

Russian Perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian Political Sovereignty, 2004-2008

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In this paper I seek to understand Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty between 2004 and 2008.¹ Thus, the focus is on Vladimir Putin's second term as President of the Russian Federation – a period when the sovereign status of these post-Soviet states had been consolidated to the extent that their demise as internationally recognised actors was unlikely in the medium term.

I argue that Russian foreign policy perceptions towards Belarus and Ukraine during this period were mainly influenced by what I define as the paradigm of Power. However, I also contend that a paradigm of Nation remained significant, unlike a third paradigm of Law. Since perceptions within both the paradigm of Power and the paradigm of Nation indicated failure to accept Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty, I conclude that Russian political elites had still not accepted the existence of the two sovereign states, over a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

My thesis is structured as follows: after the introduction I present the framework for my analysis. Then follow the three main parts of the paper. Each concerns a separate political issue relevant to the discussion at hand: territory, governance, and ideology. Finally, I use the conclusion to summarise my main points regarding each of these issues.

Framework

In this paper I address the interaction between international state-actors, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. Thus, my argument belongs within the disciplinary framework of International Relations (Baylis et al. 2008a, 3). Furthermore, since my argument is concerned with perceptions, the theory that frames my argument is post-Positivist and Constructivist in nature. Post-Positivism relates to epistemology; to underlying assumptions about what knowledge may be obtained about the world. Is it possible to find 'truth', or are subjective standpoints all any analysis within the social and political sciences may find (Marsh and Furlong 2002, 18-19)? Post-Positivists argue the latter, seeking to understand, not explain the world (Bevir and Rhodes 2002, 131-2). Furthermore, I draw on the ontological assumptions of Constructivism. Ontology relates to underlying assumptions about what motivates events. Is it material factors, including relative military or economic capabilities, or is it ideas and perceptions about the world, about friends and enemies, that matter (Wendt 1999, 92-138)? Since this article focuses on perceptions, it mainly follows the latter course, employing a theoretical framework seldom used in analyses concerning post-Soviet developments.

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Yet the impact of material factors cannot be completely ruled out. Thus, Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty were motivated mainly by constitutive dialogues between political elites in these states, but also partly by the imbalance of material capabilities between Russia and its neighbours.

For the purposes of my argument a few definitions are required. I define 'sovereignty' as 'the rightful entitlement to exclusive, unqualified, and supreme rule within a delimited territory' (Baylis et al. 2008b, 587). The 'political' I define as any issue concerning 'the organizational stability of states, systems of government and the ideologies that give them legitimacy' (Buzan 1991, 19-20). Beyond this, my argument discusses paradigms of Power, Nation and Law. I use 'paradigm' in the sense of worldview, or *Weltanschauung*. This refers to a coherent set of assumptions regarding the past, present, and future. Russian paradigms relating to Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty interconnect with perceptions of 'Russia.' In other words, perceptions concerning Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty are constituted by perceptions concerning Russian sovereignty. Based on the study of academic literature, and especially of a significant body of primary Russian-language sources, I have discerned three major paradigms relevant for my argument. According to the paradigm of Law, 'Russia' is the same as the Russian Federation. It originated as a self-conscious construction, and the strategy of Russia for the present should be to stabilise its position internationally, with an aim to eventual 'normalisation', in accordance with established, predominantly Western, international rules and norms. Here, Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty is respected as separate from that of Russia. In contrast, according to the paradigm of Power, 'Russia' is the same as the Russian empire. That is, 'Russia' originated from specific, historical developments, and its strategy for the present should be to widen the international sphere of influence for Russia, with an aim to eventual 'great power' status. In this paradigm, Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty is subsumed under that of Russia. This paradigm was the most visible between 2004 and 2008. Meanwhile, a third paradigm, the paradigm of Nation, also significantly influenced Russian perceptions. According to this paradigm, 'Russia' is the same as the Russian nation, understood primarily, but not exclusively in an ethnic sense. This Russia originated from a primordial, ahistorical state, and its strategy for the present should be to re-gather the Russian people, with an aim to recreate a 'pure' Russia in the future. In this paradigm Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty is not accepted in their current form. Parts of these states are perceived as legitimately belonging to Russia, while other parts are seen to belong to states opposed to Russia.

Finally, I define as a Russian any individual describing him- or herself as Russian, without considering their status of citizenship, cultural or ethnic background, etc. However, the perceptions of some Russians are more significant for the purposes of my argument than others. To discern whether a given individual belonged to a foreign policy elite between 2004 and 2008, it is necessary to estimate roughly how closely connected this person was to the contemporary power centre of Putin (Lo 2003, 42-44). At the same time, however, since an important part of my argument concerns the way in which perceptions of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians constantly influenced and reinforced one another, this article will consider Belarusians' and Ukrainians' perceptions of Russia, too.

