft power source.

<sup>46</sup> In the Kremlin's narrative, US and EU sanctions against Russia for the annexation of Crimea symbolised Western partial application of international law and were another attempt to contain Russia's in its defense of its "national interests". In a speech on 18 March 2014, Vladimir Putin stated: "We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment [...] continues today. They [the West] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position. [...] With Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally". <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603>

<sup>47</sup> <https://i.imgur.com/yP3WZz0.jpg>

What is sometimes defined as “religious soft power” is made possible by the well-documented close relationship between the government and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its leader, Patriarch Kirill<sup>48</sup>. During the Cold War, state atheism defined Soviet communism – often set in contrast with “Christian America”<sup>49</sup>. In reality, the Russian state, whether Czarist or Soviet, “used its national church and its religious channels as a tool of geopolitical influence and often as a source of pressure within the Orthodox world”<sup>50</sup>. Yet, today’s partnership is unprecedented. Under Putin, the Kremlin has used the Christian faith as one of the justifications for its foreign policy and portrays the country as a champion of socially conservative, Christian-based values<sup>51</sup>. This relationship seems to pay off for both actors. In Speedie’s words:

The significance of religion in Russian life allows the state to garner huge social capital from having the blessing of the Orthodox Church, and likewise the Church benefits from the relationship by disseminating its message of Christianity worldwide via Russian foreign policy. For the state, *Russky Mir*

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<sup>48</sup> R.C. Blitt, “Russia’s “orthodox” foreign policy: The growing influence of the Russian orthodox church in shaping Russia’s policies abroad”, *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Economic Law*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2011, pp. 363-460; A. Agadjanian (2017) “Tradition, morality and community: elaborating Orthodox identity in Putin’s Russia”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2017, pp. 39-60.

<sup>49</sup> P. Henne, *The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Berkeley (CA), Berkeley University blog post, 6 June 2019.

<sup>50</sup> P. Tasiopoulos, *Russia’s Religious Soft Power: Is Christianity Ready for a New Schism?*, Wilfrid Martens Centre for European Studies, 19 October 2018. After the Russian Orthodox Church’s dissolution and the losses of territorial jurisdiction that characterised the period 1917-1939, the interwar years marked the start of a period of church-state collaboration – a “concordat” – in areas where the domestic and international interests of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Soviet authorities overlapped, for example the need to improve the USSR’s international image as a guarantor of religious freedom or the consolidation of all Orthodox structures in the postwar Soviet space under the guidance of Moscow’s Patriarchate. D. Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948: From Decline to Resurrection*, London, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (2014).



is a political/cultural tool for strengthening domestic stability, worldwide status, and influence in neighboring states. For the Church, it is a religious foundation essential for reversing the secularization of society (which it sees as an unwelcome evolution already well underway in the West)<sup>52</sup>.

Synergies between the government and church activities are present in Russia's "near abroad". Acting in tandem with the Russian government to repossess old churches and build new ones in neighbouring Orthodox countries, the ROC "signals its endorsement of the use of churches to bolster Russia's profile as well as its willingness to avail itself of the Church as a potential lever of soft power in its pursuit of foreign policy objectives"<sup>53</sup>. The conservative and religious discourse resonates also in neighbouring countries that do not necessarily share the same Orthodox faith but share a very conservative outlook, such as Armenia. Conservative layers of the Armenian civil society look at the "Russian" worldview to balance "Western-imposed" gender discussions, which they "correlate with moral and demographic decline"<sup>54</sup>.

Partly thanks to this conservative narrative, Moscow seems to have become an ideological Mecca for many far-right and socially conservative movements, such as the UKIP (UK Independence Party) in the UK, the National Rally in France, Jobbik in Hungary and Ataka in Bulgaria<sup>55</sup>. The conservative narrative is very anti-liberal, but it does not deny Russia's belonging to the European community; rather, it is an argument for Russia's "true

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<sup>52</sup> D. Speedie, *"Soft Power": The Values that Shape Russian Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Council, 30 July 2015.

<sup>53</sup> R.C. Blitt (2011), p. 424.

<sup>54</sup> N. Shahnazarian, *Eurasian Family versus European Values: The Geopolitical Roots of "Anti-Genderism" in Armenia*, PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 488, October 2017.

<sup>55</sup> A. Klapsis, "An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia", *European View*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2015; M. Laruelle, "Russia as an anti-liberal European civilization in Pål Kolsto", in H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016; E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (2018).



European Christian identity”<sup>56</sup>. Marine Le Pen, for instance, called Putin a “a true patriot and defender of European values”, allegedly buying into the narrative of some members of Russia’s political elite, such as Dmitry Rogozin, who define “Russia as the ‘true Europe’, continuing Europe’s XIX century traditions of geopolitical spheres of influence and social conservatism”<sup>57</sup>, while praising Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has used the protection of the Christian population in Syria and of Christians at large to legitimise Russia’s military operation in the eyes of its own population<sup>58</sup> and to bolster its influence among Palestinians<sup>59</sup>. The protection of Christians in the Middle East is indeed a stated goal of the Kremlin. Speaking at a meeting with heads of Middle East Christian churches together with the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in 2019, Putin said: “Although the Middle East is the cradle of Christianity, the position of Christians in the region is very difficult. [...] This is an alarming development [...] because our identity is based on the Christian culture”, and vowed to “help to bring peace and stability”<sup>60</sup>. The ROC actively supports this narrative. For instance, Archpriest Nikolaj Balashov, the vice-chairman of the Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations pointed out that Middle Eastern Christians “have known for centuries that no other country would look after their interests in the same way Russia would”<sup>61</sup>. The actual weight of this narrative for Russia’s influence in the region is hard to determine and will

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<sup>56</sup> M. Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2014, pp. 356-379 (cit. p. 375).

<sup>57</sup> E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (2018), p. 144.

<sup>58</sup> L. Issaev and S. Yuriev, *The Christian Dimension of Russia’s Middle East Policy*, Alsharq Forum, Expert Brief, March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> A. Abu Amer, “Russia is using religion to strengthen its influence among Palestinians”, *MEMO Middle East Monitor*, 1 February 2020.

<sup>60</sup> President of Russia, *Meeting with heads of Middle East Christian churches*, 30 October 2019.

<sup>61</sup> “Russia’s “protectorate” over Middle Eastern Christians”, *La Stampa*, 30 December 2019.

be further analysed in Mühlberger's chapter in this volume; from a preliminary assessment, though, this narrative seems to resonate well with some prominent members of the Christian community. For example, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in an interview concerning the situation in the Holy Land, said: "Europe is irrelevant. [...] Today, it is Russian President Vladimir Putin who counts in the Middle East"<sup>62</sup>.

## Conclusion

Despite its reliance on hard power measures, Russia started investing in soft power and public diplomacy from the early 2000s through media, language and cultural programmes targeting its neighbourhood and beyond. Many experts and governments dismiss Russia's soft power and even accuse the Kremlin of carrying out covert influence activities – known as "active measures" in Soviet times. This chapter has reviewed the main soft power sources of the USSR in order to compare them with those of today's Russia, making the case for a less "Western" (i.e. liberal) reading of the concept of soft power. A neutral reading of the concept reveals that Russia's soft power results not only from public diplomacy initiatives put in place by the Kremlin and individual organisations, but also from Russia's very image on the global stage and the values it embraces, which often contrast with the "universal" values championed by the West. This is particularly clear in the case of Russia's defence of conservative values, national sovereignty and multipolarism against the perceived Western interference and normative imperialism.

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<sup>62</sup> Agenzia S.I.R. (Servizio Informazione Religiosa). Terra Santa: Pizzaballa (Patriarcato), "l'Europa è irrilevante, è Putin che conta in Medio Oriente" ("Europe is irrelevant. Today, it is Putin who counts in the Middle East"), 2 December 2019.

Assessing the effectiveness of soft power policies requires us to consider how the targeted audiences react to those policies. Even if such an analysis falls beyond the limited scope of this chapter, two indications may be drawn from the sections above. First, soft power is not universal. Different target audiences react to the same soft power instruments differently; for instance, some of Russia's narratives may anger Western liberals but entice and inspire anti-American, far-right and far-left audiences in the EU and US. Moreover, authoritarian institutions and political values could also be attractive to political elites in other like-minded states (a sort of "authoritarian allure"<sup>63</sup>). It is also possible to unpack the reasons for the success of a soft power instrument: for example, for citizens of many post-Soviet countries learning Russian is about status and access to economic opportunities, in light of Russia's economic and political position in the post-Soviet area; for the diaspora and the "Russian world", it may act as a bond with the homeland; globally, it is rather seen in cultural terms and linked to Russia's literature and music.

Second, it is time to look at soft power objectively. Russia's soft power specificities and strategies include Moscow's capacity to oppose "universal" values and to pitch itself as an alternative to the West, possibly calling into question the EU's capacity to project its own values in the shared neighbourhood – for instance, *vis-à-vis* the Eastern Partnership countries. This makes it even more important for Western academics and practitioners to pay adequate attention to the phenomenon of Russia's soft power rather than simply dismissing it as hard power in disguise.

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<sup>63</sup> M.H. Van Herpen, "Putinism's Authoritarian Allure", *Project Syndicate*, 15 March 2013.

## 4. Russian Meddling in Democratic Processes in Europe and the US

Giorgio Comai

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In recent years, the issue of Russian meddling and Russian interference have prominently entered the public and political debate in Europe and North America. Given the extraordinary attention the issue of Russian interference has attracted in the media, the way it poisoned the public debate, and the real-world political consequences it caused, there is good reason to investigate what happened, and to find ways to prevent its recurrence or mitigate its consequences.

This chapter firstly defines “Russian meddling” as a temporally delimited phenomenon that grabbed the attention of Western mainstream media starting with the US presidential elections in November 2016<sup>1</sup>. In this context, and in line with the official US investigation that led to the publication of the Mueller report, Russian meddling allegedly took place particularly in two partly overlapping forms: disinformation on social media and timed hack-and-dump operations<sup>2</sup>. After outlining some of

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of “Russian meddling” considerably restricts the scope of the analysis. As a consequence, this chapter does not specifically discuss Russia’s operations in its “near abroad” or cases when Russia was itself victim of cyber-attacks, nor does it deal with meddling stemming from other countries, including those such as the US with a long history of conducting both covert and overt operations ranging from interference to subversion.

<sup>2</sup> A third hotly debated part of the Mueller investigation was aimed at understanding if the Trump campaign “conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities”. Given that the investigation “did not

the dynamics of this media narrative, this chapter approaches each of its main component parts separately discussing evidence about their prevalence and impact on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, it provides recommendations on how to deal with Russian interference and, in particular, with the vulnerabilities it exposed. Indeed, the fact that, as will be seen, Russian meddling in democratic processes may not have materialised in Europe along the lines suggested by the initial media framing does not mean that the vulnerabilities that Russia allegedly exploited (or could have exploited) do not exist. On the contrary, these are structural vulnerabilities of contemporary democracies, newly shaped by recent technological developments, that need adequate responses in policy and practice, quite independently of Russia's role in them.

## What Does “Russian Meddling” Refer To?

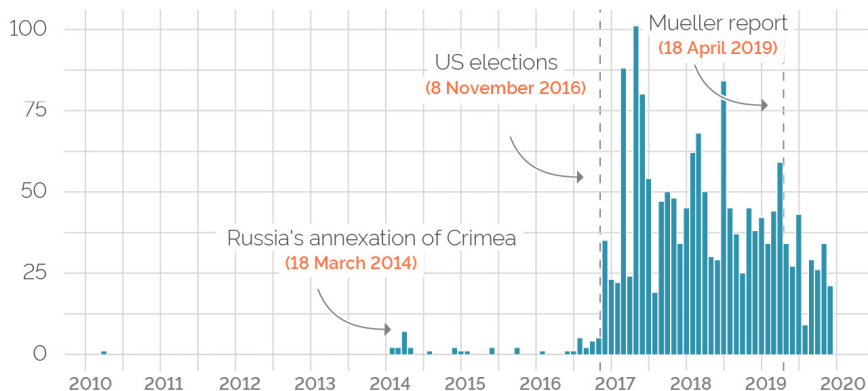
Given the multifaceted nature of Russian interference as characterised by the media in recent years, as a starting point it may be useful to situate this phenomenon temporally and geographically. Analysing the publications of major English-language media outlets, it appears that the issue of “Russian meddling”/“Russian interference” (the two expressions will be used interchangeably hereafter) as a media phenomenon has a clear starting date: the US presidential vote in November 2016 that determined Donald Trump's election. In the last decade, there is no significant mention of “Russian interference” in leading publications such as *The New York Times* or *the Guardian* before that day, and only a handful of them during the campaign (see Figure 4.1)<sup>3</sup>.

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establish such coordination”, and that there is no direct correspondence with events in Europe, this chapter does not deal with this component of “Russian meddling”. US Department of Justice, Special Counsel R.S. Mueller, “[Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election](#)”, Volume I of II, III, Submitted Pursuant to 28 C.F.R. § 600.8(c) Washington D.C., March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> For a debate on the usefulness of using basic word frequency in delimiting a

FIG. 4.1 - ARTICLES MENTIONING "RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE"  
OR "RUSSIAN MEDDLING" IN A MONTH ON *THE NEW YORK TIMES*



Note: Based on all articles between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2019

At least in terms of media discourse, there is no apparent continuity or proximity between “Russian meddling” as understood since late 2016 and other phenomena that, broadly speaking, may be perceived to be contiguous. In this understanding, “Russian meddling” is specifically related to activities aimed at interfering with democratic processes in established Western democracies, and is distinctly separate from other forms of geopolitical contrast between Russia and the West. Before November 2016, in terms of media discourse, a specific framing of “Russian meddling” simply did not exist. The few mentions that can be found on *The New York Times* since the fall of the Soviet Union and until 2016 almost invariably refer to either Georgia or Ukraine, and none of them to the US themselves or other established democracies. Even

case study, see G. Comai, “Quantitative Analysis of Web Content in Support of Qualitative Research. Examples from the Study of Post-Soviet De Facto States”, *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 30 June 2017.

these sporadic mentions mostly refer to generic interference, and not specifically to tactics such as disinformation and cyber-attacks which are at the core of the current narrative, in spite of the fact that these same tactics (e.g. cyber-attacks) have been used at least for a decade before Donald Trump's election<sup>4</sup>.

Some analysts have highlighted how the kind of "Russian meddling" that has been object of countless media stories since late 2016 is just an updated version of tried and tested Soviet-time tactics. Disinformation, after all, was a widely discussed part of Moscow's arsenal of "active measures" in Soviet times<sup>5</sup>. In a 1981 US Senate hearing, for example, it was claimed that the KGB's Disinformation Department achieved its goals "by fabricating lies, planting forged documents and spreading issue-obfuscating propaganda in situations where a story-hungry and sometimes gullible press would seize upon them"<sup>6</sup>. Such characterisations would not seem to be particularly out of place almost forty years later. Taking clues from the literature from the time of "developed socialism" and apply it to the Russia of "developed Putinism" and the international context of the 2010s, however, risks obscuring, rather than illuminating, the issues being analysed. No matter how tempting it may be to cherry-pick quotes from Soviet-time literature, there are obvious differences in context, contents, methods, and goals, that limit the usefulness of a direct comparison, in particular if the goal is to find actionable policy responses.

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<sup>4</sup> P. Pernik, "The Early Days of Cyberattacks: The Cases of Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine", in N. Popescu and S. Secrieru (eds.), *Hacks, Leaks and Disruptions – Russian Cyber Strategies*, Paris, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> R. Godson and R. Shultz, "Soviet Active Measures: Distinctions and Definitions", *Defense Analysis*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1985, pp. 101-10.

<sup>6</sup> United States Senate, *The Origins, Direction, and Support of Terrorism: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism of the Committee on the Judiciary*, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session, on the Origins, Direction, and Support of Terrorism, 24 April 1981, Serial no. J-97-17, Washington D.C., G.P.O; see also L.J. Martin, "Disinformation: An Instrumentality in the Propaganda Arsenal", *Political Communication*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1982, pp. 47-64.

## Russian Meddling in the United States

In the United States, the controversy around Russian meddling led to the establishment of an official “investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election”, which resulted in the publication of the so-called Mueller report in April 2019<sup>7</sup>. The two main pillars of this effort as confirmed by the investigation and detailed in the report were adversarial influence operations on social media and hacking-and-dumping operations against the server of the Democratic National Committee and a number of e-mail accounts, including that of Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman, John Podesta. Finally, the investigation inconclusively tried to establish if the Trump campaign had actively conspired with the Russian government.

The activities detailed in the Mueller report can be considered a blueprint of what is understood by “Russian meddling”. The report itself and other materials produced during the investigation provide substantial evidence that there were indeed active attempts to interfere in the elections, including by generating and promoting divisive content on social media, and that such efforts originated in Russia, in particular in the “Internet Research Agency” in Saint Petersburg<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the investigation put the blame of the cyber-attacks that victimised the Democratic party on hacking units belonging to the Russian security apparatus, confirming earlier analyses and adding considerable details, including the exact GRU units allegedly chiefly responsible for the attacks<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> R.S. Mueller (2019).

<sup>8</sup> R. DiResta et al., *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, New Knowledge, December 2018.

<sup>9</sup> As a rule, in the case of cyber-attacks “the most useful and detailed attribution reports that are publicly available are published by companies, not governments”, see T. Rid and B. Buchanan, “[Attributing Cyber Attacks](#)”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1-2, 2 January 2015, p. 25. In this specific case, the Mueller report and the indictment of Viktor Borisovich Netyksho et al. (US District Court for the District of Columbia, 13 July 2018) stemming from the Mueller investigation summarise available evidence and provide additional information;



## Hacking the US Democrats

In media reports, the term “hacking” is used to describe a vast range of events, making it difficult to understand the gravity of a given operation without looking at the details. In some cases, attacks do not imply access to the computer system of the victim or of their personal communications. For example, distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks that make a given website or web-based service unavailable to the wider public may cause issues, but they do not give to perpetrators access to the victim’s data. Even in cases of defacement, when a hacking group gains access to the social media channels or website of a victim often to post derisory contents, attackers may have limited access to anything besides information that is already public. Other types of attacks may disrupt the computer services of victims, e.g. by deleting or encrypting contents (e.g. with so-called ransomware), without giving the possibility to hackers to exfiltrate contents. The cyber-attacks conducted by Russia’s secret services against the Democrats have been much more pervasive. Through a combination of targeted actions they obtained and maintained extended access to their computer systems between April and June 2016; “stolen documents included internal strategy documents, fundraising data, opposition research, and e-mails from the work inboxes of DNC employees”<sup>10</sup>. On top of that, a number of e-mail accounts of people working on the Hillary Clinton campaign were also hacked.

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they are therefore mentioned here as a key point of reference. While it is difficult to establish the veracity of all the details in the indictment, the contours of the operations as characterised in the report are compatible with analyses published by other actors such as cyber-security companies, as well as journalistic accounts published by non-US sources offering a different angle on some aspects of the operation. See e.g. H. Modderkolk, “[Dutch agencies provide crucial intel about Russia’s interference in US-elections](#)”, *De Volkskrant*, 25 January 2018.

<sup>10</sup> R.S. Mueller (2019), p. 40.

As the name suggests, hacking-and-dumping operations have two phases: first there is the hack, then exfiltrated contents are made public online and actively promoted. In the case of the US democrats, these materials were first published on a purposefully created website, then they were distributed little by little by Wikileaks, thus ensuring enhanced and prolonged media attention. The hacking and the public distribution of internal communications of the campaign of a leading candidate to the presidency and of the party that supports it by a foreign power is a clear case of interference in a democratic process, made all the more egregious by the fact that the victims are the United States of America and the perpetrators are, beyond any reasonable doubt, the secret services of the Russian Federation.

