russian
analytical
digest

RUSSIA AND REGIME SECURITY

ANALYSIS

From Crisis to Crisis: Russia's Security Policy Under Putin

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Abstract

This article considers Russia's more assertive foreign policy stance during the Ukraine crisis and now in terms of conducting airstrikes in Syria in support of the Assad regime. It suggests that these foreign policy-choices should be interpreted in light of questions of domestic security and how these foreign actions relate to the Putin regime's wider political project for Russia. In this way, the regime's previous concern about the taboo on the use of force abroad has gradually been eroded in conjunction with its shift to articulating a more patriotic and anti-Western political project following the popular protests against the regime in 2011/12.

Russia's security strategy is once again a hot topic for the international community and foreign policy analysts. This is mostly due to the Ukraine crisis and, most recently, Russia's military operations in Syria in support of the Assad regime. The reaction of analysts and observers to Russia's stance on Syria and Ukraine highlights the need to go beyond critique of Russian policies and towards a deeper understanding of what is driving the Putin regime's security strategy, so that the next "crisis" involving Russia is not met with such surprise. From this perspective, two key but often neglected dimensions to understanding the Putin regime as an international actor are, one, to forget about the artificial separation between domestic and foreign policy, and, two, to consider the interplay between core and relatively fixed principles at the heart of Russia's security policy and Moscow's short-term often reactive responses to individual crises.

Taking this into account, this article sides with those who argue that one persuasive way to read Russia's recent assertive and aggressive security policy is to focus on the rise of anti-Westernism and patriotism adopted by the regime. It is suggested that this shift to emotive patriotism and emphasis on creating a national identity vis-à-vis the West as an Other, has also evolved alongside a gradual process of sweeping away prior taboos on the use of force in the worldview of the Putin regime that has conditioned its inclinations towards power projection, first domestically, then regionally and now internationally. Indeed, the sweeping away of the taboo on the use of force also seems to signal that the Putin regime has put the promotion and support of like-minded and friendly regimes abroad, both regionally and internationally, ahead of its stated economic ambitions, now curtailed under sanctions, be these domestic modernisation and economic diversification, the future development of the Eurasian Economic Union or engagement with the global economy in terms of promoting foreign direct investment in Russia and general opening up of the Russian economy.

Analysing Russia's Security Agenda

Security policy-makers in Russia do not seem to follow the neat separation between foreign, regional and domestic agendas and policy-spaces, which are often explicit or implicit in analysis of Russian security policy. The Russian security imaginary or worldview tends to transcend such simple divisions. All dimensions of security policy—a policy-area encompassing aspects of a wide range of other policy-areas (economics, societal etc.)—are tightly interlinked with Putin's wider agenda for Russia more broadly. Security policy, therefore, cannot be investigated in isolation from wider developments in Russia. Concerns about the threat posed from foreign sources, such as Euromaidan or the Arab Spring, to domestic regime security. Or, how domestic political developments, such as the 2011–2 electoral cycle protest, shape Russia's foreign policy positions on the validity of intervention against the Assad regime in Syria or on global norms and the regulation of cyberspace. Within this assemblage of policy issues, fear of domestic instability within Russia itself, and the possibility the protests could succeed in toppling the regime overshadow all others, however unlikely most analysts consider this prospect to be. Hence, triangulating what is going on inside Russia (and the regime's reading of this) in many cases is maybe as important as the particular details of the regional and international security issue or crisis under discussion in accounting for the Putin regime's foreign policy position.

Furthermore, in interpreting the Putin regime a combination of longitudinal and immediate crisis analysis is needed. Rather than a static construct, Putin's political project is instead a highly changeable national programme, which has evolved through several different iterations since his first term in office. In this period, this national project has moved from seeking to rebuild Russia from a proclaimed position of weakness in the early 2000s towards a more patriotic and anti-Western ideal of the Russian state since 2012. This evolution, however, is not the product of a single linear strategy, but has been influenced and shaped by reactive responses to circum-

stances over the course of the last fifteen years. Hence, reacting to firstly the global War on Terror and latterly to Georgia 2008 and Euromaidan, the Putin regime has framed its relationship to the West as initially one of friendship to the current characterisation of enmity respectively. While this framing tends to be altered to a degree in reaction to events and crises, below the surface certain fundamentals, habits and red lines within the Putin regime's security policy have remained consistently in place: Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, concern over the West's policy towards the post-Soviet region, distrust of liberal interventions and externally-sponsored regime change.