Within this framework, the three main sections of this article analyse Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty concerning territory, governance, and ideology. Within each of these themes, the relative significance of the paradigms of Law, Power and Nation within Russian elites' perceptions of

Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty is due to Russian domestic politics as well as politics in Belarus and Ukraine. Any actor in international politics, including Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, needs an identity, needs to be something different from, if not necessarily opposed to, other identities (Hopf 2002, 7). The three paradigms outlined above are examples of this. The paradigm of Power was co-opted by the Russian political elite from the outset. However, this made it impossible for any other Russian actors to define themselves in opposition to the regime without defining Russia differently. At the same time, the Russian leadership failed to outline sufficiently and consolidate the paradigm of Law as an acceptable alternative. The paradigm of Nation thus filled this vacuum. At the same time, however, this development was also reinforced by actions of Belarusians and Ukrainians. They contributed to strengthening the paradigm of Nation in Russia by reacting to perceived Russian aggression. Thus, the fact that Russian perceptions developed as they did depended on the interaction of the Russian political elite with Russian as well as non-Russian actors.

Territory

Law: International Legal Norms

Russian elite perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian territorial sovereignty could rarely be grouped within the paradigm of Law. This tendency risked conflicting with prevailing perceptions in Ukraine. The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, had not offered any new territorial guarantees to Ukraine during his first term. At the same time, though, an opinion poll from September 2004 showed that 75 per cent of respondents in Ukraine supported Ukrainian territorial sovereignty. This figure was the second highest reported in similar polls conducted in Ukraine over the preceding twelve years and, crucially, came before the presidential election of Viktor Iushchenko (Shulman 2005, 34-5). Understanding that this represented a persistent trend, the Russian commentator Sergei Dubynin reminded Russians in January 2005 that 'there are no influential political or social forces in Ukraine, who would like to engage with the task of direct unification with Russia' (Dubynin 2005). Increasingly, the same could be said about Belarus. A survey from December 2005 showed that only 12 per cent of respondents there agreed that 'Belarus and Russia should become one state, with one president, government, army, flag, currency etc'. This proportion had markedly dropped from 21 per cent one year before, and 28 per cent in late 2000 (Drakakhrust 2006, 108-19). Yet the Russian leadership did not arrive at the necessary conclusions. Admittedly, at a press conference held jointly with Iushchenko in December 2006, Putin stressed that the territorial dispute had to be resolved through international law (Surkov 2007, 35). Yet this statement was provided out of necessity rather than out of conviction, and subsequent Russian territorial claims indicated that no permanent acquiescence to the Ukrainian position would take place. The fact that Russians would not heed their neighbours' demands also became obvious in the discussion about Russo-Belarusian integration. Notably, in April 2007, the Russian Ambassador to Minsk, Aleksandr Surikov, underlined how Belarusians could not expect preferential economic treatment in any future union (Avimova 2007). This might have made economic sense, but only served to reinforce Belarusian disinclination to integrate.