## **Disinformation and Impact of Russian Meddling in the US**

Given the sheer amount of domestic resources poured into political campaigning in US presidential contests, it beggars belief that a relatively tiny initiative run from the outskirts of Saint Petersburg could swing election results. Indeed, recent quantitative analyses seem to confirm that such efforts had most likely negligible impact, in spite of the fact that they reached millions of US residents<sup>11</sup>. The possibility that the hacking-and-dumping operations against the Democrats had some impact on voters is more difficult to dismiss completely considering how it influenced election coverage on mainstream media at a key phase of the campaign. But so did many other events of debatable political significance that grabbed a disproportionate

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<sup>11</sup> S. McCombie, A.J. Uhlmann, and S. Morrison, “The US 2016 Presidential Election & Russia’s Troll Farms”, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2 January 2020, pp. 95-114; C.A. Bail et al., “Assessing the Russian Internet Research Agency’s Impact on the Political Attitudes and Behaviors of American Twitter Users in Late 2017”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 117, no. 1, 7 January 2020, pp. 243-50.

amount of media attention in the run-up to the vote, first among them the scandal on Hillary Clinton's use of her own private e-mail server during her term as Secretary of State<sup>12</sup>.

The fact that the question on the actual impact of "Russian meddling" has no conclusive answer does not remove from the understanding that there is solid evidence that Russia did interfere in the US presidential elections, as detailed in the Mueller report, in intelligence reports, in internal investigations conducted by companies with direct knowledge of the matter as well as by independent analyses conducted on the hacked e-mails.

## Expectations of Russian Meddling in Europe

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic is however much less clearly defined. In the aftermath of the eventful presidential election in the US, both researchers and journalists were ready to investigate Russian interference in elections scheduled in Europe in 2018 and 2019, including the vote for the European Parliament in 2019. In line with events recorded in the US, interference was expected to take place in the form of disinformation on social media and targeted cyber-attacks.

The Computational Propaganda Project at the University of Oxford has published a series of research reports highlighting key aspects of the dynamics observable on social media after elections across Europe<sup>13</sup>. Their reports and working papers point at worrying trends such as widespread sharing of "junk news", automated or semi-automated accounts trying to shift the public conversation, and limited transparency from platforms

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<sup>12</sup> Hillary Clinton herself refers to the e-mail server affair as the thing that "first, and most importantly" turned away voters from her in the final stretch of the campaign, see H. Rodham Clinton, *What Happened*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2017, p. 403.

<sup>13</sup> Part of their research has been collected in an edited book, S.C. Woolley and P.N. Howard (eds.), *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018.

such as Facebook that made it more difficult to investigate such dynamics. These phenomena, however, developed quite independently from Russia and seem to be predominantly domestic. For example, their analysis of Russian involvement during the Brexit referendum pointed at the fact that contents promoted by Russian accounts “contributed relatively little to the overall Brexit conversation” and that Russian news contents were not widely shared<sup>14</sup>. Their analysis of social media during the 2018 general elections in Sweden found that “only 0.2% content of all junk had Russian origin”<sup>15</sup>. Many of these junk contents are produced simply for gaining a profit through the traffic they generate, not only in the US but also in European countries such as Italy, highlighting the relevance of structural issues with the advertisement-based model that dominates the internet<sup>16</sup>.

The mismatch between expectation of renewed attempts by Russia to interfere in elections across Europe and lack of the kind of extended meddling efforts seen in the US emerged clearly, for example, in the title of an article published by *The New York Times* after the German elections in 2017: “German Election Mystery: Why No Russian Meddling?”<sup>17</sup>. A report to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly combines the concern about Russian interference that was widespread at the time and the perceived need to do something to prevent it, with observations that in practice elections in Europe in 2017 and 2018 took place without any noteworthy interference<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> V. Narayanan et al., *Russian Involvement and Junk News during Brexit*, Data Memo, University of Oxford, Computational propaganda project, 19 December 2017.

<sup>15</sup> F. Hedman et al., “[News and Political Information Consumption in Sweden: Mapping the 2018 Swedish General Election on Twitter](#)”, Data Memo, University of Oxford, Computational propaganda project, 6 September 2018.

<sup>16</sup> N. Bruno, “[La Fabbrica di Fake News italiane? Si trova a Taurianova, in Calabria](#)” (“The Italian Fake News Factory? It is located in Taurianova, in Calabria”), SkyTg24, 6 April 2018; C. Silverman and A. Lawrence, “[How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News](#)”, *BuzzFeed News*, 3 November 2016.

<sup>17</sup> M. Schwirtz, “[German Election Mystery: Why No Russian Meddling?](#)”, *The New York Times*, 21 September 2017.

<sup>18</sup> D. Susan, “[Russian Meddling in Elections and Referenda in the Alliance](#)”,

A lengthy report published by the Carnegie Endowment on Russian election interference in Europe highlights significant concerns about Kremlin-linked activities in time of election, and details relevant preparatory actions conducted in five countries which held national votes in 2017: the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Sweden<sup>19</sup>. The sections on “notable interference” that accompany each of these case studies, however, do not highlight events that could meaningfully impact the vote in either of those cases or that could be credibly attributed to Russia. At least in part, this may be due to a media and political environment that was more alert to this threat, to measures taken by social media companies to hinder the most blatant tactics used to spread disinformation, or, finally, to the fact that Russia did not engage in such “sweeping and systematic” (to use the words of the Mueller report) attempts of electoral interference in the first place.

## Hacking-and-Dumping Operations in Europe

Recent years have not gone without hacking operations against leading political figures and institutions across Europe. The event that most closely resembles the pattern seen in the US is the publication of emails and documents emerging from the accounts of staffers of Emmanuel Macron’s political campaign two days before the 2017 presidential election in France. In the case of the so-called “#MacronLeaks” there has been no consensus on attributing the attack to Russian actors. The head of the French cyber-defense agency declared in an interview that the hack to Macron’s campaign was “not very technological; [...] the attack was so generic and simple that it could have been practically anyone”<sup>20</sup>. In spite of inconclusive evidence, some

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NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 18 November 2018.

<sup>19</sup> T. Maurer and E. Brattberg, *Russian Election Interference: Europe’s Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks*, Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment, May 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “AP Interview: France Warns of Risk of War in Cyberspace”, *AP NEWS*, 1

reports still seem to assume it was an operation conducted by the Russian secret services<sup>21</sup> and some later journalistic reports insisted on some technical aspects of the operation that would link it to Russia<sup>22</sup>. The released contents were however of limited scope, of little interest, and largely politically irrelevant: even if it was a Russian operation, it was an unsuccessful and poorly conducted one<sup>23</sup>.

Across the European Union there have been other hacking operations involving politicians, but none completely in line with the format observed with the hacking of the US Democrats. For example, the computer systems of the German parliament were hacked in 2015, most likely by Russia's secret services; as a result of the operation, "the offices of at least 16 parliamentarians were combed through, mail boxes copied, hard drives scrutinized and internal data, some of it likely classified, misappropriated"<sup>24</sup>. There was concern that the materials taken during that operation may be published in time for the 2017 federal elections in Germany, but nothing happened. If the administrators of the relevant IT systems had not found out, it is entirely possible that nobody would have known about it, suggesting this may have been more of an espionage rather than electoral interference operation (of course, one could lead to the other).

In an unrelated event in December 2018, personal data (including emails and personal chats) of hundreds of German politicians and public figures were released online. Soon after the dump received substantial visibility online, German authorities discovered that it had been the result of actions by a 20-year-old local resident, with no third parties involved; he

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June 2017.

<sup>21</sup> T. Maurer and E. Brattberg (2018).

<sup>22</sup> "Les preuves de l'ingérence russe dans la campagne de Macron en 2017", *Le Monde.fr*, 6 December 2019.

<sup>23</sup> S. Soesanto, *The Macron Leak That Wasn't*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 9 May 2017.

<sup>24</sup> P. Beuth et al., "Cyberattack on the Bundestag: Merkel and the Fancy Bear", *Die Zeit*, 12 May 2017.

had a lot of free time but no exceptional IT skills, and made use of poor cyber-security practices of public figures or people close to them<sup>25</sup>. Having personal chats and other materials published online was certainly annoying and perhaps embarrassing for some of those involved, but the event did not have major political consequence, at least in part because journalists took a more considerate approach on how they reported about the dump considering their largely personal nature<sup>26</sup>.

The extreme vulnerability of computer systems of political parties has been exposed also in Italy. The online platform used by the *Five star movement* has been repeatedly breached in 2017, leading to an official investigation by Italy's data protection authority that demonstrated disregard for basic cyber-security practices<sup>27</sup>. The platform was hacked again in 2018<sup>28</sup>. In all these known cases, attacks were conducted by individuals with no particular political motives, and seemingly did not require the kind of advanced intrusion techniques adopted by Russian hackers in other occasions. In all of these cases, the attacks were made public by the intruders themselves; based on the technical details released by Italy's data protection authority, it seems that other actors could have accessed and even modified those data without leaving any trace.

Finally, just a few weeks before Italy's political elections in 2018, *Lega's* social media account, website, and e-mails have been repeatedly hacked. A dump with more than 20 giga bytes

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<sup>25</sup> "Mass Data Attack on German Politicians", *BBC News*, 4 January 2019; K. Connolly, "German Cyber-Attack: Man Admits Massive Data Breach, Say Police", *The Guardian*, 8 January 2019.

<sup>26</sup> L. Franceschi-Bicchierai, J. Koebler, and E. Maiberg, "Before Germany's Massive Hack, We Learned What Not to Do With Sensitive Stolen Information", *Motherboard*, 4 January 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Garante privacy, "Provvedimento su Data Breach" ("Provision in Data Breach"), [garanteprivacy.it](http://garanteprivacy.it), 21 December 2017.

<sup>28</sup> R. Nejrutti and F. Coluccini, "È un luna park ormai: abbiamo parlato con l'hacker di Rousseau" ("It's an amusement-park now: we talked to Rousseau's hacker"), *Vice (Tech by Motherboard)*, 7 September 2018.

of e-mails belonging to *Lega* staffers was published online<sup>29</sup>. It seems that also in this case no particularly advanced technique was required, and no foreign actor was involved. In spite of the obvious political significance of the breach, the issue only marginally featured in Italian media and never became a major news story, indirectly demonstrating the importance of curating the distribution of the hacked contents in traditional and social media in “successful” hacking-and-dumping operations<sup>30</sup>.

This brief overview of high-profile cases is far from complete: data breaches involving political organisations, institutions, and individual public figures happen routinely across the continent. What emerges from this summary of data breaches involving national-level political organisations in the biggest EU countries in recent years is that it hardly takes advanced foreign intelligence actors to violate the computer systems of major political organisations. At the same time, the fact that non-professional hackers with limited resources could penetrate such high profile targets suggests that those very same targets, and perhaps others, may have been attacked by malicious foreign government actors without them even realising it. This is however part of a broader problem related to limited awareness about cyber-security issues, rather than to Russian interference in democratic processes.

## Contrasting the Promotion of Disinformation in Time of Elections

Both of the issues at the core of the public preoccupation with “Russian meddling” reflect legitimate concerns as we

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<sup>29</sup> F. Martelli, “[Anonymous ha pubblicato online 70.000 email della Lega](#)” (“Anonymous has published on the web 70,000 Lega’s emails”), *Vice (Tech by Motherboard)*, 23 February 2018.

<sup>30</sup> It is telling that in the Mueller report the dissemination of hacked materials through Wikileaks and other channels receives more attention than the hack itself.



enter the 2020s. Online disinformation and other worrying trends emerging from an online landscape dominated by a small number of mostly US-based tech companies focused on increasing revenue by selling the privacy and attention of citizens should be a concern. However, the focus on Russia in this context seems to be misplaced. Malicious, targeted, and highly political disinformation campaigns on social media originating from Russia did happen. They represented however what is literally a drop in the ocean of the multi-billion media eco-system that revolves around US presidential elections. More “traditional” forms of disinformation and disingenuous support for far-fetched conspiracy theories have been used by Russia in recent years in a number of circumstances. Initiatives such as the EU-sponsored “EU vs Disinfo” ([euvsdisinfo.eu](http://euvsdisinfo.eu)) provide extensive lists of such cases and debunks them. Many of the materials denounced by “EU vs Disinfo” may well be problematic, but they hardly pose a threat to the integrity of electoral processes in Europe.

In other cases, they may not even be as problematic as “EU vs Disinfo” and some Western media make it to be. For example, a stereotyped understanding that Russian state-sponsored media must function as vectors of disinformation has facilitated widespread acceptance of the notion that they have actively engaged in disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020; as highlighted in a scholarly analysis of the issue, such claims are questionable<sup>31</sup>.

The report released by the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age summarises best some of “the challenges to electoral integrity arising from the global spread of digital technologies and social media platforms”, and proposes policy and advocacy actions to deal with them<sup>32</sup>. Other initiatives and reports similarly tackle this

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<sup>31</sup> S. Hutchings and V. Tolz, “The Challenge to Counter-Disinformation Analysts: A COVID-19 Case Study for Policy Makers and Journalists”, *Reframing Russia’ research project website*, University of Manchester, 6 April 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age,

issue without unduly focusing on the Russian component<sup>33</sup>. What emerges from these and other documents is that the story around “Russian meddling” has brought to light many of the weaknesses enabled by digital platforms and patterns of behaviour that have been used by domestic campaigners, foreign spoilers, and controversial communication consultancies that have made a business of muddying the waters in time of electoral campaigns around the globe<sup>34</sup>.

As a consequence, policy recommendations mentioned in these reports do not focus on a specific foreign actor, but rather on the eco-system that makes such interference possible. Possible responses include basic steps such as updating the current legislation on advertising for political campaigns to the digital age and introducing substantive transparency requirement for social media platforms, as well as broad initiatives to promote digital and media literacy among the population at large. New regulations should ensure that consultancies promoting and implementing deceptive digital campaign practices cannot legally sell their services in time of elections. The disproportionate power wielded by a small number of companies which ultimately owe their loyalty only to their shareholders may eventually require bolder action; perhaps revised anti-monopoly legislation could be used to limit the current extreme concentration of control on the information environment that can in itself be considered a form of “external interference” into democratic processes.

There is no silver bullet that will completely remove the issue of disinformation from electoral processes. There are however

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“Protecting Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age”, January 2020.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Chatham House’s Commission on Democracy and Technology, <https://demtech.chathamhouse.org/>; P. Butcher, *Disinformation and Democracy: The Home Front in the Information War*, Brussels, European Policy Centre (EPC), 30 January 2019; F. Mat and N. Caranti, *Dossier: Disinformation*, Trento, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), January 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as highlighted by the Kofi Annan Commission, the issue of disinformation, hate speech, external interference, and domestic manipulation are due to be of particular concern in time of elections in the global South.

a number of steps that can be taken to mitigate this risk, no matter where it comes from, and there is broad consensus among experts on some of them. Updated regulations on political advertisements, mandatory transparency requirements for social media platforms, and initiatives promoting digital and media literacy are the obvious starting points.

## **Taking Cyber-Security and Russian Cyber-Attacks Seriously**

As previously discussed, political parties across Europe do not seem to take their own cyber-security seriously. The sheer amount of private data held by political organisations should compel them to take adequate measures to protect their computer systems. If, as it is apparently the case at the moment, they do not, governments should intervene. Also in this case there is a broad consensus in the expert community among some of the initiatives that should be taken, well summarised by a set of recommendations on election cyber-security released in 2019 by ENISA, the EU cyber-security agency. Among other things, ENISA suggests that “a legal obligation should be put in place requiring political organisations to deploy a high level of cyber-security in their systems, processes and infrastructures”, and that other initiatives should be aimed at “assisting political practitioners in the securing of their data and their communications”<sup>35</sup>.

In the case of cyber-security, however, the focus on Russia may not be out of place. As detailed in a gripping, book-length journalistic account of Russia’s cyber-operations published in 2019, Russia has been engaging in disruptive cyber-operations well beyond the cases of electoral interference discussed above<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> ENISA, *Election Cybersecurity: Challenges and Opportunities*, Brussels, ENISA - EU Cybersecurity agency, February 2019.

<sup>36</sup> A. Greenberg, *Sandworm: A New Era of Cyberwar and the Hunt for the Kremlin’s Most Dangerous Hackers*, New York, Doubleday, 2019.

While, for example, China has so far engaged more in cyber-espionage, Russia has not shied away from the most aggressive forms of cyber-attacks, including actions that disrupted physical infrastructure (e.g. provoking black-outs in Ukraine) as well the irresponsible distribution of malware that in one instance in 2017 stopped hundreds of thousands of computers across the globe and deleted data, causing billion of dollars of damages and disrupting services in a wide range of contexts, from airports to hospitals<sup>37</sup>. In February 2018, a number of Western governments, including the US and the UK, officially attributed the attack to Russia's military<sup>38</sup>.

Attribution of cyber-attacks is notoriously difficult, and digital forensic analyses are often interpreted in context, including aspects such the capacity, resources, and motivation of potential attackers<sup>39</sup>. This is why attribution is often communicated with qualifiers such as “with a moderate-to-high degree of confidence”. Governments have traditionally been reluctant to attribute an attack to a specific state actor both because of the lack of certainty the characterises attribution, and because official attribution often calls for some sort of official reaction, such as sanctions and retaliation, that may be politically or strategically inconvenient. Given that the option of retaliation is however always on the table, cyber-attacks can escalate quickly in spite of uncertain attribution.

Admittedly, uncertainty of attribution is not exclusive to cyber-attacks, and often applies, for example, to acts of terrorism. For better or worse, states have made momentous decisions of war and peace based on inconclusive evidence on

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<sup>37</sup>A. Greenberg, “[The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyberattack in History](#)”, *Wired*, 22 August 2018.

<sup>38</sup> UK National Cyber Security Centre, *Russian Military “Almost Certainly” Responsible for Destructive 2017 Cyber Attack*, [ncsc.gov.uk](#), 14 February 2018.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed breakdown of the main elements that contribute to determine attribution in the context of cyber-attacks, see T. Rid and B. Buchanan, “[Attributing Cyber Attacks](#)”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1-2, 2 January 2015, pp. 4-37.

attribution for a long time<sup>40</sup>. However, the structural complexity of attributing cyber-operations and the limited understanding of many of these issues by government officials and the wider public makes it particularly important that all involved take a cautionary approach.

Instruments for deterrence are needed, and initiatives such as the European Union cyber diplomacy toolbox should receive more attention<sup>41</sup>. Establishing active dialogue with Russia may be difficult as long as the Kremlin insists in denying any responsibility in such events, but all efforts should be taken to ensure there are open communication channels to reduce the risk of escalation.

## Conclusion

A media narrative that exaggerated the impact of Russia's efforts at the time of the 2016 US presidential elections has effectively contributed to its success: as argued by Stephen McCombie, Allon J. Uhlmann, and Sarah Morrison, "it is precisely because it is commonly assumed that Russia engaged in an effective information campaign to sway the election results, that the post-election destabilising effects of the Russian campaign are made possible"<sup>42</sup>. In spite of the fact that even this most blatant attempt at interfering in an election has most likely had negligible direct impact on the outcome of the vote, this

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<sup>40</sup> "The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on 28 June 1914 offered a similar conundrum: who was Gavrilo Princip, the assassin? And was he an agent of the Serbian state?", *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> "The Path to Digital Peace Requires Deterrence", EU Policy Blog, 20 May 2019; Council of the EU, "Cyber Attacks: EU Ready to Respond with a Range of Measures, Including Sanctions", [consilium.europa.eu](https://consilium.europa.eu), 19 June 2017; P. Ivan, *Responding to Cyberattacks: Prospects for the EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox*, Brussels, European Policy Center, 18 March 2019; E. Moret and P. Pawlak, *The EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox: Towards a Cyber Sanctions Regime?*, Paris, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2017.