Hence, in seeking to account for Russia's policy towards a particular crisis or issue, such as the Ukraine or Syria crisis, it is therefore critical to consider both how this relates to the current iteration of the regime's political programme and its ad hoc priorities, but also to this wider set of enduring concerns underlying Putin's wider national project since he came to power. Indeed, this interplay between a current specific policy-issue and the fundamentals that the regime is built on, has been a trademark of Putin's presidencies. On several occasions, a particular security issue has come to play a 'special' role within Putin's wider political project, examples being Chechnya in the early 2000s as the rationale for restoring strong central control, or the Iraq war and Libya as illustrative of the deceit of Western states. In recent years, individual security crises have come to function as markers in the sand for the evolution in Russia's increasing willingness to use force outside of its borders, from Georgia in 2008 to Crimea and Ukraine since 2014 and most recently in terms of air strikes in support of the Assad regime in Syria.

Patriotism, Security and the Ukraine and Syria Crises

The evolution in Russia's security agenda since 2000 and its view on the use of force is related to the concurrent evolution in who or what has been deemed as the main threat to the regime and nation. Over the last decade, national- or state-security has come to be usurped by concerns about regime security. This is evident in the mass domestic securitisations of actors that sought to challenge or oppose the regime's legitimacy to rule, which has gathered pace since 2012. This has run parallel to worsening relations with the West in foreign affairs. With these two tracks—internal and external—fused in the promotion of a patriotic agenda and the calls of greater self-reliance, moves that are intended to counter these domestic and foreign threats to regime security at one and the same time.

As opposed to his first term as President, upon his return to the role in 2012, the Putin regime appeared to lack a coherent and clear internal logic and sense of direction in terms of its national project for the next 6 years. They attempted to articulate a project reconciling discourses about economic modernisation and Russia as a great power, as seen by the political capital invested in the Eurasian Economic Union project and talk of greater interconnections with the global economy. However, the result was an incoherent kaleidoscope of policy-initiatives and claims about Russia's future direction. At the same time, the Putin regime also took steps to securitise and counteract any actors or processes deemed as a challenge to their ruling legitimacy, driven by the shock of widespread anti-regime protests around the 2011 Duma and 2012 Presidential election. What is often missed by global analysts in this context, is that these initial securitising moves were focused on the domestic Russian space, and not counteracting Western power and principles abroad. This period saw the trial of the punk band Pussy riot, a more punitive approach to NGOs and non-governmental groups operating inside Russia, a tightening of anti-LGBT regulations, and an emphasis on controlling the Russian information space. Indeed, during the initial years of his third term, many analysts began to question the popular interpretation of Putin as an astute foreign policy strategist, able to navigate and out-manoeuvre other leaders in the choppy waters of international security. This seemed to go hand-in-hand with a view that Russia was a falling power, constrained in its international role by its poor domestic economic outlook and lacking a sense of purpose and direction as to what it represents.

However, the international crises in Syria and Ukraine have altered this impression, becoming symbolic in galvanising Putin's new patriotic program for Russia, which has not only resulted in major popularity gains for the president himself among the Russian electorate, but also the reassertion of a more aggressive role for Russia in both regional and international affairs. Indeed, these crises have become central features in articulating this new iteration of the Putin project. With the Ukraine crisis, the Putin regime has put forward their own very particular historical discourses, elaborating a notion of nationalism more centred on ethnicity than that promoted previously. They have sought to utilize the historical precedent that certain parts of Ukraine were once located within the Russian Empire, with this mode of thought expanded into a wider image of the historical memory of 'Novorossiya'. While the theme of Russia's responsibility to protect Russian-speaking communities abroad has been present within Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the USSR, its usage as justification for the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, amounts

to a much more traditional understanding of Russian nationalism and patriotism. Terminology seeped in the language of biopolitics—supporting Russian compatriots abroad—came to dominate Russian official discourse on Ukraine, and has also been drawn upon in reinterpreting Russia's position on the doctrine of Responsibility-to-Protect, potentially opening the space for justifying further Russian adventures in other countries with large-"Russian" populations.

In this regard, the Ukraine crisis came to play a similar symbolic role in the development of Russian official security discourse and agenda, as that played by NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo, the second Chechen campaign, the Iraq war, the colour revolutions and debates around NATO expansion in the 2000s. Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine and the diplomatic and later military support of Assad regime in Syria, a clear focus has been on re-inserting patriotism as a way to solidify the balance between tackling security concerns and ensuring the regime's popularity. This has become increasing significant in the face of a worsening economic situation. If in 2012, Putin's national idea and direction for Russia seemed incoherent and stumbling, the shape of Putin 3.0 has now been consolidated around the discursive lynchpin of patriotism and the regime's responsibility to prevent Russia from collapsing into disorder as domestic and foreign enemies would like to see.