Power: Union State Moving Forward

Yet the Russian leadership was unwilling to abandon the idea of Russo-Belarusian integration. Previously, reintegration with Belarus and Ukraine had commanded support in Russian leading circles during Putin's first presidential term. In 2004, opinions polls of the Russian elite showed that support for reintegration with Belarus remained strong among all political groups. Indeed, within governmental elites a 34 per cent increase in favour of reintegration had been discernible over the previous five years (Zimmerman 2005, 196, 207). Furthermore, Russians believed that if inhabitants of Belarus had partly lost interest in integration this was due to disillusionment with the project, not to any inherent animosity towards Russia. Tellingly, a poll from 2004 revealed that twice as many Belarusian-speakers opted for unification with Russia than did Russian-speakers themselves. Russian-speakers were, on the contrary, much more interested in looking to the EU (Ioffe 2008, 84-85). It might have been expected that the election of Iushchenko as Ukrainian President in December 2004 indicated that Ukrainians had become more sceptical regarding Russians' intentions towards Ukraine. It might also have been expected that the Iushchenko administration would seek to strengthen popular Ukrainian mistrust of Russia. Indeed, a survey from February 2006 showed that only 19 per cent of respondents intending to vote for Iushchenko's Our Ukraine electoral bloc wanted to unite with Russia and Belarus. However, at this time the former Prime Minister Iuliia Tymoshenko's coalition had become more successful, and among its prospective voters 40 per cent wanted integration with Russia and Belarus (Katchanovski 2008, 371). In addition, support for such integration did not fall even as Putin openly criticised the Ukrainian and Belarusian regimes. In Ukraine, Tymoshenko and her supporters ignored previous Russian accusations of criminal activity against Tymoshenko. In the meantime in Belarus, even during the trade war with Russia in 2006-7, opinion polls showed that 40 per cent wished for closer relations or unification with Russia, while only 22 per cent would prefer closer relations or integration with the EU ('Natsional'nyi' 2007). Putin wanted to take advantage of such sentiments. In April 2007, he emphasised that 'Russia is open to any kind of integration [with Belarus]. We are ready to go as far as our Belarusian friends are prepared to go' (Putin 2007). At the same time, data showing economic progress were also used to retain public support for the process. Vasili Khrol, Deputy State Secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union State, highlighted that the Union budget had grown one and a half times between 2001 and 2006, and that turnover of goods within the Union had increased almost threefold (Avimova 2007). This provided seemingly concrete proof that continued integration was worthwhile, not only for Belarus, but also for an increasingly chaotic Ukraine. Dissatisfaction with Iushchenko's Westernising project had grown, and in June 2007, a survey among inhabitants living throughout Ukraine by the Eurasian Monitor International Research Agency showed that 55 per cent of respondents were now willing for their state to enter into a union with Russia (Marples 2008, 34-35).

Nation: Taking Territory back

Russian belligerence could easily change Ukrainian opinions, however. A serious Russo-Ukrainian territorial clash had already taken place over the island of Tuzla in the Kerch Strait in late 2003. Despite subsequent attempts at conflict resolution by Prime Ministers Mikhail Kas'ianov and Viktor Ianukovych, the risk of Iushchenko's

election as President a year later confirmed to Putin that territorial threats might remain necessary as a bargaining tool. Mostly, other politicians were left to present the threats. In November 2004, the Mayor of Moscow, Iurii Luzhkov, thus attended a self-ascribed separatist conference held in Severodonetsk in eastern Ukraine by invitation from Ukrainian Prime Minister and presidential candidate, Ianukovych. Luzhkov's appearance had undoubtedly been approved by Putin beforehand, since the Mayor of Moscow used the conference to present Putin's support for Ianukovych's candidacy ('Komu' 2004). Additionally, the idea of separatism in south-eastern Ukraine at this time had substantial popular backing. After Ianukovych's defeat, a popular survey conducted in the region in December showed that 20 per cent of Crimeans and a remarkable 40 per cent in Donetsk wanted their region to separate from the rest of Ukraine and join Russia (Shulman 2005, 44). Although these wishes did not subsequently result in unrest, Belarusian observers at the time were sufficiently worried for President Aleksandr Lukashenko to argue in May 2005 that the Russia-Belarus union had reached an impasse because of Putin's earlier proposal that Belarus become part of Russia – a proposal that allegedly would result in a new Chechnia west of Russia (Marples 2008, 25). Not many people believed Lukashenko, and open military territorial conflict remained an unrealistic scenario for the region. Yet diplomatic disputes showed no signs of détente, and by June 2006 official delegations from Russia and Ukraine openly disagreed on border demarcation in the Sea of Azov: 'Russia is attached to the Kerch agreement from 2003, which was signed by the presidents of the two states. [Ukraine] suggests changing the status of the Sea of Azov, declaring the waters not internal, but international' ('Rossiia' 2006). In the case of Belarus, matters were different since territorial integration was, officially, welcomed by both parties. However, in October 2006, Lukashenko complained to visiting Russian journalists that the Russian authorities were hindering the re-unification of Russia and Belarus by offering either nothing more than cooperation like in the EU, or, conversely 'that [Belarus] should be incorporated into Russia [and] "even Stalin had not gone that far"' (Savchenko 2006). No Belarusians were allowed to contradict Lukashenko, and it was perhaps particularly ominous for the prospects of future cooperation between Russia and Lukashenko that the unquestioned leader of Belarus was the most outspoken critic of Russian territorial ambitions. In Ukraine, on the contrary, Iushchenko's administration had no interest in increasing the dispute, but rather reacted to renewed provocations by Luzhkov. In February 2007, the Mayor went to Sevastopol', where he declared: 'Here in the legendary Sevastopol', a city of Russian glory, we must talk about the developments that tore Sevastopol' and Crimea away from Russia [...] These developments were undeserved' Not unreasonably, Ukrainian authorities accused Luzhkov of interference in Ukrainian internal affairs (Vas'kovskaia 2007). Perhaps they were prudent in doing so as a precautionary step, for Luzhkov's sentiments certainly had supporters within the Russian executive. A civil servant of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs whom I interviewed in May 2007 repeatedly returned to discussing territorial revanchism and potential divisions of Ukraine (*Interview with civil servant*, 2007). At the pinnacle of his power, Putin provided similar threats. Eventually, in April 2008, he reportedly warned American President George Bush that the entry of Ukraine into NATO might prompt Russia to encourage the predominantly Russian-inhabited areas, including Crimea and the eastern regions, to break away from the rest of the state (Allenova et al., 2008, 1, 3). Thus, even borders officially agreed on were not secure for the future.