<sup>42</sup> S. McCombie, A.J. Uhlmann, and S. Morrison (2020).

narrative gave to Russia's "implausible deniability" the flavour of a victory: the narrative of "Russian meddling" poisoned and polarised political debates in the US long after 2016 and led more people to question the integrity of the vote<sup>43</sup>.

The fact that the direct impact of Russian interference in the US in 2016 has been limited and that a US-style scenario did not repeat itself on European soil does not mean, however, that the vulnerabilities to democratic processes exposed by the scandals related to "Russian meddling" do not exist. They do, but focusing exclusively on the "Russian" component may distract from a more convincing definition of the problem to be addressed and hinder an adequate debate on policy responses. Ironically, they also distract from far more problematic aspects of Russia's foreign intervention repertoire. As Ivan Krastev put it, "getting over our Putin paranoia will be a welcome first step at eroding Russia's destabilizing international influence"<sup>44</sup>.

Evidence-based analyses and cold blood are needed to approach the important questions brought to light by "Russian meddling": an information environment and digital space where disinformation thrives, limited understanding and awareness about the wide-ranging implications of vulnerable computer systems, and a Russian Federation that is increasingly confrontational at the international level and has demonstrated to be willing to use a wide range of non-conventional approaches to increase its clout.

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<sup>43</sup> As of January 2020, the news event category on the website of *The New York Times*, "Russian Hacking and Influence in the U.S. Election - Complete coverage of Russia's campaign to disrupt the 2016 presidential election" includes more than two thousand articles; the fact that new contents are added to this category on an almost daily basis more than three years after Trump's election testifies the enduring prominence of this debate in American media and the extent to which this conversation is inextricably related with the figure of Donald Trump and its election in 2016. See <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/russian-election-hacking>.

<sup>44</sup> I. Krastev, "America's Dangerous 'Putin Panic'", *The New York Times*, 8 August 2016.

## 5. Arab Public Opinion: The View on Russia's Foreign Policy

Wolfgang Mühlberger

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In October 2019, when President Putin visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the de facto ruler of the country, Mohammed bin Zayed, greeted his visitor with a remarkable comment: “I consider Russia my second home”<sup>1</sup>. If an Arab ruler from the Gulf allows himself to make such an official comment, it goes far beyond a standard statement of friendship in line with diplomatic protocol. In particular, for a country that is to a large extent part of the Western sphere of influence, it may even seem rather strange. Indeed, in the fields of security policy, arms purchases, hydrocarbon flows, nuclear energy and counterterrorism cooperation, strong and mutually binding ties between the Arab Gulf states and Western countries have been maintained since the 1970s, with the latter often operating as external security providers<sup>2</sup>. In the Near East and North Africa, following the Camp David agreement (1979), Jordan and Egypt have also become pivotal Arab allies of the West, even allowing to further extricate Cairo from Russia's Soviet embrace, still looming large at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> “UAE and Russia sign major deals in energy and aviation”, *The National*, 15 October 2019.

<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have started to establish their own nascent arms industries, operate in regional military theatres (Yemen, Syria and Libya) on their own device, often via proxies, and pursue an increasingly autonomous foreign policy. F. Gaub and Z. Stanley-Lockman, “Defence industries in Arab states: players and strategies”, EU ISS, Chaillot paper no. 141, March 2017.

So, what are the motivations for such a warm-hearted reception, which also aims to have a signalling effect on various audiences, including domestic ones? Is the UAE, like several other regional players, indicating its fundamental dissatisfaction with the handling of regional affairs by the United States, be it over the Iranian nuclear question under President Obama, the lack of military posture by the incumbent president in response to Iranian asymmetric warfare in the Persian Gulf or the choice of non-interference in Syria's civil war? Is it a pragmatic rapprochement with a re-emerging regional player that also has good relations with Tehran and hence could play a mediating role? Could there even be an element of admiration for an authoritarian, self-confident non-Western leader?

In practice, there is a convergence of interests on a number of topics between Russia on the one hand, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other. First and foremost among them is the question of 'political Islam' in its majoritarian and republican manifestation; second, and closely related to the first, is a shared conception of how to handle the Libyan conflict; and third, there is a shared wish to counterbalance any single external hegemon. Nevertheless, if media coverage of these comments is hinting at a certain Russophile attitude and shared interests at the elite level, public opinion polls in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region suggest a mixed picture when it comes to perceptions of Russia. As far as finding a job or the desire for an alternative place to live is concerned, Russia is by no means a top-ranking country<sup>3</sup>. Admiration for Putin's political leadership is also limited, mostly restrained by the Kremlin's military action in Syria<sup>4</sup>. Measuring Russia's or Putin's

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<sup>3</sup> In a poll conducted in 2011, Russia ranked second to last with 4%, just before Pakistan. See: S. Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes*, New York, Basic Books, 2013, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> On the official level, the "defeat" in Syria has been acknowledged though. See G. Steinberg, *Regionalmacht Vereinigte Arabische Emirate: Abu Dhabi tritt aus dem Schatten Saudi-Arabiens* (*Regional power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi emerges from the shadow of Saudi Arabia*), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP-Studie



popularity throughout the region effectively shows a nuanced picture, with strong intra-regional and synchronic variations, as well as cleavages between public opinion and elite attitudes.

In order to understand public and elite perceptions of Russia in the MENA region, a first step will be to identify the basic features, as far as empirically discernible, of Arab public opinion<sup>5</sup>. Basically, three major determinants can be discerned. Firstly, non-Arab foreign policy behaviour towards policy issues considered as 'salient' explains Arab attitudes<sup>6</sup>. In view of the rise of intra-Arab interventions as a result of the 2011 upheavals, however, this feature should probably be qualified as being complemented by an additional 'Arab' dimension. Second, as a regional specificity, both a national and transnational ("pan-Arab") dimension can be observed in Arab public opinion<sup>7</sup>. The transnational component is essential in order to explain cross-regional identifications with those issues considered as salient, such as the Palestine question, Iraq or lately Syria. Third, the development and polarisation of Arab mass media has led to an increased autonomy of public opinion and a reduced capacity of state-controlled media to impose their narrative and thereby influence the formation of public opinion<sup>8</sup>. However, the massive recent use of bots by state actors to influence opinions on social media also needs to be taken into account to paint a more complete picture<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, as a general trend,

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2, February 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The focus of this chapter is on the Arab world. Some of the polling data quoted below also refer to Israel and Turkey though.

<sup>6</sup> P. Furia, A. Russel, and E. Lucas, "Determinants of Arab Public Opinion on Foreign Relations", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, 2006, pp. 585-605.

<sup>7</sup> M. El-Oifi, "L'opinion publique arabe entre logiques étatiques et solidarités transnationales", *Raisons politiques*, vol. 19, August-September 2005, pp. 45-62.

<sup>8</sup> M. Lynch, "Beyond the Arab Street: Iraq and the Arab Public Sphere", *Politics and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, March 2003, pp. 55-91; M. El-Oifi, "Les opinions publiques arabes comme enjeu des relations internationales", *Maghreb-Machrek*, no. 204, summer, 2010, pp. 107-130.

<sup>9</sup> M.O. Jones, "The Gulf Information War| Propaganda, Fake News, and Fake Trends: The Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Gulf Crisis", *International*

the availability of polling data has considerably increased, in particular since the uptick in regional polling following the mass-terrorist attacks on US soil in the early 2000s<sup>10</sup>. Despite these characteristics, technical questions about data reliability remain, while the relevance of measuring public opinion for the foreign policy formulation of – authoritarian – Arab regimes remains equally open to debate.

But how does Russia fit into this picture? With Russia's foreign policy driven by geostrategic considerations and mercantilist reflexes, how is this Machiavellian approach perceived in MENA? This chapter, backed by relevant surveys, argues that a tactical convergence of interest and "autocratic reciprocity" seem to shape elite attitudes, creating mixed perceptions at the public opinion level.

### **Putin's Path Dependence: Machiavellian Foreign Policy**

Russia's approach to international affairs could be summarised as "Make Russia Great Again" via geopolitical manoeuvres underpinned by the search for new markets, with products and commodities that not only enjoy a competitive advantage but also tend to strengthen the state due to the companies' ownership structures. Following a shaky domestic stabilisation in the 1990s, President Yeltsin eventually nominated then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as his successor. The by now longtime Russian leader felt compelled to enter the geopolitical game beyond the country's adjacent rimlands (Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus), increasingly challenging US and "Western" hegemony in permissive settings, such as hotspots in a conflict-ridden Middle East.

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*Journal of Communication*, vol. 13, 2019, pp. 1389-1415.

<sup>10</sup> J.J. Gengler et al., "Why do you ask? The Nature and Impacts of Attitudes towards Public Opinion Surveys in the Arab World", *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 October 2019, pp. 1-22; S. Telhami (2013), p. 10.

More importantly, even though Russia's evolving role and policies in the region are born out of a fundamental rivalry with the US over global status, they do not translate into direct confrontations on the ground. In this sense, they represent a continuation of the Cold War period, with roughly defined zones of influence – the most important difference being the lack of ideology on the Russian side, which is why Russia's discourse and self-representation has required post-Soviet and conflict-related adaptation<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Russia also tries to undermine established US-Arab relations, and, more generally, to enter NATO's area of Southern partnerships, for instance by training Haftar's Libyan forces in Jordan with Russian equipment<sup>12</sup>, by seeking close ties with Egypt over its role in Libya, and by offering and selling military equipment to US allies, including Arab Gulf countries and Turkey.

A central tenet of Putin's *raison d'état* is domestic regime continuity, a goal that requires both reshaping the national narrative and leveraging disarray in MENA for scoring foreign policy points. This strategic approach includes the tactics of using available entry points<sup>13</sup>, embracing balance of power thinking as well as the drive to improve Russia's standing.

Concerning values, the traditional argument of "protecting Orthodox Christianity" has been revived under Putin<sup>14</sup>, leaving open the question of how Russia's role is perceived in Middle Eastern conflict zones where Christians are disproportionately affected (Iraq, Syria). For instance, Putin's actions in Syria could

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<sup>11</sup> A. Miskimmon and B. O'Loughlin, "Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World", *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2017, pp. 111-120; D. Dajani et al., "Differentiated visibilities: RT Arabic's narration of Russia's role in the Syrian war", *Media, War & Conflict*, 12 December 2019, pp. 1-22.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marsad Libya <https://www.marsad.ly/en/2019/05/23/jordan-arming-libyas-haftar-armored-vehicles-weapons/>

<sup>13</sup> W. Mühlberger and M. Siddi, *In from the cold: Russia's agenda in the Middle East and implications for the EU*, EuroMeSCo Policy Brief no. 91, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> L. Issaev and S. Yuriev (2017) [The Christian Dimension of Russia's Middle East Policy](#), Expert Brief, Alsharq Forum, March 2017.

to a certain extent explain positive attitudes towards him in Lebanon<sup>15</sup>.

Also, compared to the pragmatism often attributed to China<sup>16</sup>, which equally seeks economic opportunities in the MENA region (mostly via the Belt and Road Initiative - BRI), Russia plays a strongly proactive role of an engaged actor. In terms of public opinion, this seems to incur a certain cost, with popularity levels varying according to Russia's role, whereas China is generally heading the polls in terms of popularity<sup>17</sup>.

Russia's evolving role in the Middle East has been marked not only by personal choices, in particular Putin's and Primakov's, but also by the strategic exploitation of circumstances, as the recent actions in Libya and Syria attest. In parallel, the increasingly authoritarian governance under Putin has fostered a truly Machiavellian foreign policy, idiosyncratically mingling regime continuity, state-building, external deterrence and national pride.

Deliberate and coerced mercantilism:  
Export drive and sanctions-induced  
import restrictions

Russian geopolitics is underpinned by domestic goals that include countering so-called colour-revolutions<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, Russia is being coerced into looking for new economic opportunities due to massive Western sanctions following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. In the MENA context, an

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<sup>15</sup> According to a poll conducted in 2019 for the BBC by the Arab Barometer, Putin's popularity in Lebanon is on an equal footing with Erdogan, possibly due to a positive reputation among some confessional groups. See: [The Big BBC News Arabic Survey](#), 24 June 2019.

<sup>16</sup> H. Stålhane Hiim and S. Stenslie, "China's Realism in the Middle East", *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 6, 2019, pp. 153-166.

<sup>17</sup> J. Friedrichs, "Explaining China's popularity in the Middle East and Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 9, pp. 1634-1654.

<sup>18</sup> A. Choumiline, *La diplomatie russe au Moyen-Orient: retour à la géopolitique*, Notes de l'Ifri/Russie.Nei.Visions no.93, IFRI, May 2016, p. 9.

associated discourse has been developed that presents Moscow's foreign policy as being driven by an anti-regime change, pro-sovereignty and non-interference agenda, basically aimed at denying access to the US and other players with a stake in regional affairs. The levers used by the Kremlin to enact these policies are based on traditional diplomacy, bolstered by the use of economic means, which, on the contrary, serve the goal of state and regime consolidation using strategically relevant goods.

These trends are epitomised by the hydrocarbon sector, which accounts for a considerable part of Russia's GDP, state budget and foreign currency revenues due to its high levels of exports. Furthermore, these figures highlight the country's dependence on commodity price levels for ensuring stable incomes. For this reason, quantitative arrangements, and disputes, with global energy players such as Saudi Arabia<sup>19</sup> and Qatar have become an important element of Moscow's foreign policy mix. Furthermore, the strong element of direct state-control over the energy sector transforms it, like it or not, into a foreign policy tool. Another key sector, whose role has been expanding, is the arms production and export industry<sup>20</sup>.

Against this background, instead of pushing for diversification, the national economy is virtually trapped in a rentier state model, fashioned around its most relevant (hydrocarbons) and most innovative (arms) sectors, both under strong state tutelage. A third sector of strategic relevance for Russia's foreign policy is agriculture, where it seeks to penetrate formerly closed markets for its export commodity (most recently Saudi Arabia). This set of goods and commodities is complemented by nuclear energy cooperation in the civilian realm and the supply of satellite technology. The elements of comparative advantage compared to other economies, as well as the state's grip on these strategic

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<sup>19</sup> "Russia-Saudi Arabia rapprochement reshapes more than the oil market", *Financial Times*, 30 October 2018.

<sup>20</sup> A. Borshchevskaya, *The tactical side of Russia's arms sales to the Middle East*, Jamestown Foundation, December 2017.

economic sectors, explains the dominant role given to these goods and commodities in its foreign policy with the MENA region, transforming them into Machiavellian foreign policy instruments.

### Russian geostrategy: Endeavour and limitations

In 2013, Joseph Nye criticised Russia for employing a strategy of state-driven soft power, instead of acting according to his own understanding of a civil society-based version of soft power, arguing that the version he considers smarter makes a powerful country appear less frightening<sup>21</sup>. However, he might have missed the point that Russia actually aims to appear frightening to the outside world, and that events such as the Sochi Olympics are linked to status seeking rather than being part of soft power projection<sup>22</sup>. Effectively, as Miskimmon argues, Russia's "strategic", i.e. foreign policy, narrative primarily seeks prestige and authority<sup>23</sup>. Its militarised foreign policy, recently culminating in the annexation of Crimea (2014) and intervention in Syria (2015) also point to hard power assertion in international affairs where deemed strategically useful, either as a means of deterrence or as forward-looking posture.

Yet, this approach also entails a prestige-linked component as it allows Russia to get a seat at the negotiation table, thereby raising its diplomatic profile<sup>24</sup>. However, some scholars argue that at the heart of this approach is not genuine conflict resolution but rather the freezing of conflicts<sup>25</sup>, as numerous festering conflicts on the fringes of the former Soviet Union

<sup>21</sup> J.S. Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power", *Foreign Affairs*, 29 April 2013.

<sup>22</sup> On the topic of Russia's soft power, see chapter 3 by E. Tafuro Ambrosetti in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> A. Miskimmon and B. O'Loughlin (2017).

<sup>24</sup> M.A. Suchkov, "How Moscow is positioning itself as broker amid Mideast tensions", *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2020.

<sup>25</sup> I. Fraihat and L. Issaev, "Russia Doesn't Solve Conflicts, It Silences Them", *Foreign Policy*, 12 June 2018.

indicate. This might also explain China's higher approval ratings in numerous polls, as an emerging global player that exercises strategic restraint in MENA in contrast to Russia's quite activist stance in the region. The only pragmatic component is its reluctance, or lack of capability, to enter into new alliances – or to replace the US as an external security provider beyond the Syrian theatre of operations. In line with these limitations, the preferred *modus vivendi* is to enter partnerships, defined by a range of formal cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding on various subjects.

### **Regional Perceptions in MENA: From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation**

During the Soviet era, Russia shared no physical border with any of the Arab countries, yet the ministers of foreign affairs nurtured close ties with a range of governments because of the ideological competition with the capitalist West. Only five years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the scholar Rashid Khalidi pointed to a deterioration of previously close ties with a list of countries, leaving only Syria, Iraq and Algeria in the close orbit of the Kremlin's foreign policy<sup>26</sup>. These developments also led to the perception that the Soviet Union was a less capable superpower than the US, although "[...] Arab public opinion pays attention to the position adopted by the Soviet Union on *certain critical problems* (emphasis added)"<sup>27</sup>.

At the beginning of the first decade following the demise of the USSR, Russia's regional influence reached a historic low. Middle Eastern relations, including with Turkey and Iran, only received a new impetus when the former head of the Institute of Oriental Studies Primakov was promoted to minister of foreign

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<sup>26</sup> R. Khalidi, "Arab Views of the Soviet Role in the Middle East", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, autumn, 1985, p. 719.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 726.

affairs in 1996<sup>28</sup>. He later became foreign policy advisor to Putin during his first presidency, even though Middle Eastern foreign policy then took a more ideological, anti-Western turn through the nurturing of close relationships with countries and non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran. During the same period, Russia sought to build relations across the region, including with Arab US allies in the Persian Gulf – while Obama's apparent retreat from pro-active engagement in Middle Eastern affairs was portrayed by Putin as a Russian victory<sup>29</sup>. As Saudi Arabia also grew increasingly uncomfortable about US policies towards Iraq, the Kingdom calculated that Russia, through its relationship with Iran, could equally play the role of counterbalancing Tehran<sup>30</sup>. From this perspective, circumstances and the geopolitical choices of other external players in the region created an environment conducive to increased, and welcome, Russian action. The eruption of the Arab Spring, however, initially threatened Russia's advances towards the region's centres of power, especially when the uprisings reached Syria and transformed into an armed insurgency against its closely allied Assad regime. Seemingly on the advice of the former head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Mikhail Fradkin<sup>31</sup>, the Syrian armed forces devised a plan to suppress the insurgency. However, due to substantial levels of foreign support and financing of the armed, jihadist wing of the rebellion<sup>32</sup>, Russia eventually had to come to the rescue of Damascus, preventing its collapse in autumn 2015 with a massive military intervention.

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<sup>28</sup> T. Nizameddin, *Trent'anni di rivoluzioni ed evoluzioni: la Russia e il Medio Oriente (Thirty years of revolutions and evolutions: Russia and the Middle East)*, Milan, Mondadori-ISPI, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 167-169.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 172.