The crisis in both Syria and Ukraine have been framed by the Putin regime in terms of a choice between order and disorder, with the image of disorder in Ukraine and Syria said to have been provoked from afar, and contrasted with an image of Russia as a place of stability, and freedom from foreign agitation. As Coalson (2014) outlines, official Russian state-television presented a picture whereby 'Russia is an oasis of calm good governance in a world of chaos. Fascism is on the march in the world and Russia must be vigilant. The motif of "Europe in flames"' (Coalson 2014). In addition, the sources of disorder in both cases were presented in terms of highlighting the potential danger that agitators set on bringing the Putin regime down face to order in Russia. Goode and Laruelle (2014) have noted that 'Russia seemed anxious to prevent the type of democrats-and-nationalists alliance that brought down Yanukovych', and thus have come out in support of the Assad regime from the threat posed by an international community willing to sanction regime change in the Syria, and elsewhere.

Putin's third term has also seen an increased fear of independent voices and civil society actors seeking to change national regimes from within. Such concerns had become more noticeable from the period of the 'colour revolutions' onwards, and the events in Ukraine

and the on-going attempt at regime-change in Syria have become symbols of what the regime both fears the most and condemns as against international law. In February 2014, countering the position that the Euromaidan protests that saw Yanukovych flee the country were a legitimate expression of democratic accountability to the people, Medvedev outlined that: 'Some of our foreign, Western partners think otherwise [that it was legitimate]. This is some kind of aberration of perception when people call legitimate what is essentially the result of an armed mutiny.' Indeed, within Russian official discourse, the image of the protest movement in Ukraine was presented as that of a West-sponsored strategy. The depiction of the protests as being driven by the extremists and orchestrated from abroad by the West, was presented as evidence of its illegitimacy, whereby the protestors could not be considered an authentic representation of the Ukrainian people, but rather as actors who had been bought-off by the US and EU.

A similar position was taken in the case of Syria, and more broadly in Russia's response to the Arab Spring, whereby local protests and uprisings were de-legitimised. The overthrow of Gaddafi and the subsequent insecurity in Libya was presented as evidence of the grave mistake of externally sponsored regime-change. With supporting the Assad regime a necessary policy to ensure the future survival of Syria in the face of a failed and dithering policy on the part of West.

In both crises, the West was depicted as a revisionist and aggressive actor, eager to support an illegitimate and illegal armed mutiny that would perpetuate chaos and disorder in these states. In this way, both have become the stage for a tug-of-war over who can set international perception of legitimacy, legality and order in spaces proximate to Russia. With the Putin regime positioning itself as a defender of established and somewhat autocratic regimes against revisionism of populist protests said to be propagated Western backers.

Critically, not only have both the Ukraine and Syrian crises become central to the formation of Putin's program/ideological project, but they have also become events that have broken through the regime's remaining concerns about the taboo on the use of force abroad. Hence, a number of security practices and methods initially developed and deployed domestically in the North Caucasus have been transplanted into Russia's external policy. The use of hybrid warfare—the blurring of interventionism and a principled stance of non-interventionism and policies of war and peace—previously reserved for the domestic sphere have now been exported onto the regional and global arenas. Furthermore, the non-identification of combatants, the repeated denials on the part of the regime and its security apparatus of

their presence and/or the existence of operations by Russian troops and equipment, a high tolerance for everyday insecurity on the ground leading to civilian casualties, all of which have perplexed many foreign policy analysts were in evidence more than a decade previous in the North Caucasus. As was the use of information warfare, the attempts to control public debate and access to news sources about on-the-ground developments, in order to primarily win support for and seek legitimacy of these policies from the Russian public, but also secondarily to influence the perceptions of outside observers.

Conclusion

In 2015, it seems that the Putin regime's main security priority is countering the proclaimed threat posed by an unholy alliance between 'anti-regime'—and thus 'anti-Russian'—groups and the West. In response, it has adopted an aggressive and confrontational conservative-nationalist and anti-Western discourse as a way of solidifying an increasingly disgruntled and shaky domestic order, an aim which also extends to foreign affairs. This strategy has found high-profile manifestation in the regime's decision to annex the Crimea in early 2014, the ongoing threat of further Russian military actions in eastern Ukraine, and the recent air strikes in Syria in the face of wide-spread criticism, including from relatively friendly states such as Turkey. Whilst Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime may well represent an attempt to shift the conversation away from Ukraine and on-going questions of its role in Eastern Ukraine, and could even be interpreted as attempt at highlighting common purpose with the West in combatting Islamic State, it is also illustrative of the fact that the Putin regime is no longer shy when it comes to using force to back up its foreign policy positions. Yet, Russia's willingness to use force both in Ukraine and in Syria has caught the vast majority of policy practitioners and analysts off guard, and, indeed, the Kremlin had until relatively recently been very reluctant to countenance such external military actions. However, in hindsight the signs of a gradual erosion of what was previously serious concern about violating the taboo of external use of force were there from 2008 onwards. This also highlights the difficulty and complexity in interpreting the future foreign policy actions of the Putin regime, without reference to the prevailing state of affairs in its domestic context.

About the Author
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