Governance

Law: Iushchenko in Moscow

Even under Kuchma by mid-2004 Ukraine was ranked as ‘partly democratic’ by the respected international organisation, Freedom House – a result that surpassed all other post-Soviet states, bar the Baltic States (Solonenko 2007, 140). Russia had certainly lost democratic ground since El'tsin's retirement, but this hardly seemed to concern the presidential administration. There remained a token allegiance to the popular vote. In October 2004, the Chairman of the Russian Electoral Commission, Aleksandr Veshniakov, complained that the Belarusian referendum on constitutional amendments allowing Lukashenko to stand for President again did not ensure public control and should not be emulated by Russia (Marples and Pervushina 2005, 26). However, few doubted that Putin planned to stay in control for many years, even if public opinion should somehow turn against him. Indeed, the idea of sovereign democracy that was becoming such a buzzword in Putin's Russia was also visible in relation to neighbouring states. In December 2004, before the re-run of the second round of the Ukrainian presidential election, between Iushchenko and Ianukovych, Putin did state that the Ukrainian crisis ‘can only be solved democratically, that is on a legal basis, and not under external or internal pressure according to political bias,’ but this was primarily a demand for Western actors to refrain from assisting the Ukrainian opposition (‘Vladimir’ 2004). Iushchenko still won, and in January 2005, the co-chairman of the Russo-Ukrainian inter-parliamentary commission, Aleksandr Lebedev, grudgingly had to admit that masses of Ukrainians flocking to Kyiv and protesting there, had decided the Ukrainian election. It could not be explained through the concept of foreign plots and financing (Herd 2005, 15). That was the opinion of most observers, and Iushchenko's triumph now led the Belarusian opposition to criticise the West for not supporting it in similar fashion to topple Lukashenko (Ibid, 8). Putin had been unable to prevent the Orange Revolution and now sought to minimise the damage. Thus, when Iushchenko, fully aware that Russian elites had strongly criticised his democratic credentials, suggested that his first trip abroad would be to Moscow, Putin happily agreed to seek reconciliation between the two regimes (Kovalova 2007, 184).

Power: Supporting Ianukovych

Putin did not necessarily respect Ukrainian sovereign governance, but in a direct continuation of previous policy he saw Iushchenko's visit as an opportunity to increase continued Russian influence in Ukraine. Previously, in the run-up to the Ukrainian Presidential election of late 2004, leading Russian actors had supported Ianukovych with a sum of at least 50 million dollars and possibly 300 million dollars (Velychenko 2007, 5). That this had not led to the desired outcome was mostly blamed on outside interference. By December 2004, when a swift election for Ianukovych was scuppered, Putin ‘compared the West with “a fellow in a colonial helmet” [and] reproached Washington for wanting to impose “a dictatorship in international affairs under the guise of pseudo democratic rhetoric”’ (Nugaired 2004). Russian political analysts argued similarly, with Viacheslav Nikonov stating: ‘Ukraine is next in line for the execution of the American plan of ‘velvet revolution,’ [...] the secret service operation to replace regimes that have not already been tested successes as “banana republics” by the USA, already accomplished in states in