<sup>32</sup> KSA, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, initially the UAE, and Turkey have been the most important foreign sponsors of Syria's armed insurrection against the Assad regime. See: C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016, pp. 105-146.



Nevertheless, authors such as Alexey Vasiliev emphasise two central factors in Russia's foreign policy in the MENA region. First, Moscow's exit strategy in Syria will be a challenge, and secondly, Russia's weak economy does not allow a regional hegemonic power projection on the same scale as that of the US. Nevertheless, Vasiliev welcomes the shift away from the long-standing normative foreign policy prescription towards greater consideration of national interests since Putin came to power. Conversely, the author attributes the relative failure of Western influence in the region to its quasi-messianic behaviour connected with the notions of democratisation<sup>33</sup>.

### The Middle Eastern view

The external relations of Middle Eastern states with Russia as well as Arab public opinion about Russia's role in regional affairs can be assessed from different angles. At the end of 2019, the Egyptian news website Ahram published a piece titled *2019: The Russians are coming back*<sup>34</sup>, offering a comprehensive regional overview of Russian foreign policy. Partially based on interviews with (former) Arab and European, Cairo-based diplomats, it also reflects elite views on this question. Underlining that "Russia has spared no efforts to remind [Arab] rulers across the region that when push came to shove during the 2011 Arab Spring the US turned its back on its closest regional allies", as well as highlighting Russia's opposition to the 'Arab Spring' uprisings, the article alludes to Moscow's narrative that Russia not only represents a more reliable partner but also opposes revolutionary changes to the political systems with uncertain outcomes.

The attitudes expressed in Ahram's article tie in well with the findings of one of the most experienced pollsters in the Arab world, Shibley Telhami. In *The World through Arab Eyes*

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<sup>33</sup> See A. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, Oxon, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "The Russians are coming back", *Ahram online*, December 2019.

(2013) he identifies “Arab resentment against US dominance, in particular since the end of Soviet Union”<sup>35</sup>, fuelled by specific US foreign policy positions on salient issues such as Palestine, Iraq and Syria. Accordingly, the Arab world at large is in search for a global counterweight to the US and considers Russia and China as candidates for this role. This longing for a balancing power is nonetheless qualified by perceptions of external players in terms of their dominance and threat assessments. In a series of polls conducted between 2005 and 2011, Russia’s ratings as “Preferred World Power” incrementally rose from only 5% in 2005 to 12% in 2011, thus ranking third<sup>36</sup>. Arab concerns about unchecked US power seem to have been driving these polling results, probably more than proactive Russian foreign policy activities in the region.

In this context of widespread regional acceptance of Russia as an emerging regional player, Mark Katz highlights the Russian ability to be on good terms with virtually every state of the region and to foster close relationships with a series of non-state actors, even though a range of these actors are locked in mutual conflict. Nevertheless, there are potential limitations to this successful balancing act, especially if a military escalation should occur in the Persian Gulf area<sup>37</sup>.

Other authors stress the Arab need for external security providers<sup>38</sup> paired with a trend to view the US as a (rather) disruptive force in regional affairs, whereas Russia is increasingly perceived by a range of Arab governments as a force of stability, i.e. a stabilising force, favouring the *status quo* of political systems. In an environment not especially inclined towards protecting human rights or embracing reform agendas, Russia

<sup>35</sup> S. Telhami (2013), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-175.

<sup>37</sup> See M. Katz, “What Do They See in Him? How the Middle East views Putin and Russia”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 2193, May 2018, pp. 2-4.

<sup>38</sup> S. Al-Makahleh, “The Arab View of Russia’s Role in the MENA: Changing Arab Perceptions of Russia, and the Implications for US Policy”, in T. Karasik and S. Blank (eds.) *Russia in the Middle East*, Jamestown Foundation, 2018.

must be appealing, at least as an optional or complementary external partner. Nonetheless, scepticism prevails in certain quarters, in particular with regards to Russian claims to uphold the principle of non-interference, despite actions to the opposite effect in Moldova (Transnistria), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk) and Syria.

## **Convergence of Interest and Authoritarian Infatuation: Attitudes Towards Russia**

Similarly to Europe, where populist and far-right political movements openly profess their approval of Putin's authoritarian leadership, in the Arab world the consistently autocratic potentates have no fear of contact with Putin, nor do they hide their admiration for his actions<sup>39</sup>. Even in the context of the Syrian conflict, which is often portrayed as an attack against the Sunni majority of the population, Putin's will to power and reliability (towards Assad) are even emphasised. Such attitudes are both an expression of wishful thinking and a consequence of the latently felt retreat of the US as the dominant power in the region. Hence a certain 'authoritarian infatuation' and (hard) geopolitical considerations equally play a role, explaining a limited but open turn towards the potential Russian counterweight.

Polling in the MENA region:  
Challenges remain, data increases

Before polling in the Arab world took off in a more systematic way, the term "Arab street"<sup>40</sup> tried to capture the mood of a polity whose views could not be assessed in a reliable manner.

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<sup>39</sup> In "Why Russia is back in the Middle East", *Gulf News*, January 2019, Putin is accredited with "the credentials as a decisive and effective leader who delivers what he set out to achieve".

<sup>40</sup> A. Bayat, *La "rue Arabe" au-delà de l'imaginaire occidental*, Centre Tricontinental – CETRI, 15 December 2009.

However, when the regional upheaval started in late 2010 and took shape over 2011, the year of the “Arab revolutions”, the term came under growing scrutiny by its own primary proponents, as a press review indicated<sup>41</sup>. An earlier change concerning the practice of polling occurred in 2001, as 9/11 triggered an increased demand for improved understanding of popular views throughout the Arab world<sup>42</sup>. Even though questions around the quality and reliability of the collected data remain<sup>43</sup>, an increasing amount of information on Arab public opinion has become available, including annual iterations of surveys with identical or similar sets of questions, allowing developments and trends in people’s opinions to be discerned. This also applies to views regarding Russian foreign policy<sup>44</sup>.

#### Perceptions of Russia through polls: Public opinion on Russia<sup>45</sup>

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (based in Qatar and Washington) has been publishing the Arab Opinion Index (*Al-Muashir al-Arabi*) since 2011. In 2015<sup>46</sup>, respondents were asked to rate the role of “foreign policies of big and international states in the Arab region” along a positive-negative scheme. Russia came out fourth in the ranking (led by Turkey, China and France), with 54% viewing Russia as having

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<sup>41</sup> T. Guaaybess, “L’opinion publique et la rue arabes au prismes de la presse française, britannique et américaine”, *Revue française des sciences de l’information et de la communication*, no. 11, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> P. Furia, A. Russel, and E. Lucas (2006), p. 585.

<sup>43</sup> J.J. Gengler (2019).

<sup>44</sup> The increased sophistication in polling in MENA also allows to break down results in relation to specific samples, be they national polls or age groups. What remains challenging is a separate assessment of public opinion and elite attitudes.

<sup>45</sup> For reasons of space limitations the Arab Barometer (<https://www.arabbarometer.org>) and the annual Arab Youth Survey (by Burson-Marsteller), are both excluded from this overview.

<sup>46</sup> The Arabic version of the 2015 report can be accessed here: [https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document\\_1541AAF4.pdf](https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document_1541AAF4.pdf)

a negative or somewhat negative role and 34% a positive or somewhat positive role. According to the pollsters, compared to the previous year (2014) this corresponds to a significant increase in negative perceptions (from 42%) and a slight decrease in positive perceptions (from 37%). In a regional country breakdown (interestingly including neither Libya nor Qatar), national public opinion data specifically on Russian foreign policy is also provided. On average, only a third of respondents (34%) attribute a positive role to Russia, whereas a substantial proportion (54%) of them see Russia as acting in a negative manner. Countries with a more positive view include Kuwait (63%), Iraq (49%) and Lebanon (43%), whereas negative perceptions are predominant in most countries, headed by Saudi Arabia (77%), Jordan (74%) and Algeria (69%).

Polling by Zogby Research Services (based in Washington) also tries to capture the foreign policy dimension of the MENA region, including Arab perceptions regarding Russia's role in the region. For instance in 2019, *Looking to the next decade*<sup>47</sup>, a sort of forecasting poll, covers opinions on Russia and asked respondents to assess the future role of Russia in Syria, to identify the most dependable ally and to define priorities for the decade ahead. In the context of the Syrian war, the importance of external players Russia and Iran will remain, including the possibility of tensions between the two over their roles in future Syria. Asked to respond to the question "What in your opinion will be the future of Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria?", 49% of Lebanese think that "Russia and Iran will remain in Syria and together exert influence over the Assad government", whereas only 6% in the UAE consider this outcome as realistic. By contrast, 61% in the UAE think that "Russia and Iran will remain in Syria, but the Assad government will be in control over decisions that affect the future of the country", whereas only 19% of Lebanese endorse such a scenario, suggesting

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<sup>47</sup> *Looking to the Next Decade: Arab, Turkish & Iranian Opinion*, Zogby Research Services, November 2019.

strongly diverging views across the region on the future role of external actors in a post-conflict Syria<sup>48</sup>. Answering to “As you look to the next decade, which of the following countries do you believe would be the most dependable partners for your country?”, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are quoting Russia as their second most important future ally, preceded by Saudi Arabia and the US, respectively. Iraq and Turkey both rank Russia fourth, while in the UAE Russia only ranks fifth (cf. p23). In the section on priorities for the next decade, in general (mean value), respondents seem to care least about improving relations with the South (Africa) or the East, including Russia.

Previously, in 2017, Zogby conducted<sup>49</sup> a trans-regional poll (9 countries, including Turkey and Iran) assessing “Attitudes in the Middle East towards foreign involvement”<sup>50</sup>. Responding to “How important is it that your country have good relations with Russia?”, Jordan and the UAE saw significant upticks in positive responses (“Important”), jumping from 26% to 65% and from 41% to 93%, respectively. Egypt and Lebanon also indicate strong support, with 86% and 70%, confirming the importance of cordial relations with Russia. Among the surveyed countries, the lowest levels of support can be found in Iraq and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), still ranging at almost two-thirds (58% and 53%). A second question relates to roles of external actors in Syria (“Which countries do you believe are playing a positive/negative role?). While in KSA 72% see Russia as playing a negative role, similar opinions can be found in Egypt, Jordan and the UAE (61%, 58% and 57%), with Lebanon having the least negative view of Russia in Syria, with only 38%.

In his survey conducted in late 2011, Shibley Telhami found that only 12% of respondents chose Russia in response to the question “In a world where there is only one superpower, which of the following countries would you prefer to be

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> “Russia in the Middle East”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 219, May 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

that superpower?”, though up compared to 7% in 2009. Furthermore, only 4% thought of Russia as an attractive place to live (“If you had to live in one of the following countries, which one would you prefer most?”), compared to 28% opting for France and 22% for Germany<sup>51</sup>.

The annual Euromed “Survey of experts and actors”<sup>52</sup> draws specifically from a pool of regional experts, which is why it cannot be strictly considered a standard public opinion survey. Its sample is mixed in the sense that it represents voices from the MENA region as well as from European researchers (although some graphs provide a breakdown into Southern and Eastern Mediterranean – SEM – and EU countries). Nevertheless, it provides a valuable data set for triangulation with other surveys on regional perceptions. The survey, published in 2018, refers to Russian foreign policy in a number of questions. Answering the question “Which of the following actors are more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region?”, Russia is ranked as the third most disruptive force with roughly a fifth of the sample (18%), preceded by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (19%) and the US with 28%. The regional breakdown also indicates that EU respondents have a more negative view of Russia with 22%, compared to SEM countries with only 15%. SEM respondents were also invited to identify the top foreign policy partner of their respective countries, with only 4% attributing this role to Russia. A qualitative analysis attributes Russia’s rather positive standing (among the SEM respondents) to “massive Russian propaganda disseminated across the Arab world”, a view that could be analytically challenged, however, by the fact that researchers tend to critically examine information disseminated by certain sources.

Pew research issues annual surveys on “global attitudes”, including on the image of political leaders. In 2017 the survey

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<sup>51</sup> S. Telhami (2013), pp.175, 180.

<sup>52</sup> EuroMed Survey of Experts and Actors, [Changing Euro-Mediterranean Lenses](#), IEMed, 9th edition, 2018.

*Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin*<sup>53</sup> included five Middle Eastern countries, with a strong emphasis on the Near East (four countries, including Israel and Turkey) and only one North-African country (Tunisia). Compared to the worldwide average, remarkably, Tunisian respondents are roughly equally divided over confidence in Putin's right handling of international affairs (32% positive, 39% negative), while 92% of Jordanians do not have confidence in the Russia leader. Interestingly, a majority in Lebanon trust Putin more (46%) than they place confidence in US President Trump (15%). The other regional extreme is represented by Israel, where Trump (56%) overrules Putin (28%) in terms of confidence attribution. In addition, the threat perception of Russia is relatively pronounced in Jordan (49% consider it a threat to national security), compared to a global median of 31%, but even higher in Turkey (54%), despite comparatively lower rates of no confidence (74%). In Israel only roughly a quarter view Russia as a potential threat (27%). Concerning the generic view of Russia in a positive or negative light, 93% of Jordanians have an unfavourable opinion of Russia<sup>54</sup>, down to only a third (37%) in Tunisia, the only MENA country below the global median (40%) with an unfavourable view of Russia. However, favourable and unfavourable views are highly polarised in both Lebanon and Tunisia, with almost equal shares (48% vs. 47%, and 37% vs. 39%, respectively). In terms of education level, respondents with higher education backgrounds in Tunisia and Turkey expressed more favourable views of Russia. Also, regarding citizens' rights, 80% of Tunisian respondents think that Russia's government respects personal freedoms, whereas 66% in Israel hold the opposite view, possibly informed by the

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<sup>53</sup> M. Vice, *Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia*, Pew Research Center, 16 August 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Noteworthy is the development of negative perceptions in Jordan, developing from an evenly spilt opinion in 2007 (49% unfavorable, 48% favorable) to the most pronounced anti-Russian sentiment among the surveyed countries only ten years later (graph p. 9).



large Russian element in its population with closer insights into Russian domestic affairs.

The following year, the Pew survey *Image of Putin, Russia Suffers Internationally*<sup>55</sup> similarly concluded that President Putin's standing faces increasingly negative views, despite the acknowledged surge of his country as a power-player on the international scene. The scope of this annual survey is considerably reduced, however, as only two Middle Eastern countries, Tunisia and Israel, are included. Yet, this still enables a limited comparison of public opinion as these two countries were also represented in the previous annual polling.

Gallup's polling on the MENA region is focused on specific topics, usually not touching on political themes such as foreign policy or providing synchronic perspectives of opinions. However, the *2020 Vision* report includes a ten-year timeline of "global leadership" ratings, with Russia ranking below China (34%) at 30%<sup>56</sup>. Notably, according to this poll, Russia's percentage evolved within a ten percent bracket from 2007 till 2018, with a steady increase in ranking since 2014.

Taken together, these polls provide a comprehensive overview of Arab public opinion about Russia. Even though the approaches, polling methods and samples are not identical, the available results allow comparisons and do not show any substantial inconsistencies. Russia is indeed perceived as a rising global power, yet with a mixed record concerning its role in the MENA region.

## Conclusion

Russian engagement with Middle Eastern countries can best be understood through an imperial lens. Putin, inspired by the past glories of both the expansionist Czarist Empire and the

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<sup>55</sup> C. Letterman, *Image of Putin, Russia Suffers Internationally*, Pew Research Center, 6 December 2018.

<sup>56</sup> J. Ray and R.J. Reinhart, *2020 Vision: Global Trends to Watch*, Gallup, 8 January 2020.

Soviet Union's global action, seeks to re-establish the grandeur of the past by embracing a proactive role on the international stage. Even though such neo-imperial ambitions remain limited by the availability of material means and constrained by other actors, the Middle East and North Africa have proved to be a fruitful terrain for Russia's search for international status.

Furthermore, the trajectory of US interventionist foreign policy in the region, especially since 9/11, has reinforced the generally shared view that a balancing, internationally capable force was necessary to counter US hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa<sup>57</sup>. It seems that Russia under Putin has managed to assume this role in a credible manner. However, his foreign policy discourse, featuring strong anti-Western elements, can only exert an effective attraction insofar as shared negative assessments of his own Western contenders exist, and specific interests coincide.

When trying to assess Arab public opinion on Russia through polls, three types of survey questions can be identified. The first group of questions relates to attitudes in the Middle East towards Moscow's foreign involvement, which can be specified in terms of stability effects or threat perceptions, as well as to Russian involvement in specific conflicts, above all in Syria. In the second cluster of questions, respondents are also asked to express either their confidence in Putin or in Russia as an ally or as a superpower, thus generally gauging the quality or importance of the relationship. A third group of questions is a more mixed bag, with questions assessing the general attraction of the country, for instance as a potential place to live and work.

What clearly emerges from this analysis is the perception of Russia as a decisive foreign policy actor that inspires both respect and fear in certain quarters. In line with the traditional regional perception of the need to counterbalance any hegemonic external actor, Russia under Putin has been able to position itself as a relevant player for this role. However, views

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<sup>57</sup> S. Telhami (2013), p. 171.

vary quite significantly from country to country and between the sub-regions of the wider Arab world. And even though the recognition of Russia's global standing is on an upward trend, the relatively distant China and the assertive Turkey under Erdogan seem to exert a stronger attraction.

## **6. Russia in Latin America: Beyond Economic Opportunities**

Alexandra G. Koval, Vladimir Rouvinski

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Despite the physical distance that separates Russia from Latin America and the Caribbean and weaker dynamics of trade and commerce compared with many other cases, relations with the countries of the region occupy a special place in the contemporary Russian foreign policy. As we explain in this chapter, this is because the government of Vladimir Putin has learned to appreciate the value of Russia's interactions with this part of the world for Moscow's short-, medium-, and long-term goals on the international arena.

At the same time, considering the changing patterns of Russian-Latin American relations, it is important to point out that the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet approach to this distant geographical area cannot be separated from the transformation of Russian foreign policy in broader terms. When Russia decided to return to the Western Hemisphere at the end of the 1990s, it did not want to replicate the USSR's Cold War policy, although the Soviet legacy was certainly taken into account. Back then, Moscow's primary interests in its international relations responded to the urgent tasks on the domestic political agenda and to the need to find new business opportunities for its defence industries and energy sector.

In this context, the beginning of the Russian love story with Latin America and the Caribbean was barely noticed by outside observers. However, two decades later, the scenario is

completely different. There is widespread recognition of Russia as a major extra-regional actor whose actions can be a game-changer, as evidenced by the 2019 political crisis in Venezuela. In addition, some of the most important Russian energy and defence companies have established a noticeable presence in the region. The volume of trade and commerce has risen steeply as well. This change has taken place since Russia's current strategy in Latin America is an essential part of a complex foreign policy design by the Kremlin, in which reciprocity with the United States is not the only logic that rules the day. Legitimate concerns over the future of Russia as a global economic player are also important.

The main objective of this chapter is to trace the evolution of Russian relations with Latin America and the Caribbean in order to explain the key reasons behind the change in Moscow's policies towards the region. We will also illustrate our general assumptions through the case study of Venezuela. We will conclude our review of Russian-Latin American relations by describing some of the challenges faced by Moscow with regard to future scenarios.

## Historical Background of Russian-Latin American Relations

The first contacts between Russia and Latin America date back to the XIX century. Indeed, before the fall of the Russian monarchy, many young Latin American governments managed to establish direct contacts with Saint Petersburg. However, while Latin Americans sought recognition by one of the most important European powers of that time in order to improve their nations' visibility in the international landscape<sup>1</sup>, the

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<sup>1</sup> See N.L. Korsakova and V.V. Noskov, "Spiski diplomaticheskogo korpusa v Sankt-Peterburge, 1835 g. (po materialam RGIA)" ("Lists of the diplomatic corps in Saint Petersburg, 1835 (based on materials from the Russian State Archives)", *Peterburgskii Historicheskii Journal*, 2015, no. 4, pp. 172-210. The first diplomatic

interest of the Russian Empire in the distant continent was of a different nature. Rather than a desire to establish full-fledged relations with the new states of the Western Hemisphere, it was an attempt to use Russia's participation in the various scenarios in the New World in order to gain an advantage in the political struggle with other European powers elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, thanks to these first limited diplomatic contacts, as well as to Russian scientific expeditions to the region<sup>3</sup>, Russia built up some initial knowledge about Latin America.

The change in Russia's approach to Latin America and the Caribbean is associated with the beginning of the Soviet era and the creation of the Third International (Comintern). For most of the twentieth century, the dominant view of Comintern activities in the region between 1919 and 1940 was that of a subversive clandestine organisation that fully obeyed any order received from Moscow and helped to advance the Soviet Union's foreign policy goals. Only in the 1990s, with the opening of previously inaccessible Comintern archives, did it become clear that a number of significant discrepancies existed between Moscow and Latin American communists concerning both the assessment of the socio-economic situation in specific countries and the type of practical activities to be carried out in cooperation with the Bureau in Russia<sup>4</sup>. Of course, the Comintern sent its agents to the region. They sought to

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representation of the Russian Empire in South America was established in Rio de Janeiro on 30 July 1811. Before the 1917 Revolution, the Russian Empire has established diplomatic contacts with 10 Latin American states.

<sup>2</sup> B. Komissarov, "Under the constellation of the Southern Cross. 200 years of the Russian consular and diplomatic service in Latin America", *Consul*, vol. 4, no. 27, 2011, pp. 14-17.

<sup>3</sup> K. Buinova, *Russkie puteshestvenniki v Latinskoj Amerike v XIX – nachale XX v. (Russian travelers in Latin America in the 19th - early 20th centuries)*, Moscow, MGIMO University, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> M. Caballero, "Latin America and the Comintern, 1919-1943", *Cambridge Latin American Studies*, 1986, no. 60; V. Jeifets and L. Jeifets, "The Comintern and the formation of the Latin American Communist militants", *Izquierdas*, no. 31, 2016, pp. 130-161.

coordinate the work of local communist organisations and provided financial support. The governments in Latin America interpreted the Comintern's activities as extremely dangerous and aimed at undermining the existing political institutions as well as at the disruption of public order. Due to the influence of the Comintern's clandestine network in sensitive political processes across the continent, the Soviet Union quickly acquired the image of the key foreign enemy<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the above antecedents, during the Second World War most of Latin America joined forces with the USSR fighting the Axis powers<sup>6</sup>. But the wartime alliance was quickly forgotten after Colombia accused Stalin's government of masterminding the assassination of the prominent political leader Jorge Gaitan in April 1948, triggering the longest civil war in the region<sup>7</sup>. With the creation of the Organization of American States, the fight against Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere was declared to be the primary goal of Latin American governments, and most of the countries broke diplomatic relations with the USSR. For an important part of Latin American elites, the image of Moscow as an enemy was back. Soviet support to revolutionary Cuba and the leftist movements in other countries only reinforced it.

In October 1962, the Soviet Union deployed short and medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba<sup>8</sup>. After the world balanced on the edge of a nuclear disaster for thirteen days,

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<sup>5</sup> M. Cajas, "The law against the communism in Colombia, 1920-1956", *Izquierdas*, 2020, no. 49, pp. 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> S. Brilev, *Zabytye sojuzniki vo Vtoroj mirovoj vojne (The Forgotten allies in the Second World War)*, Moscow, OLMA Media Group, 2012; A. Sizonenko, "SSSR i Latinskaja Amerika vo vremja Velikoj Otechestvennoj Vojny" ("The Soviet Union and Latin America during the Great Patriotic War"), *Latin American Historical Almanac*, no. 16, 2016, pp. 141-147.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Trapani, "Seeing 'Reds' in Colombia: Reconsidering the 'Bogotazo', 1948", *Revista Esboços*, no. 36, 2017, pp. 352-372.

<sup>8</sup> For the latest review of the Cuban missile crisis that use newly available sources, see H. Karlsson and T.D. Acosta, *The Missile Crisis from a Cuban Perspective. Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Reflections*, New York, Routledge, 2019.

the subsequent removal of the missiles marked the beginning of detente in US-Soviet relations and the changing of the rules of the game regarding Soviet policies towards the region. From this perspective, the Cuban crisis was not only a crucial moment in the Cold War but also the turning point in the great power competition in the Western Hemisphere. On the one hand, Moscow came to appreciate the value of the geographical proximity of Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States in the context of the balance of power and logic of reciprocity<sup>9</sup>. As a result, for 30 years, Cuba became a vital and costly Soviet outpost in the US “backyard”, characterised by the permanent presence of Soviet military personnel and Havana’s total dependence on Soviet aid<sup>10</sup>. Moscow also supported many other leftist movements in the continent, although trying to avoid direct involvement in internal conflicts. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union managed to restore diplomatic relations with many Latin American governments and diversified its methods of engagement. For instance, despite sharp ideological differences, the USSR promoted trade, commerce and technical cooperation with some of the region’s strongest economies ruled by the military, namely, Argentina and Brazil<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, the Soviet government offered scholarships for university studies in the USSR, and tens of thousands of Latin Americans, many of whom are part of their national business and intellectual elites

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<sup>9</sup> J. Suchlicki, “Soviet Policy in Latin America: Implications for the United States”, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1987, pp. 25-46.

<sup>10</sup> In the beginning of the 1980s, it was estimated that the daily cost of the Soviet economic aid to Cuba was \$11 m a day (about \$4 bn a year) plus another \$600 m in military aid (United Press International, 18 June 1983). The issue of the Cuban debt was one of the most difficult to resolve in Russia’s post-soviet relations with Cuba. Only in 2014, an agreement was reached between Moscow and Havana to write off 90% of \$35.2 bn Cuban Soviet-time debt.

<sup>11</sup> N. Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America 1959-1987*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; A. Varas, “Soviet Union-Latin American Relations: A Historical Perspective”, in H. Munoz, J.S. Tulchin and D.G. Becker (eds.), *Latin American Nations In World Politics*, New York, Routledge, 1996.



today, were educated in the Soviet Union<sup>12</sup>. In the end, until its demise in 1991, the USSR possessed diverse and valuable links with Latin America and the Caribbean.

## Latin America in Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy

The end of the Soviet Union saw a drastic reduction in Moscow's influence in the region. The volume of trade declined dramatically and many other types of contacts stopped. In its early days, post-Soviet Russia wanted to collaborate with the West on many items on the global agenda and, as a result, lost any strategic interest in the region's geographical proximity to the United States. Cuba had a particularly hard time. The new authorities in Russia stopped providing crucial aid and closed their military base, removing almost all of the former Soviet Union's tangible presence in the island. Facing enormous social and economic difficulties, the Castro government had to declare a "special period"<sup>13</sup>. The abandonment of Cuba and the decline of economic relations with other countries dealt a serious blow to Russia's prestige among Latin Americans.

The situation changed after Vladimir Putin took office as Russian President in 2000 and began to adopt a more assertive policy on the international arena. Against this background, it is possible to identify several reasons for Russia's renewed interest in Latin America and the Caribbean. The first reason had to do with the fact that the distant continent turned out to be a convenient venue for staging a political spectacle of Russia's restored influence around the world. For Putin, the increasingly positive perception of Russia's role on the international stage

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<sup>12</sup> T. Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> M.J. Bain, "Russia, Cuba and colonial legacies in the twenty-first century", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-17.

among ordinary Russians was key in achieving an extraordinarily high approval rating that enabled the Russian President to introduce a number of reforms and political changes inside the country. Russia's media machine was the driving force behind the new image of a mighty Moscow. In this respect, Latin America was useful because the majority of Russian voters had vivid memories of the Soviet Union's glorious past in the region (Cuba and Nicaragua). This allowed Russian TV to use the frequent visits by heads of states and other similar events as evidence of "Russia being back" as a global power<sup>14</sup>.

The other reason was the restored value of Latin America's geographical proximity to the United States for Moscow's political elites. Not only the top members of the Russian government but also many other powerful decision-makers were seriously alarmed by Russia losing control over the political and economic scenarios in the former republics of the Soviet Union. This area of major security, social, and economic concern was labelled by Moscow as Russia's "near abroad". Vladimir Putin's government was convinced that the failure to keep many former Soviet republics within the Russian orbit was the result of the deliberate policy of the United States, and Moscow had to act accordingly. Because of the Soviet legacy, Latin America is perceived in Russia as Washington's "near abroad". Through the prism of reciprocity – even if mostly symbolic – it was decided that establishing and sustaining relations with Latin American governments was in the Kremlin's best interests.

Engaging the regimes belonging to the so-called "pink tide"<sup>15</sup> was given priority since their leaders frequently rejected US

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<sup>14</sup> V. Rouvinski, "Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America", *Kennan Cable No.20*, Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Pink tide" (also "left turn") refers to the wave of leftist governments that came to the power by winning elections in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia in the end of the 1990s-beginning of the 2000th. Their permanence in power mostly coincided with the commodity boom of the first decade of the 21st century enabling these governments to carry out a number of impressive social programs.

policy and shared many ideas from Putin's famous 2007 Munich speech denouncing the US-led world order. Russia was ready to assist its new allies by collaborating with them in international organisations like the United Nations and supporting their domestic stands, often as the only extra-regional power to do so.<sup>16</sup> They were also offered substantial financial credits, in addition to military cooperation and investments in the energy sector. Russia's strategy towards its allies from the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was twofold. On the one hand, credits from Moscow were easy to obtain because they played the role of rewards to Russia's Latin American supporters. On the other hand, the credits were normally tied to the acquisition of Russian machinery and equipment, thus opening new markets or allowing Russian producers to return to the markets they had before the collapse of the USSR<sup>17</sup>.

During the late 2000s and the 2010s, it became clear that the Russian strategy worked. For example, in 2008, after the Russian-Georgian five-day war, leftist regimes in Latin America were among only a handful of governments that supported the Russian position in the conflict and recognised the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In addition, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua allowed Russia to send its strategic bombers and navy ships to their countries in a widely televised coverage. In turn, Moscow provided well-timed credits and investments. Russia also shipped machinery and various types of industrial equipment and promised impressive projects in the energy sector. On a separate front, with the help of new partners in the region, Russia's arms sales skyrocketed and turned Moscow into the second biggest arms trader in the world<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, for the government of Hugo Chavez, it was very important to show Venezuelans that Russia – a major world power – supported his policy.

<sup>17</sup> See V. Rouvinski, "Russian Re-Engagement with Latin America: Energy and Beyond", in B.M. Bagley, D. Mouliokova, and H.S. Kaab (eds.), *Impact of Emerging Economies on Global Energy and the Environment: Challenges Ahead*, Lexington Books, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The estimated \$14.5 bn worth of Russian arms were sold to Latin American

The third reason behind Russia's return to Latin America and the Caribbean are long-term goals related to the future of global economic relations. The Kremlin's energy policy is aimed at keeping Russia's status as an energy superpower for many years to come. While Russia managed to replace the old gas and oil distribution networks it inherited from the Soviet Union with new ones, there are experts who speak about the risk of diminishing Russian domestic oil and gas production in the mid-term perspective<sup>19</sup>. Moscow hopes that Russia's energy mega-companies like Rosneft will be able to expand the geography of oil and gas exploration and its worldwide distribution. In the Western Hemisphere, Rosneft focuses on Venezuela and Cuba, where the company has made significant investments and owns a number of joint ventures. As shown by the 2019 political crisis in Venezuela, examined in the last section of this chapter, Russia is determined to protect its investments in the energy sector in the region because they are of strategic value.

Finally, yet importantly, Moscow's post-Soviet rapprochement with the Western Hemisphere has opened new opportunities for the diversification of the geography and tools of Russia's foreign policy. Nowadays, the Kremlin is careful not to place all its eggs in one basket, and its policy towards Latin America is becoming more pragmatic. Besides Venezuela and Cuba, Vladimir Putin's government is attempting to keep workable relations with many other countries in the region. It actively pursues business opportunities for Russian companies, and constantly monitors political, economic, and social processes. Moreover, official country-to-country contacts are complemented by informal links, tourism<sup>20</sup>, cultural exchange and the use of non-traditional means of engagement. In this

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countries since the mid-1990s. See V. Jelfets, L. Khadorich, and Ya. Leksyutina, "Russia and Latin America: Renewal versus continuity", *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2018, pp. 213-228.

<sup>19</sup> See International Energy Agency (IEA), *World Energy Outlook 2019*.

<sup>20</sup> In 2019, Latin America became the first entire region, which allows Russian nationals travel visa-free for short-term visits.

context, the Russian media can be considered a true success story. As of the beginning of 2020, RT in Spanish (and in English in the English-Speaking Caribbean nations) was freely available in every country of Latin American and the Caribbean and on the Internet. Today, it is likely to be the most consulted foreign source of information on international developments for Latin American journalists and young people<sup>21</sup>. Sputnik Mundo news has its own network of correspondents in the region and has many subscribers on the Internet. Both outlets are owned by the Russian government and are included in the list of strategic companies with guaranteed funding. The Russian media exposes Latin American audiences to alternative interpretations of international events from those originating in Western countries and which are in line with Moscow's official stand instead. RT and Sputnik are highly critical of US domestic and foreign policy as well.

## **Russian Economic Cooperation with Latin America**

There are four major dimensions of Russian economic relations with Latin America: trade, investments, scientific and technical cooperation<sup>22</sup>, in addition to foreign aid<sup>23</sup>. However,

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<sup>21</sup> Based on interviews conducted by one of the authors to journalists in Colombia, Ecuador and Argentina in June-November 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Some of the examples of Russian-Latin American cooperation in this area are the promoting of the use of Russia's satellite navigation system Glonass in several countries of Latin America. Just recently, the plans of introducing Glonass had been discussed in Venezuela (<https://ria.ru/20181206/1547557658.html>). The other example is the production of vaccines using Russian technologies that was launched in April 2019 at the immunobiological center in Managua (Nicaragua) according to Russia's Foreign Ministry <https://www.mid.ru/problemy-vzaimootnosenij-so-stranami-latinskoj-ameriki-i-karibskogo-bassejna>

<sup>23</sup> The share of Latin America in total Russian development assistance programs is approximately 20 percent (estimated); much less than that devoted to Asia and Africa. The main recipients of the Russian aid in the region are Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Venezuela. At the same time, Russia represents only 4 percent of total foreign aid received by Latin America. Most

it is primarily trade that represents the cornerstone of Russia's economic links with the region. It is worth mentioning here that trade was also an important instrument of Soviet policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. For instance, in 1970, the USSR's trade with the region amounted to \$975 m<sup>24</sup> (excluding Cuba, \$48 m). In 1985, it reached \$11.85 bn (excluding Cuba, \$2.52 bn)<sup>25</sup>. The Soviet Union exported not only raw materials but also many manufactured goods while it imported mainly agricultural goods.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russian-Latin American trade fell sharply and between 1992 and 1994 it amounted to only about \$1.4 bn (excluding Cuba; \$700 m)<sup>26</sup>. Russia almost entirely ceased to supply high-tech products, and the lion's share of its exports consisted of raw materials. The main reasons for such dramatic changes can be linked to the transformation of the Russian economic model to that of a market economy and the Westernisation of Russian foreign policy<sup>27</sup>. The dynamics of trade only changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Figure 6.1 shows, Russian-Latin American trade has substantially increased for the last twenty years. Already in 2007, Russia's trade with the region exceeded \$11.9 m and achieved the same volume as Latin American trade with the Soviet Union.

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of Russia's assistance goes to the area of education, health, fighting illegal drug trafficking and humanitarian aid. See: A.G. Koval and A.M. Lantukh, "Rossijskie programmy sodejstvija razvitiiju v Latinskoj Amerike" ("Characteristics of Russian development assistance programs in Latin America"), *Latinskaja Amerika*, no. 3, 2018, pp. 45-55.

<sup>24</sup> \$ - US dollars.

<sup>25</sup> L. Klochkovsky, "Situacion y Perspectivas de las Relaciones Comerciales entre Rusia y America Latina", CEPAL LC/R, no. 1435, 1994.

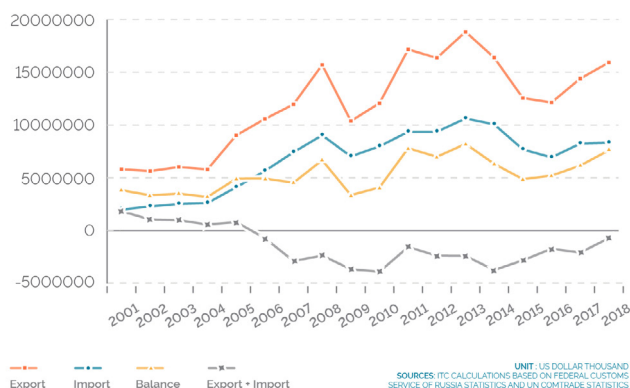
<sup>26</sup> V.M. Davidov, "Rusia en América Latina (y viceversa)", *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 226, 2010, pp. 4-12.

<sup>27</sup> See A.G. Koval and S.F. Sutyryn, "Transformation of the Russian trade policy facing the geopolitical challenges", in S.F. Sutyryn, O.Y. Trofimenko, and A.G. Koval (eds.), *Russian Trade Policy: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, Abington, New York, Routledge, 2019.

FIG. 6.1 - RUSSIA'S TRADE WITH LATIN AMERICA IN 2001-2018,  
\$ THOUSAND

## Bilateral trade between Russian Federation and Latin America and the Caribbean

PRODUCT: TOTAL ALL PRODUCTS



Source: ITC Trade map 2019, [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org).

In recent years, the global financial crisis, Western sanctions and Russia's counter sanctions and the fall in oil prices have had a negative impact on the Russian economy, leading to the decline of trade by Russian companies. At the same time, Russia started to implement an import substitution strategy and to support, inter alia, domestic agricultural companies. Therefore, the Russian embargo on certain agricultural products from the West has not resulted in a significant increase in imports of agricultural products from Latin America, even though this option has been widely discussed<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, C. Meacham, *What Does the Russian Food Import Ban Mean for Latin America*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 September 2014.

Western sanctions forced Russia to begin searching for potential new economic cooperation opportunities. Arguably, Latin America could be a possible focus of re-orientation in Russian foreign trade<sup>29</sup>. Yet, after 2014, Russia pivoted towards Asia, especially China<sup>30</sup>, and today Asian nations are very strong competitors on both the Russian and the Latin American market. In the context of this tough competition, one of the main obstacles for the growth of business contacts between Russia and Latin America remains a lack of market information. While official visits to a certain extent intensified the dissemination of information and the development of legal and institutional framework had resulted in the strengthening of Russian-Latin American economic cooperation<sup>31</sup>, the challenge of designing an institutional framework for better exchange of business information and product promotion remains on the agenda<sup>32</sup>. Interviews with business representatives have also confirmed that information-related barriers together with the cost of transportation are major obstacles to Russian-Latin American trade<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> P.P. Yakovlev, "Rossija i Latinskaja Amerika: parametry strategicheskogo partnerstva" ("Russia and Latin America: dimensions of strategic partnership"), *Latinskaya Amerika*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5-14.

<sup>30</sup> See A.G. Koval, L.V. Popova, and S.F. Sutyryn, "Transformation of the Russian Trade Policy: Pivot to Asia, Focus on China", in *Research on the economic development of Russia in 2017*, Renmin University of China, Beijing, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Institutional frameworks include such organizations for trade promotion as trade missions and intergovernmental commissions. Currently, Russia has trade missions to Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru and intergovernmental commissions with 12 Latin American nations. See Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation, [http://minpromtorg.gov.ru/ministry/trade\\_mission/world\\_countries\\_and\\_trade\\_missions/](http://minpromtorg.gov.ru/ministry/trade_mission/world_countries_and_trade_missions/); Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, [https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/news/mezhpravitelstvennye\\_komissii\\_mpk\\_po\\_torgovo\\_ekonomicheskomu\\_sotrudnichestvu\\_so\\_stranami\\_azii\\_afriki\\_i\\_latinskoy\\_ameriki.html](https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/news/mezhpravitelstvennye_komissii_mpk_po_torgovo_ekonomicheskomu_sotrudnichestvu_so_stranami_azii_afriki_i_latinskoy_ameriki.html)

<sup>32</sup> See Y. Paniev, "Cooperacion Economico-Comercial Ruso-Latinoamericana: Adelantos y Deficiencias", *Iberoamérica*, no. 3, 2013, pp. 111-127.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews were conducted by one of the authors. See also V. Ryzhkova, and A. Koval, "The Role of Trade Costs in the Russian-Paraguayan Trade Relations",



One of the priorities for today's Russia is to strengthen the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a customs union based on a common foreign trade policy. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation set out the importance of a regional approach for Russia in Latin America: "Russia will seek to consolidate ties with its Latin American partners by working within international and regional forums, expanding cooperation with multilateral associations and Latin American and Caribbean integration structures"<sup>34</sup>. Hence, EAEU is now actively engaged in discussing the opportunities for signing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), and treaties have already been signed with Vietnam, Iran, Singapore and Serbia. Chile and Peru were the first Latin American countries to propose FTAs to the EAEU. The EAEU had also held preliminary talks with MERCOSUR on the subject<sup>35</sup>.

In 2018, Russian-Latin American trade amounted to almost \$16 bn. It is important to emphasise that despite some fluctuations in export and import dynamics, the Latin American share of Russia's trade has not changed significantly over the past ten years. It accounted for about 1.8% of Russia's merchandise exports and for 3.8% of Russia's imports in 2018. At the same time, Latin American countries play an important role in Russia's trade when it comes to certain products, in particular, raw materials and products thereof (Figure 6.2), with fertilisers, mineral fuels, iron and steel representing 80% of Russian exports to Latin America. Brazil is a leading importer of

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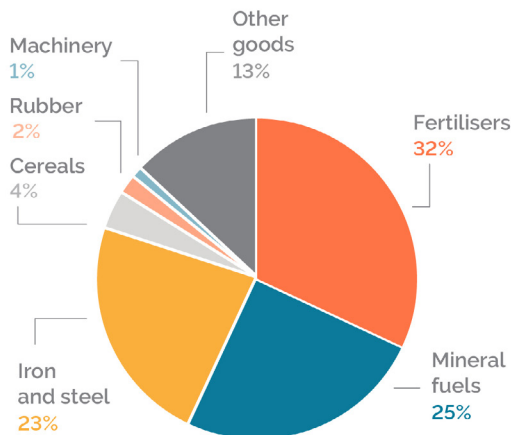
*Latin American Journal of Trade Policy*, vol. 1, no. 2, January 2019, pp. 5-29.

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB)

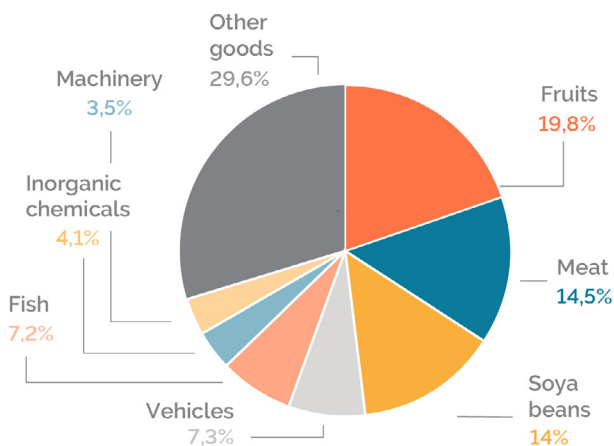
<sup>35</sup> Eurasian Economic Commission, <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/nae/news/Pages/18-12-3018-1.aspx>. These talks evidenced that agricultural sector and trade are ones of the most sensitive issues in FTA negotiations between the EAEU and Latin American countries, which is another reasons why Russian-Latin American trade relations did not benefit from the Russian sanction regime for agricultural products originating in the West.

Russian fertilisers. The main recipients of crude petroleum oils in the region are Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil and Argentina. Mexico is the fourth largest importer of Russian iron and steel.

FIG. 6.2 - RUSSIA'S TRADE WITH LATIN AMERICA BY PRODUCT, 2018



UNIT: US DOLLAR THOUSAND  
SOURCES: ITC CALCULATIONS BASED ON FEDERAL CUSTOMS SERVICE OF RUSSIA STATISTICS AND UN COMTRADE STATISTICS



UNIT: US DOLLAR THOUSAND  
SOURCES: ITC CALCULATIONS BASED ON FEDERAL CUSTOMS SERVICE OF RUSSIA STATISTICS AND UN COMTRADE STATISTICS

Source: ITC Trade map 2019, [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org)

In comparison with the Soviet Union, Russia's exports of high-tech products to Latin America are insignificant. Moreover, today Russia imports more machinery products from Latin America than it exports<sup>36</sup>. In 2018, Russian machinery exports only amounted to about \$43 m, while Moscow imported products for \$112 m. The main importers of Russian machinery are Cuba, Argentina and Venezuela, while the key exporters are Brazil and Mexico.

Today, the bulk of Russian imports from Latin America are agricultural products: fruit, meat and soya beans, in addition to vehicles and machinery (see Figure 6.2). It is worth mentioning that some scholars argue that Latin America could be a platform for the diversification of Russian exports in order to increase the supply of manufactured goods<sup>37</sup>. However, others are sceptical about the extent of the potential for Russian-Latin American trade in high-tech goods<sup>38</sup>. This is because Russian manufacturers seem to have difficulties in competing with other producers, above all China, for the Latin American market due to the higher costs of their products, older technology and lack of financial strength.

Brazil is a core trade partner for Russia in the region and accounts for 32% of Russian-Latin American trade. Apart from the trade relations, Brazil, as a BRICS member, plays a particular role in Russian engagement in Latin America. In Moscow, BRICS is considered an important instrument for constructing the new multipolar world order promoted by the Kremlin. At the same time, BRICS summits, having mostly a geopolitical focus, still contribute substantially to the strengthening of Russian-Brazilian economic relations<sup>39</sup>. While

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<sup>36</sup> The only exception is Cuba, where Russian export consists primarily of manufactured goods.

<sup>37</sup> See P.P. Yakovlev, "Rossija – Latinskaja Amerika: strategija proryva na rynki nesyr'evoj produkcii" ("Russia-Latin America: strategy of entering into markets of industrial goods"), *Latinskaja Amerika*, no. 12, 2017, pp. 15-28.

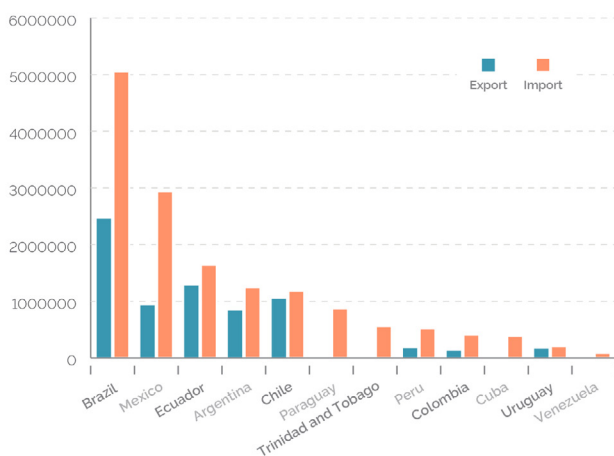
<sup>38</sup> J.A. Lopez Arevalo, "Las relaciones comerciales (intra e interindustriales) de Rusia con América Latina y el Caribe, 2000-2015", *Iberoamérica*, no. 2, 2018, pp. 68-97.

<sup>39</sup> A.G. Koval and T. Dantas, "Contemporary Russian-Brazilian Trade Relations", in S.F. Sutyryn, O.Y. Trofimenko, and A.G. Koval (eds.), *Russian Trade Policy*:

MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance are not among Russia's key political allies in the region, they constitute the focus of Russian commercial trade. By contrast, as Figure 6.3 shows, Moscow's allies Cuba and Venezuela play a much smaller role in Russia's trade (around 3%).

In comparison with trade, Russian investments in Latin America are small. In 2018, Russia's foreign direct investment (FDI) to the region, excluding tax havens, amounted to only \$177.4 m<sup>40</sup>. Nevertheless, there are several particular dimensions of Russian FDI that must be taken into account. Firstly, as Figure 6.4 shows, Russian FDI to Latin America follows a pattern similar to the dynamics of Russian-Latin American trade.

FIG. 6.3. RUSSIA'S TRADE WITH LATIN AMERICA BY COUNTRY, \$ THOUSAND, 2018



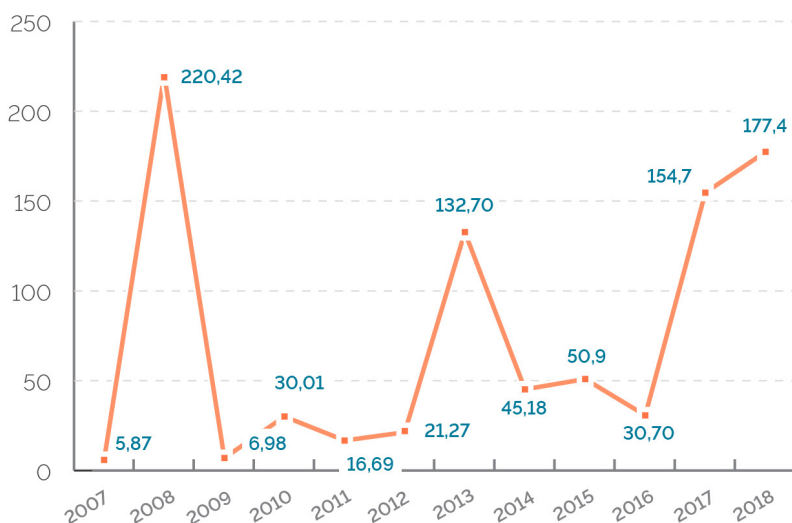
Source: ITC Trade map 2019, [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org).

*Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, Abington, New York, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> The investments data on Russian-Latin American investments varies substantially depending on its source. Nevertheless, in general the amounts of investments are very low, but there are certain big investments projects. Moreover, investments in Venezuela seem to be not included in Figure 6.4.

Second, Russian-Latin American investment cooperation has only developed in a few sectors. The energy sector dominates Russia's FDI to this region, though there are several FDI projects in the mining, machinery, transport and IT industries<sup>41</sup>. Finally, political factors play a significant role in Russia's decisions to invest in energy and other sectors. One vivid example of this is Russian economic cooperation with Venezuela.

FIG. 6.4 - RUSSIAN FDI TO LATIN AMERICA,  
EXCLUDING TAX HAVENS, \$ MILLION, 2007-2018



Source: Central bank of Russia 2020, [www.cbr.ru](http://www.cbr.ru)

<sup>41</sup> See A. Koval, "Russian Outward Foreign Direct Investments in Latin America: Contemporary Challenges and Prospects", in K. Liuhto, S.F. Sutyryn, and J.F. Blanchard (eds.), *The Russian Economy and Foreign Direct Investment*, Abington, New York, Routledge, 2017.

## Russia and Venezuela: Key Perspectives

From the perspective of commercial pragmatism, Venezuela does not seem to be at the top of the Russian agenda. Yet, the 2019 political crisis in Venezuela and Russia's support of Nicolas Maduro grabbed international attention. In order to better understand Russia's engagement, it is necessary to consider a number of factors.

Firstly, there is a strong geopolitical dimension to Russian-Venezuela relations: Russia aspires to increase its role as a re-emerging power in the international arena and promotes the idea of multipolarity thus rejecting the US-led world order. From this perspective, and because Venezuela is located in the Western Hemisphere, Russia's presence in this South American nation is seen in Moscow as a necessary element of a – mostly symbolic – reciprocity strategy in response to Washington's influence in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The *Chavista* government of Venezuela depends on Russian support in order to stay in power, while an important part of the opposition is supported by the United States. Hence, the political interests of the Kremlin and Maduro coincide.

Second, Venezuela is the most important buyer of Russian arms in Latin America and, between 2009 and 2013, Caracas was the fifth-largest recipient of Russian arms globally. However, between 2014–18, Russia's arms trade with Venezuela decreased by 96%<sup>42</sup>. Total arms deliveries from Russia to Venezuela since 2005 are estimated to amount to \$11 bn, or almost 80% of Russia's total arms exports to the region<sup>43</sup>, while Russia's share of total Venezuelan arms imports was almost 90%<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Trends in international arms transfer 2018, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2019, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs\\_1903\\_at\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> The major arms contracts between Russia and Venezuela were signed in 2005, 2009, and 2013. They included a wide variety of deliveries for the subsequent years as well as building of service centres, some of which are still under construction. The last relatively small contract was announced in 2015. Thereafter, Venezuela did not make any substantial purchase of Russian arms and the current focus is maintenance and joint military exercises.

<sup>44</sup> However, the share of all Latin American states in Russian arms transfer

Third, between 2007 and 2016, Venezuela played the leading role in exports of Russian machinery and equipment to Latin America. This was made possible by the opening of Russia's credit lines<sup>45</sup>. In 2017-2018 machinery trade with Venezuela fell sharply and the country seems to be losing its attractiveness to Russian businesses. However, KAMAZ, a large Russian manufacturer, invested \$22 m in bus assemblies in Venezuela, and continues to supply spare parts. Moreover, Venezuela is currently one of the main importers of Russian cereals<sup>46</sup>. In other words, for some Russian products, the Venezuelan market remains rather promising.

Finally, but most importantly, the crucial issue for Russian-Venezuelan relations is energy cooperation. In total, Rosneft's FDI stock in Venezuela amounts to \$3.5 bn, that is on top of all the other Russian investment projects in Latin American countries<sup>47</sup>. In Venezuela, Rosneft has invested in five oil refineries and one gas project and has also acquired two oilfield equipment and services companies. Moreover, since 2014, Rosneft has provided Venezuela with \$6.5 bn in prepayments for oil deliveries<sup>48</sup>. Rosneft also holds 49.9% of total stakes in the US-based Citgo Petroleum Corporation as Venezuela's loan collateral.

At the beginning of 2020, the amount of Venezuela's debt to Rosneft was decreasing<sup>49</sup>. Rosneft's loans constituted a

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estimated for only 3 percent of Russian arms trade. Russia has also exported arms to Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador. See A.A. Hetagurov, "*Voenno-tehnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo Rossii: gosudarstva Central'noj i Latinskoj Ameriki*" ("Military-Technical cooperation of Russia: Central and Latin American states"), Moscow, RIAC, 27 October 2017.

<sup>45</sup> In 2012 Russian machinery export to Venezuela achieved more than \$63 m.

<sup>46</sup> Cereals represent more than 65% of the Russian export to Venezuela.

<sup>47</sup> Along with Rosneft, Gazprombank also invested about \$300 m in oil production in Venezuela. Most notably, all private energy companies left the Venezuelan market.

<sup>48</sup> Part of the deliveries went to the Rosneft associated company in India. Vedomosti, 24 January 2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2019/01/24/792343-rosneft>.

<sup>49</sup> Vedomosti, 6 November 2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/news/2019/11/06/815574-venezuela-snizila-dolg-do-800-mln>

substantial addition to Russia's overall financial aid to the country of \$3.5 bn. However, Venezuela's total external debt amounted to more than \$155 bn. From this perspective, the volume of Russia's tangible assistance seems to be minimal<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, Russian assistance to Venezuela may help to increase creditors' confidence, at least to some of them, since continuous Russian involvement is evidence of Moscow's interest in "keeping the house in order". All in all, the introduction of a new round of US sanctions against Rosneft, announced on 18 February 2020<sup>51</sup>, shows that Russia's assistance to Venezuela has important political implications in the context of continuing tensions between Russia and the United States.

On 28 March 2020, the Russian government established a new company under the name of Roszarubezhneft, which bought all of Rosneft's assets in Venezuela<sup>52</sup>. This step was widely regarded as a manoeuvre designed to help Rosneft avoid further US sanctions without Russia giving up its support of Venezuela. At around the same time, Russia donated 10,000 Covid-19 test kits in humanitarian aid to the Venezuelan government<sup>53</sup> and co-sponsored, with Venezuela, a "Declaration of solidarity of the United Nations in the face of the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19)"<sup>54</sup> to be adopted by the United Nations. However, the document, which called for the lifting of unilateral sanctions, was rejected by the United States and its Western allies<sup>55</sup>. This is yet another proof of the continuing US-Russia opposition.

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<sup>50</sup> A.G. Koval, *Russia: Venezuela's "savior" sets limits?*, Commentary, ISPI, 29 March 2018.

<sup>51</sup> H. Foy, "[Rosneft defies US sanctions on Venezuela oil trading](#)", *The Financial Times*, 19 February 2020.

<sup>52</sup> S. Filatov, "[Oil in Venezuela is now the property of the Government of Russia](#)", *The International Affairs*, 28 March 2020.

<sup>53</sup> *RIA Novosti*, 24 March 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200324/1569049138.html>

<sup>54</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, "[Declaration of solidarity of the United Nations in the face of the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)", 27 March 2020.

<sup>55</sup> "[West opposes Russia's proposal in UN General Assembly to reject sanctions](#)", *TASS*, 3 April 2020.



## **Conclusion**

It is possible to outline several key characteristics of contemporary Russian foreign policy towards Latin America. Firstly, the role of Latin America in Russia's foreign policy and economy should be properly evaluated. While Russia's priority agenda focuses on the former Soviet Union, Europe and some countries in the Asian region, Latin America does provide some commercial as well as geopolitical opportunities. Indeed, from a political standpoint, Russia's strategy in the region represents a long-term commitment designed to provide Moscow with the capacity for primarily symbolic reciprocal actions against the United States. Russian involvement promotes the idea of multipolarity and supports Russia's stand as a re-emerging power in the international arena.

Second, the regional energy sector constitutes one of the priorities for investments and technical cooperation aimed at helping Russia achieve the status of energy superpower in the future, as illustrated by Rosneft's engagement in Venezuela.

Third, today's Russia follows a more pragmatic approach to Latin America compared to the previous ideology-based system of preferences. While some cooperation with ALBA countries can be considered politically motivated, in the case of other countries the driving force of Moscow's engagement is commercial interest. This is particularly evident in Russia's relationships with Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance. In addition, the dynamics of trade and investments demonstrate that economic engagement should be matched by political will if Moscow wants its policy to be successful. However, Russia's potential for increasing economic cooperation with Latin America is rather limited: Russian-Latin American trade is dominated by primary commodities, while investments and other forms of cooperation are only making modest progress.

## 7. Russia's Enduring Quest for Great Power Status in Sub-Saharan Africa

Samuel Ramani

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Russia's resurgence as a great power in Sub-Saharan Africa attracted widespread international attention on October 23, 2019, as Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted 40 African heads of state at the inaugural Russia-Africa Economic Forum in Sochi. At this historic summit, Russia finalised noteworthy commercial deals with African countries and showcased Moscow's re-emergence as a continent-wide player for the first time since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991<sup>1</sup>. Although the Sochi summit was a landmark triumph for Russian diplomacy in Africa, its success was the culmination of a decade of steadily increased engagement between Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In June 2009, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev showcased Russia's return to Africa with state visits to Egypt, Nigeria, Angola and Namibia, and facilitated Moscow's emergence as a crucial player in the civilian nuclear energy, oil and diamond mining sectors<sup>2</sup>. Although Russia's engagement with Africa was principally confined to commercial transactions during Medvedev's presidency, Russia's footprints in the diplomatic and security spheres have strengthened since 2014. This resurgence occurred in tandem with the broader systemic crisis in Russia-West relations triggered by the Russian annexation of Crimea

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<sup>1</sup> C. Casola, M. Procopio and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, *Russia is Knocking on Africa's Door*, Dossier, ISPI, 23 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> S. Eke, "Medvedev Seeks Closer Africa Links", *BBC News*, 23 June 2009.

and reflected Moscow's desire to project power in new theatres. As a result of its foreign policy reorientation, Russia has emerged as a critical diplomatic arbiter in the Central African Republic civil war, mediated tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile River access and deployed private military contractors (PMCs) to Sudan, Central African Republic, Madagascar and Mozambique.

This chapter will examine the drivers and implications of Russia's post-2014 resurgence as a great power in Sub-Saharan Africa. To contextualise its analysis of Russia's Africa strategy, the chapter will provide a brief comparison between Soviet and contemporary Russian objectives and power projection techniques in Sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter will then proceed to examine the three pillars of Russia's resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa: energy and mining investments, security assistance and engagement with multilateral institutions. Afterwards, the chapter will apply its conclusions on the sources of Moscow's resurgence to the case of Nigeria. The Russia-Nigeria bilateral relationship incorporates all three pillars of Russia's African strategy and is central to Moscow's continental outreach efforts. The chapter will conclude on a prescriptive note by highlighting how European policymakers can contain Russia's growing influence in Africa, and selectively engage with Moscow on areas of common interest. As there is a dearth of academic literature and country-specific policy reports on the various dimensions of Russia's power projection initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa, this chapter will extensively reference Russian and Western media sources to substantiate its empirical claims, and cite long-form reports to support its overarching conclusions.

### **Russia's Geopolitical Ambitions in Africa: A Throwback to the Soviet Era?**

In US and European media outlets, Russia's resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa has been often described as a "return" after a nearly three-decade hiatus. This depiction is not entirely

accurate, as Russia began courting South Africa during the mid-2000s and participated in anti-piracy operations in Somalia in 2008. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Russia's influence in Africa is at its highest point since the end of the Cold War<sup>3</sup>. Although Russia's material resources pale in comparison to the Soviet Union's capabilities, it is essential to place Moscow's current ambitions into their historical context, while avoiding exaggerated parallels between Soviet and Russian strategies. A misconception circulating in Western analyses is that Russia is trying to recreate Cold War-era partnerships in Africa. Although Russia retains close bilateral relations with some Cold War partners, such as Ethiopia, Angola and Nigeria, the robustness of Russia's diplomatic presence in Central Africa contrasts with the USSR's formidable strength in West Africa during the immediate post-colonial period and the Horn of Africa during the Leonid Brezhnev era. Even though Russia's Africa strategy has limited geographical overlap with Soviet outreach efforts, Moscow has consistently tried to contain Western influence in Africa and adapted to China's growing strategic ambitions on the continent. In addition, both Soviet and Russian officials have synthesised economic investments, hard military power and ideational bonds to carve out a unique place for Moscow in African affairs.

In response to the wave of decolonisation movements in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union sought to expand its presence in Africa by implementing a dual containment policy against the United States and China. This policy was characterised by its reliance on co-option and emphasis on caution, as the Soviet Union sought to restrain hostile powers in ways that did not risk a broader military confrontation<sup>4</sup>. After the Director of the Africa Institute of the Soviet Union Ivan Potekhin travelled to Ghana, Mali and

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<sup>3</sup> P. Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> R. Yordanov, *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa*, The Wilson Center, 15 February 2017.

Guinea in 1957, the USSR viewed foreign aid as the most effective means of spreading socialism in Africa, and was convinced that the classless nature of many African societies would facilitate the diffusion of Soviet ideology<sup>5</sup>. Although political instability caused Soviet policymakers to question the effectiveness of foreign assistance as the 1960s progressed, the USSR revived its provision of credit and foreign aid to Africa after Marxism spread to Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique during the late 1970s<sup>6</sup>. The events of 1977, which saw Sudan expel Soviet military advisers from its territory and Somalia pivot towards the United States, inspired this renewed escalation of Soviet involvement in Africa. This revival of the USSR's presence converted into military interventions, as Moscow sought to contain US influence in the Horn of Africa during the Ogaden War and preserve its beachhead in Angola in the face of US and Chinese pressure. In order to prevent a superpower confrontation, the USSR relied extensively on proxy militias, such as Cuban troops and technical advisers from Warsaw Pact countries, and largely refrained from promoting communism through direct coercion<sup>7</sup>.

Although Russia lacks the material resources to simultaneously contain both the United States and China, Moscow has emulated the USSR's low-risk, high-impact approach to diplomacy in Africa. Russia's primary goal in Sub-Saharan Africa is to capitalise on US disengagement from Africa and present itself as a non-hegemonic external power, which could help African countries reduce their dependence on China. In keeping with the USSR's instrumental use of foreign aid, Russia has leveraged debt forgiveness as a potent diplomatic tool. During his first term as president, Putin embarked on a

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<sup>5</sup> G. Guan-Fu, "Soviet Aid to the Third World: An Analysis of its Strategy", *Soviet Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, January 1983, pp. 71-72.

<sup>6</sup> C.W. Lawson, "Soviet Economic Aid to Africa", *African Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 349, October 1988, pp. 501-503.

<sup>7</sup> E. Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 149

debt-for-development programme in Africa, which saw Russia forgive Tanzania's debt to reset diplomatic relations, and since 2015, Moscow has forgiven Soviet-era loans to Madagascar, Mozambique and Ethiopia<sup>8</sup>. Since Dmitry Medvedev stated in June 2009 that "Africa is waiting for our support"<sup>9</sup>, Russia has resumed its historical role as an aid donor to Africa. Unlike development assistance provided by the USSR, Russia's foreign aid provision has principally consisted of spontaneous donations to help African countries handle humanitarian crises. Russia's deployment of PMCs after securing informal invitations by African governments resembles Soviet-era patterns of military intervention in Africa. In line with the USSR's conflict mitigation strategies, Moscow has emphasised that the Wagner Group – a Russian paramilitary organisation sometimes described as a PMC – has no links with the Russian government, and has refrained from directly challenging US and European forces<sup>10</sup>.

Now that a synoptic overview of the synergies and points of divergence between Soviet and Russian approaches to Sub-Saharan Africa has been laid out, this chapter will outline the three pillars of Moscow's contemporary influence in Africa. Although these pillars will be examined separately, any points of integration between these dimensions of Russia's outreach to Sub-Saharan Africa will be discussed where relevant. Russia's economic interests have facilitated the deployment of PMCs and encouraged its diplomatic interventions in regional conflicts. Similarly, Russia's rising soft power in Africa has facilitated its ability to secure trade deals, which suggests that these three pillars should be viewed synergistically as part of a broader continental strategy. In the next section, Russia's proliferation of mining and energy sector contracts in Africa will be discussed

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<sup>8</sup> "Russia Vows to Forgive Ethiopia's Debts Amid Growing Push for Influence in Africa", *The Moscow Times*, 22 October 2019

<sup>9</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, "Africa is Waiting for Our Support", RT, 28 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> "Russia's Putin: Russians Fighting in Libya Do Not Represent the State", *Reuters*, 11 January 20a20.

in depth, as these commercial links dominate the economic vector of Moscow's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa.

## **The Economic Pillar of Russia's Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy: Mining and Energy**

Although the US and European foreign policy communities view Russia as a rising power in Sub-Saharan Africa, Moscow's geopolitical influence is restricted by its limited trade links with the continent. In 2018, the volume of trade between Russia and Africa stood at just \$20 bn, which paled in comparison to India's \$63 bn and China's \$204.2 bn in trade with Africa<sup>11</sup>. In spite of these low trade figures, Russia's economic ties with Africa have dramatically grown in recent years and this positive trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Russia's trade links with Africa increased by 185% from 2005-15 and registered 17% growth in 2018<sup>12</sup>. At the Sochi summit, Vladimir Putin announced Russia's intention to forgive \$20 bn in debt to Africa and to double its trade links to \$40 bn by 2024<sup>13</sup>.

Even though Russia is seeking a broad-based expansion of trade with Africa, which includes investments in the continent's agriculture, manufacturing and defence sectors, Russia's economic presence in Africa still revolves around mining and energy. During a March 2018 tour of southern Africa, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov singled out mining and energy as Russia's two primary economic interests in Africa<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, Russian media coverage of the Sochi summit emphasised

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<sup>11</sup> "Russia's Re-Engagement Raises Stakes in Africa", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 5 November 2019.

<sup>12</sup> "Russian Trade Turnover with African Countries Up 17% to US \$20 Billion", *Russia Briefing*, 30 August 2019.

<sup>13</sup> "Russia's Putin Seeks to Double Trade Volume with Africa Within 5 Years", *Radio France Internationale*, 24 October 2019.

<sup>14</sup> "Lavrov Embarks on Tour of African Countries to Discuss Ways to Boost Trade", *TASS*, 5 March 2018.

Africa's importance as a supplier of minerals and energy, and ability to compensate for Moscow's loss of control over Central Asia's resources after the USSR's collapse<sup>15</sup>. Although Russia has aspirations of being a continent-wide player in the mining sector, its mining investments remain heavily concentrated in southern Africa. This concentration is a legacy of the Cold War-era policies. In spite of its strident opposition to apartheid, the USSR retained an informal agreement with South Africa on the price regulation of gold, diamonds, platinum and precious metals<sup>16</sup>. The USSR's collapse triggered a decline in Russia's involvement in southern Africa's mining industry, but Moscow's economic presence in this region has undergone a resurgence over the past decade. In concert with South Africa's entry into BRICS in 2011, Russian industrial giant Renova secured major extraction deals in South Africa's manganese mines<sup>17</sup>. While Russia has struggled to obtain its desired levels of investment in South Africa's diamond sector, as De Beers opposed Russian diamond conglomerate Alrosa's overtures, Moscow has noticeably expanded its presence in the diamond industries of Angola and Zimbabwe. In May 2017, Alrosa received an 8% stake in Angola's Luaxe deposit, which holds an estimated \$35 bn in diamond reserves<sup>18</sup>. In January 2019, Alrosa established a subsidiary in Zimbabwe to capitalise on Harare's ambitious plans to triple its diamond production by 2023<sup>19</sup>.

The recent success of Russia's mining initiatives in southern Africa has encouraged Moscow to expand its presence in the mining sectors of other African regions. In order to reach out to

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<sup>15</sup> "Sammit Rossiya-Afrika: Elektrichestvo Kak Dvizhushchaya Sila Razvitiya Afrikanskogo Kontinenta" ("Russia-Africa Summit: Electricity as a Driver for the Development of the African Continent"), *Neftegaz.ru*, 23 October 2019.

<sup>16</sup> A. Weiss and E. Rumer, *Nuclear Enrichment: Russia's Ill-fated Influence Campaign in South Africa*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 December 2019.

<sup>17</sup> "Russia Opens Manganese Mine in SA", *Mining Review Africa*, 23 March 2011.

<sup>18</sup> "Russia's Alrosa Secures Stake in Angola's Largest Diamond Deposit", *Reuters*, 23 May 2017.

<sup>19</sup> "Russia's Alrosa Returns to Diamond Exploration in Zimbabwe", *Reuters*, 14 January 2019.



new markets in Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia has capitalised on its loyalty to authoritarian allies in crisis and growing presence as a diplomatic stakeholder on the continent. Russia's support for Guinea's President Alpha Conde, in the face of violent protests, facilitated Russian aluminium company Rusal's investments in Guinea's lucrative bauxite deposits and Nordgold's privileged access to Lefa gold mine, which possess 7.78 million ounces of gold<sup>20</sup>. The Kremlin's close relationship with Sudan under Omar al-Bashir's leadership allowed Russian companies to gain extensive access to Sudan's gold deposits after the discovery of new reserves in 2015<sup>21</sup>. Russia's PMC deployments to the Central African Republic have increased its access to the CAR's diamond reserves. Russian Deputy Finance Minister Alexei Moiseyev's efforts to lift the international embargo on "blood diamonds" from the CAR support these investments<sup>22</sup>. If this campaign succeeds, other mineral-rich nations facing economic sanctions, such as Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, could strengthen their relationships with Russia.

The expansion of Russia's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa's energy sector has accompanied the growth of its mining investments. The principal components of Russia's energy sector outreach efforts are oil and gas and civilian nuclear energy. In the oil and gas sector, Russia has combined strategic investments in extant oil reserves with initiatives to enhance the refinery capacities of oil-exporting countries and explore new offshore fossil fuel deposits. Russia has timed the expansion of its oil and gas investments to capitalise on the retrenchment of US energy companies from Africa, due to the discovery of shale gas in the United States. In April 2019, Exxon Mobil

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<sup>20</sup> R. MacLean, "'Russians have Special Status': Politics and Mining Mix in Guinea", *The Guardian*, 27 August 2019.

<sup>21</sup> M. Pfichta, "Why Russia is Standing by Sudan's Bashir", *World Politics Review*, 29 March 2019.

<sup>22</sup> O. Carroll, "Russia is Trying to Legalise African 'Blood Diamonds'", *The Independent*, 13 November 2019.

mulled selling its stake in Nigeria's oil fields for \$3 bn<sup>23</sup>, and in January 2020, Equatorial Guinea's oil Minister Gabriel Obiang Lima confirmed that Exxon Mobil wished to sell its assets in his country's oil and gas sector<sup>24</sup>.

In response to these developments, Lukoil signed a memorandum of understanding with Nigeria's National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) at the Sochi Summit, and Obiang Lima has hinted that a Russian company will replace Exxon Mobil's stake in Equatorial Guinea's Oil industry. Russia's growing presence in Africa's oil and gas sector has allowed Rosneft to compete directly with Exxon Mobil for a share of Mozambique's lucrative offshore natural gas deposits, and both companies split a \$700 m stake in these reserves in October 2018<sup>25</sup>. Russia has complemented its plans to capitalise on US disengagement by investing in energy development projects, such as the Etinde offshore oil block in the Gulf of Guinea, and these capital provisions have belied Western allegations that Russia pursues a purely extractive approach to Africa's energy sector.

In addition to Moscow's oil and gas investments, Russia's civilian nuclear energy company Rosatom has secured contracts with Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Congo, Uganda and Zambia. Russian policymakers believe that civilian nuclear energy is a lucrative investment because the training needs of African countries will ensure steady business for Russian engineers and technicians<sup>26</sup>. Despite this optimistic forecast, the sustainability of Rosatom's energy investments is unclear. Due to the small size of many African economies, there are

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<sup>23</sup> R. Bousoo and J. Payne, "Exxon Weighs Selling of Nigerian Oil and Gas Fields for Up to \$3 Billion", *Reuters*, 2 April 2019.

<sup>24</sup> B. Faucon, "Exxon Considers Sale of Oil Assets in Equatorial Guinea", *Wall Street Journal*, 12 January 2020.

<sup>25</sup> "Mozambique Signs Oil Exploration Agreements with Exxon, Rosneft", *Reuters*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>26</sup> C. Chimbela, "African Countries Mull Nuclear Energy as Russia Extends Offers", *DIW*, 22 October 2019.

concerns that countries with Rosatom nuclear power plants could become over-reliant on a single energy source. Popular backlash is also growing against the high costs of nuclear power for African economies, and this trend jeopardises Russia's soft power<sup>27</sup>. South Africa's August 2018 decision to divest from nuclear energy in favour of natural gas and wind power eroded Rosatom's commercial advantages on the continent. In light of this precedent, Russian policymakers are concerned that other nations could follow South Africa's lead once the costs and risk of dependency on nuclear energy become evident.

## **The Security Pillar of Russia's Power Projection in Sub-Saharan Africa**

In tandem with the expansion of Russia's investments in Sub-Saharan Africa's mining and energy sectors, Moscow has emerged as a leading arms supplier to African countries. According to aggregated Stockholm International Peace Institute data from 2014-2018 Russia supplied 28% of all arms purchased by Sub-Saharan African countries, which gives it a greater market share than China (24%), Ukraine (8.3%), the United States (7.1%) and France (6.1%)<sup>28</sup>. Although more recent data on Russia's share in Sub-Saharan Africa's arms markets is unavailable, there are indications that Russia is expanding its lead role as a weapons supplier to the continent. At the October 2019 Sochi summit, Rosoboronexport CEO Alexander Mikheev announced that Russia supplied \$4 bn in arms to Africa in 2019 and the Director of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Dmitry Shugaev stated that Russia has \$14 bn in outstanding arms contracts with African countries<sup>29</sup>. Russia's

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<sup>27</sup> "Russia Pushing 'Unsuitable' Nuclear Power in Africa, Critics Claim", *The Guardian*, 28 August 2019.

<sup>28</sup> P.D. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, A. Kuimova, N. Tian, and S.T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018", *SIRPI Fact Sheet*, March 2019, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> "Rossiya Postavit v Afriku Oruzhiye Za Chetyre Milliarda Dollarov" ("Russia

arms contracts to Africa are diffuse in scope, but are especially concentrated in air force technology, air defence systems, small arms, the supply of anti-tank missiles and armoured vehicles.

The marked expansion of Russia's arms exports to Sub-Saharan Africa since 2012 can be explained by Russia's willingness to supply weapons to countries facing economic isolation, and efforts to assist African countries on counterterrorism, anti-piracy initiatives and conflict resolution. In line with Russia's alignments with US-designated rogue states, such as Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Syria and Cuba, Moscow has acted as an arms seller of last resort to African countries facing international sanctions. This policy was first revealed by Russia's willingness to supply 87% of Sudan's conventional weapons needs from 2003 to 2007<sup>30</sup>, even though the UN had banned arms supplies to non-governmental forces in Darfur. Although Russian military technology transfers to Sudan consisted of Soviet-era weaponry, these sales were enthusiastically received by Sudan's primarily conscript army<sup>31</sup>, and encouraged Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to rely on Russian PMCs during his last months in power. Russia's arms sales to Sudan while the country faced international isolation have been mirrored by its delivery of two major weapons tranches to the Central African Republic since 2017<sup>32</sup>, and Moscow's negotiations with Eritrea on the sale of missile boats, helicopters and small arms after its peace treaty with Ethiopia<sup>33</sup>.

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will Supply Four Billion Dollars of Weapons to Africa”), *RIA Novosti*, 23 October 2019.

<sup>30</sup> A. McGregor, “Russia’s Arms Sales to Sudan a First Step in Return to Africa: Part Two”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 29, Jamestown Foundation, 12 February 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Russia Delivers New Batch of Weapons to Central African Republic”, *The Moscow Times*, 27 September 2019.

<sup>33</sup> “Eritreya Prismatrivayetsya K Rossiyskim Kateram I Vertoletam, Soobschayet FSVTS” (“Eritrea is Eyeing Russian Boats and Helicopters, FSVTS said”), *RIA Novosti*, 23 October 2019.

In addition to its willingness to sell arms to African countries under sanctions, Russia has played an active role in combating piracy and Islamic extremist movements in Sub-Saharan Africa. In May 2010, Russian special forces stormed an oil tanker that was hijacked by Somali pirates, and this decisive action revealed Moscow's willingness to join the US and European countries in combating the threat of piracy<sup>34</sup>. Russia has also stepped up its counterterrorism efforts, as African countries have become frustrated with Washington's pattern of carrying out unilateral strikes without consulting with African governments. Russia's military intervention in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in September 2015 increased respect for Russia as a counter-terrorism partner, as Moscow framed this campaign as an example of its ability to combat the Islamic State (ISIS) by promoting state centralisation. This "strong state" approach to counterterrorism has encouraged Somalia to request Russian assistance by enacting military reforms and promoting economic stability<sup>35</sup>, and has also inspired Mozambique to enlist Russian PMCs in the struggle against Islamic extremism in the Cabo Delgado province<sup>36</sup>.

Although Russia's security cooperation with authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa has sullied its international reputation, and its counterterrorism initiatives have been accompanied by unforeseen costs, such as the deaths of seven Russian PMCs in Mozambique in October 2019, Moscow's outreaches have achieved notable successes. Since 2015, Russia has signed nineteen military cooperation agreements across the continent, which have formalised counter-terrorism collaboration with Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad and Ethiopia, and technical cooperation with Botswana, Cameroon and

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<sup>34</sup> "Pirate Killed in Russian Rescue of Sailors", *The Guardian*, 6 May 2010.

<sup>35</sup> "Somalia Would Like Russia to Help Develop Economy, Support Army- PM", *Sputnik*, 19 April 2016.

<sup>36</sup> A. McGregor, "Why Mozambique is Outsourcing Counter Insurgency to Russia: The Historical Relationship", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 16, no. 150, Jamestown Foundation 29 October 2019.

Eswatini<sup>37</sup>. At the Sochi summit, Vladimir Putin stated that military personnel from twenty African states were studying at institutions affiliated to Russia's Ministry of Defence and noted the expansion of the Army-2019 international army games to include representatives from eleven African countries<sup>38</sup>. These forms of cooperation have facilitated the marked increase in Russian arms sales to Sub-Saharan Africa and could help Russia establish a network of military bases on the continent. Russia has actively engaged with Sudan on the establishment of a naval base on the Red Sea<sup>39</sup>, and at the Sochi summit the CAR's President Faustin-Archange Touadera expressed interest in hosting a Russian base<sup>40</sup>. By constructing these facilities, Russia will be able to gain preferential access to critical trade routes, such as the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and to mineral-rich areas with inadequate external investment.

## Russia's Engagement with Multilateral Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa

The third pillar of Russia's resurgence as a great power in Sub-Saharan Africa is its growing engagement with multilateral institutions that shape the continent's economic development and political trajectory. Although Russia's patterns of multilateral engagement on African affairs have ebbed and flowed since the mid-2000s, Moscow has consistently used its permanent membership in the UN Security Council, engagement with BRICS and relationship with the African Union to expand its

<sup>37</sup> "Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries", *Reuters*, 17 October 2018.

<sup>38</sup> "Putin Zayavil, Chto Rossiya Postavlyayet Oruzhiye V Nesol'ko Desyatkov Afrikanskikh Stran" ("Putin said Russia Supplies Weapons to Several Dozen African Countries"), *TASS*, 24 October 2019.

<sup>39</sup> "Sudan May Show Interest in Hosting Russian Naval Base, Expert Says", *TASS*, 22 April 2019.

<sup>40</sup> A. Roth, "Central African Republic Considers Hosting Military Base", *The Guardian*, 25 October 2019.

influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the UN Security Council, Russia has consistently defended authoritarian governments in Sub-Saharan Africa from Western sanctions and leveraged these voting patterns to expand its array of continental partnerships. Russia's emphasis on authoritarian solidarity emerged with its veto against UN sanctions against Zimbabwe in 2008. Russia justified this veto by arguing that Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe did not pose a threat to international peace and security. Russia's position on Zimbabwe was received positively by African leaders, like South Africa's President Jacob Zuma and Libya's dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi<sup>41</sup>, and caused these leaders to view Moscow as a normative counterweight to the United States. As Russia's geopolitical influence in Africa grew, Moscow's resistance to Western pressure against authoritarian regimes in the UN expanded further. After Sudan's Transitional Military Council (TMC) was implicated in the massacre of a hundred and twenty-eight protesters in Khartoum in June 2019, Russia blocked a draft UN resolution condemning the TMC by describing it as "unbalanced"<sup>42</sup>. Russia's solidarity with its authoritarian allies in crisis bolstered its perceived reliability as a partner for African leaders, and has encouraged under-fire presidents, like Guinea's Alpha Conde, who faces mass protests over his scheduled term extension, to tighten their relationships with Moscow. Russia's resolute opposition to unilateral US campaigns against authoritarian leaders, such as the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, has helped it construct ideational coalitions in Africa. These normative coalitions have caused the majority of African countries to support or abstain from UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's policies towards Ukraine.

To bolster the partnerships it gained through UN votes, Russia has used its engagement with BRICS and the African Union to

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<sup>41</sup> P. Worsnip, "Russia and China Veto UN Zimbabwe Sanctions", *Reuters*, 12 July 2008.

<sup>42</sup> "Toll in Sudan Army Attack Jumps as China, Russia Block Action", *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2019.

present itself as a supporter of Sub-Saharan Africa's economic development and security. In 2013, South Africa enthusiastically supported Russia's proposal that each BRICS member invest up to \$10 bn in a BRICS bank<sup>43</sup>. Vladimir Putin enticed African countries to support Moscow's economic development proposals by publicly linking Russian development plans to Soviet-era foreign aid donations. At the 2018 BRICS summit in Johannesburg, Putin emphasised the "decades-old traditions of friendship and mutual aid that bind Russia with Africa"<sup>44</sup>. This statement encouraged leaders of Soviet-aligned countries during the Cold War, like Angola's President Joao Lourenco, to seek Russian support for their economic diversification plans. Russia has supplemented its economic outreach efforts at BRICS with the training of African Union (AU) peacekeepers, and enthusiastic support for African-led solutions to regional security crises, such as the ongoing Libyan civil war. Russia's recognition of the AU's constructive role furthers its ambitions to create a multipolar world order and could allow Moscow to transfer the arbitration experience it has gained in the Middle East to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Although Russia's pledges of diplomatic assistance and investments often surpass its actual accomplishments, Moscow's engagement with multilateral institutions is vital in expanding its soft power in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Russian Foreign Ministry's rhetorical emphasis on forging equal partnerships with African countries, instead of dependency-based relationships, and Moscow's frequent condemnations of US hegemony in multilateral settings, have improved public perceptions of Russia on the continent<sup>45</sup>. These patterns of diplomatic conduct in

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<sup>43</sup> I. Arkhipov, "Russia Says BRICS Nations Plan to Create Development Bank", *Bloomberg*, 18 March 2013.

<sup>44</sup> T. Stanley and B. Fletcher, "Russia Steps up its Game in Africa", *The Moscow Times*, 18 October 2019.

<sup>45</sup> S. Sukhanin, *The Kremlin's Controversial Soft Power in Africa*, Jamestown Foundation (Part One), 4 December 2019. On the issue of Russia's soft power, see E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, "Branding the Country and its Leader: Soft Power Made in Russia",



multilateral institutions ensure that Russia's frequent emphasis on its long-standing opposition to "colonialism, racism and apartheid", and resistance to Western "pressure, intimidation and blackmail" gain widespread attention in Africa<sup>46</sup>. Soft power-building initiatives by Russian officials have been further strengthened by complementary messages in Russian state media outlets, like RT and Sputnik, which highlight positive news stories in Africa more frequently than their Western counterparts<sup>47</sup>. Although February 2020 Pew Research Center data, which showed Russia receiving low favourability ratings in Nigeria (41%), Kenya (38%) and South Africa (33%), reveal that Moscow's outreach efforts have room for progress<sup>48</sup>, its soft power-building initiatives mitigate damage among the public caused by negative aspects of Russian conduct, like PMC deployments and election interference campaigns.

Russia's response to Covid-19 provides it with a unique opportunity to reframe extant narratives about its role in Sub-Saharan Africa. On April 7, Russia expressed support for Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's calls for IMF and World Bank involvement in ameliorating the pandemic's socioeconomic impact<sup>49</sup>, and Ahmed publicly endorsed Putin's "mobilisation of resources" to counter Covid-19 in Africa<sup>50</sup>. Although Russia's provisions of medical supplies to Europe and the United States have been criticised for their geopolitical motives, humanitarian assistance to African countries and

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chapter 2 in this volume.

<sup>46</sup> "Vladimir Putin: Rossiya Gotova Poborot'sya Za Sotrudnichestvo s Afrikoy" ("Vladimir Putin: Russia is Ready to Compete for Partnerships in Africa"), *TASS*, 20 October 2019.

<sup>47</sup> E. Gershkovich, "At Russia's Inaugural Africa Summit, Moscow Sells Sovereignty", *The Moscow Times*, 26 October 2019.

<sup>48</sup> C. Huang and J. Cha, *Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally*, Pew Research Center, 7 February 2020.

<sup>49</sup> "Telephone Conversation with Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed", Kremlin.ru, 7 April 2020.

<sup>50</sup> J. Omondi, "Abiy, Putin hold telephone conversation over COVID-19 Pandemic", *CGTN*, 7 April 2020.

support for debt relief could bolster Moscow's soft power, if prominent African leaders depict Russia as a constructive force on the continent.

### **Synthesising the Three Pillars of Russia's Resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of Nigeria**

Although the three pillars of Russia's resurgence are apparent in many African countries, Nigeria's status as Africa's most populous country, largest economy and leading regional power in West Africa make it an especially important case study. In order to expand the Moscow-Abuja trade partnership, Russia has invested extensively in Nigeria's oil sector. In November 2014, Lukoil announced a major joint investment with Chevron in an unnamed Nigerian energy project, and its entry into Nigeria's oil sector was viewed as a step towards the globalisation of Russia's oil investments<sup>51</sup>. As US oil companies scaled back their presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia capitalised by expanding its investments in Nigeria. As Nigeria plans to double its production of crude oil and triple its refinery capacity by 2025, the NNPC signed a memorandum of understanding with Lukoil in October 2019<sup>52</sup>. In order to de-emphasise the extractive nature of its economic presence in Nigeria and advance its "equal partnership" approach to diplomacy, Rosneft held discussions in May 2018 with Nigeria's Oranto Petroleum on developing twenty-one major oil assets in Africa<sup>53</sup>. In order to highlight its commitment to economic diversification, Rosatom signed a deal with Nigeria in June

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<sup>51</sup> "Russia's Lukoil to Invest in Nigeria's Project with Chevron", *Reuters*, 21 November 2014.

<sup>52</sup> "Nigerian State Oil Firm Signs Memorandum to Work with Russia's Lukoil", *Reuters*, 24 October 2019.

<sup>53</sup> T. Paraskova, "Nigerian Firm to Partner with Rosneft to Develop 21 African Oil Assets", *Oil Price*, 24 May 2018.

2019, which would allow nuclear power to assuage its chronic energy shortages. The Russian company Metprom ratified an agreement in October 2019 that would contribute to the revival of the Nigerian steel industry<sup>54</sup>. As a result of these contracts, Nigeria imports \$665 m in goods from Russia every year, which makes Russia its eleventh largest import destination<sup>55</sup>, but the balance of trade remains decidedly in Moscow's favour.

In tandem with Russia's burgeoning economic relationship with Nigeria, Moscow has converted Abuja into a vital security partner by taking a proactive stance against the Boko Haram insurgency and advancing a "strong state" approach to counterterrorism. In response to the Obama administration's unwillingness to transfer advanced US helicopters and fighter jets to Nigeria, Russia offered Abuja an array of weapons to combat the Boko Haram insurgency, including Mi-35 and Mi-17 jets and ground attack helicopters, in December 2014<sup>56</sup>. Russia's willingness to entrust the Nigerian military with offensive weaponry contrasted with US concerns about militants gaining access to arms, and highlighted Moscow's willingness to cooperate directly with African states against extremist movements. Russia's military intervention in Syria enhanced bilateral security cooperation. Nigeria's Ambassador to Russia Steve Ugbah stated in October 2019 that "We're sure that with Russian help we will be able to crush Boko Haram, given Russia's experience crushing the Islamic State in Syria"<sup>57</sup>. Ahead of the Sochi summit, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari consulted Putin on how Russia has preserved stability in a 17 million square kilometre country, as Nigeria tried to model

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<sup>54</sup> W. Clowes, "Russia to Revive Nigerian Steel Plant on Hold Since Soviet Era", *Bloomberg*, 31 October 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Nigeria, Imports Visualization, 2017, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/nga/#Exports>

<sup>56</sup> J. DeCapua, "Analysts Weigh Russia-Nigeria Arms Deal", *Voice of America*, 10 December 2014.

<sup>57</sup> "Nigeria Looks to Sign Military Cooperation Deal with Russia this Month", *Reuters*, 11 October 2019.

its state-building initiatives after Russia's experience<sup>58</sup>. This positive momentum culminated in a Russia-Nigeria military cooperation agreement at the Sochi Summit, which ensured that Russian technical experts will play a critical role in shaping the Nigerian military's future development.

Although convergent economic and security interests provide strong foundations for a durable Russia-Nigeria partnership, Moscow's overtures towards Abuja have also been strengthened by engagement with multilateral institutions and soft power. Russia's consistent support for the reform of the UN Security Council to include more non-Western countries, such as India, Brazil and an African candidate, has been enthusiastically received by Nigerian officials, and Nigerian Defence Minister Mansur Dan Ali openly courted Russian support for a Security Council seat in 2017<sup>59</sup>. During the 2011 Libyan civil war, Nigeria joined Russia in supporting a no fly zone that strictly provided humanitarian assistance, and both countries consistently supported an end to US unilateral sanctions against Zimbabwe. These synergistic normative positions have strengthened the Russia-Nigeria partnership, and built on residual goodwill towards Moscow, which originated with the Soviet Union's strident opposition to Biafra separatism during the 1967-70 civil war<sup>60</sup>. Historical legacies profoundly influence Nigerian elite attitudes towards Russia. At the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh on 31 October 2019, Buhari noted that "Those who focus on the progress of developing countries would see what Russia right from its days as the Soviet Union had done for us", and remembered Moscow's

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<sup>58</sup> "Stiv Ugba: Nigeriya Mozhet Priglasit Rossiyskikh Voyennykh Obuchat Spetsnaz" ("Steve Ugba: Nigeria Might Invite Russia to Train Special Forces"), *RLA Novosti*, 10 October 2019.

<sup>59</sup> S. Hamza, "Nigeria Seeks Russia's Support for UN Security Council Bid", *NNN*, 24 August 2017.

<sup>60</sup> A. Stent, "The Soviet Union and the Nigerian Civil War: A Triumph of Realism", *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, vol. 3, no 2, Summer 1973, pp. 43-45

support for state centralisation in the 1960s<sup>61</sup>. Although Nigerian public perceptions of Russia remain polarised and business elites question Moscow's sincerity about investments in diversification initiatives, soft power plays an important role in consolidating the Russia-Nigeria partnership.

## **How Can European Policymakers Handle Russia's Growing Influence in Africa?**

Although Russia's rising geopolitical influence in Sub-Saharan Africa is primarily aimed at profiting from US disengagement and diluting China's hegemony wherever possible, Moscow's resurgence as a great power in Africa challenges European interests on the continent. In the past twelve months alone, Russia has used its UN Security Council seat to rebut British and French requests for a continued peacekeeping presence in Sudan, and condemned Paris's efforts to enforce a strict arms embargo against the Central African Republic. As Russia's media presence and political influence in Africa grows, Moscow's relentless criticisms of what it believes to be European neo-colonial policies could erode Europe's soft power on the continent. In order to counter these challenges to European interests, the EU should continue stepping up its investment presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and emulate Russia's direct cooperation with African states against regional security threats. The 2007 joint EU-Africa strategy, which transformed European economic cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa from a donor-based to a complementary interest focus, and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's 2018 calls for continent-wide investments in Africa could help the EU challenge Russia's growing investment presence<sup>62</sup>. In order

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<sup>61</sup> "Nigeria Will Never Forget Russia's Assistance During Civil War, says President", *TASS*, 31 October 2019.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, *Towards Stronger EU-Africa Cooperation*, 12 September 2018.

to more effectively counter Russia's mining and energy-focused economic outreach efforts, European investment initiatives should focus more overtly on diversification plans, which deal with the needs of an increasingly urbanised continent and assist Sub-Saharan African countries in harnessing their immense human capital. The EU should also cooperate with the African Union on economic development challenges on an equal partnership basis and avoid the "dictation without prescription" approach to development that has alienated African public opinion from European institutions<sup>63</sup>.

In the security sphere, European policymakers should eschew the temptation of unilateral campaigns, like the US counterterrorism policies in Somalia, and engage national governments, civil society organisations and moderate Islamist groups against the threat of Islamic extremism. The need for Europe to embrace a cooperative approach to African security has grown, as US counterterrorism policies in Africa under the Trump administration have become increasingly incoherent. In December 2019, the United States pledged to increase its focus on security challenges in the Sahel, but abruptly withdrew troops in February 2020. Given these inconsistencies in US policy, European countries need to reassure African countries of their commitment. France's retention of a 4,500 strong military force in the Sahel since 2013 and pledge to add an additional 600 troops for counterterrorism purposes is a positive contribution. Despite this decision, Russia is emboldened to take action in the Sahel because it is sceptical of France's power projection capacity, in the absence of consistent US support<sup>64</sup>. In order to blunt Russia's advance, countries with geopolitical interests in Africa, such as the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany, should consider deployments in solidarity with France. Targeted

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<sup>63</sup> B. Stout, "It's Africa's Turn to Leave the European Union", *Foreign Policy*, 10 February 2020.

<sup>64</sup> "V SSHA Dumali O Sokraschchenii Voyennykh Kotingentov V Afrike" ("The US Thought about Reducing Military Deployments to Africa"), *MK.ru*, 20 January 2020.

cooperation with Russia on limited areas of common interest, such as protecting maritime shipping in the Horn of Africa and stabilising Mali, should be included in European security strategies towards Sub-Saharan Africa. However, European countries should not passively acquiesce to Russia's view that authoritarian stability is the antidote against terrorism but actively encourage states that are showing signs of liberalisation, like Sudan and Ethiopia, to resist external pressures towards authoritarian backsliding.

## **Conclusion**

Although Russia's resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa has often been described as an opportunistic reaction to US disengagement from the continent, the revival of Moscow's influence in Africa is the product of a decade-long strategy of renewed engagement. Russia's resurgence in Africa is grounded in Moscow's partial restoration of Soviet geopolitical strategies, and a targeted focus on three pillars: mining and energy; security and counterterrorism; and multilateral engagement. Although Russia's economic resources pale in comparison to China's, and Russia has faced criticisms for its support for authoritarian regimes and PMC deployments in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sochi summit's success bodes well for the future of Moscow's geopolitical influence on the continent. In order to counter Russia's growing economic and security presence and reduce the effectiveness of anti-Western narratives that expand its soft power, European countries should engage with African governments on an equal partnership basis and repair their frayed relationship with the African Union.

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