Eastern Europe or Georgia' (Nikonov 2004). In Ukraine, until his defeat in the repeated electoral runoff, Yanukovich sought to deflect the blame for his impending defeat: 'A large number of organisations sponsored by the USA have worked in Ukraine for many years. America interferes with the internal affairs of Ukraine' (Bogdanov 2004). In Belarus, there was evidently a similar fear of Western influence and pressure for regime change. In late December 2004, twenty opposition youth activists from United Civic Party regional and city organisations were detained for participating in an unauthorised demonstration celebrating the victory of the Ukrainian opposition (Herd 2005, 8). Yet the Belarusian and Russian leaderships had to accept that they could not keep Iushchenko from power. As a second-best solution, however, maybe Iushchenko could be persuaded not to unite with the West against Russia. In January 2005, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov noted that 'not all [states] have succeeded in getting rid of stereotypes from the past. This shows in the reaction of some circles in Europe and the USA to the political crisis in Ukraine [and in their declarations] that "Ukraine has to join forces with the West"' (Gavrilov and Chirkin 2005). After Iushchenko's regime was beset by domestic troubles in 2006, the former head of the Russian presidential administration, Aleksandr Voloshin, went on a semi-official mission to the USA, where he complained that expanded American activity had problematised events in Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet region, an area that Russia could rightfully lay claim to (Sidorov 2006). At this time, the recent dearth of Western economic and other support for Iushchenko showed Voloshin that the government of Ukraine might be persuaded that Russia could offer Ukraine more than the West could. And despite the spats that had taken place between the Russian political elite and Lukashenko, it seemed clear in Belarus, too, that Western help would not be forthcoming. By May 2007, the lack of Western assistance had finally convinced some members of the Belarusian opposition that governance by Moscow would be a lesser evil than Lukashenko. Uladzimer Parfenovich and Leanid Sinitsyn duly published a manifesto that favoured associated member-status for Belarus in the Russian Federation (Sinitsyn 2007). Lukashenko opposed this, but he was even more averse than Putin to Western intervention. Thus, it came as no surprise when in October 2007 Russia, Belarus and other post-Soviet governments presented a plan for monitoring all elections in OSCE member-states equally, and for reducing the amount of monitoring: '[...] the number of [OSCE] observers [at a given election] shall not exceed 50 people'. This would prevent the OSCE from establishing whether elections were free and fair and would thus reduce the risk of an unpleasant Iushchenko-like surprise cropping up in Putin and Lukashenko's way in future (Bausin et al. 2007).

Nation: Disparaging the Ambassador

Still, such measures would not help the Russians to get rid of Lukashenko. Indeed, within Belarus the Belarusian President was now becoming increasingly popular relative to the Russian leadership. Already, Putin had suggested incorporating, and thus neutralising, the Belarusian central administration into an expanded Russia. Yet this seemed decreasingly popular in Belarus, and not just among Lukashenko's supporters. In November 2004, following suspension of Russian gas to Belarus, inhabitants of Belarus for the first time favoured Lukashenko to Putin. Answering the question 'If the position of President for Belarus and Russia was established whom would you vote for?' 30 per cent supported Lukashenko, against Putin's 24 per cent. Putin had previously been favoured, notably gaining 51 per cent to Lukashenko's 14 per cent in April 2002 (Drakakhrust 2006, 113). Putin's role in the Ukrainian turmoil

during this time worried inhabitants of Belarus, who did not want similar unrest. The peaceful outcome of the Ukrainian election had not seemed certain, particularly after Yanukovich's menacing statement in November: 'Today we're on the edge of catastrophe [...] When the first drop of blood is spilled, we won't be able to stop it' ('Vybory' 2004). And even if Putin had not promoted Ukrainian civil war, parliamentarians in Russia supporting him had been more willing to do so. Luzhkov was now a member of United Russia, openly supporting Putin, and in December the Mayor of Moscow visited eastern and southern Ukrainian regions including Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea, the leaders of which vowed to pursue strategies of greater autonomy from the central Ukrainian government by any possible means, should Iushchenko win the election. As mentioned earlier, Luzhkov repeatedly visited Severodonetsk to express his support ('Komu' 2004). Lukashenko was unwilling to be similarly undermined. In mid-2005, the Kremlin appointed the governor of Saratov region, Dmitrii Aiatskov, as ambassador to Belarus. However, after he spoke disparagingly about Lukashenko at a press conference in his hometown, 'the Belarusian [administration] strongly opposed his appointment', Aiatskov never went to Minsk, and by February 2006 Aleksandr Surikov became ambassador instead ('Rossiiskii' 2006). Yet while the Russian government deferred to Lukashenko, at least in this instance, Iushchenko's regime was still being obstructed. Supplies of natural gas to and through Ukraine were halted on January 1, 2006, just when the Ukrainian political system was most vulnerable during its transformation from a presidential to a presidential-parliamentary system (Flikke 2008, 385). Although no political turmoil ensued, the dispute showed Iushchenko's political skills in an unflattering light, while a Russia-friendly parliamentary opposition could argue that increased power to them would mean less difficult relations with Russia in future. Iushchenko had been forced to cede some presidential power to the parliament in order to come to power, but Lukashenko could not be similarly undermined. Russian criticism of Lukashenko was therefore sometimes forced to use other means, including slander. In November 2006, for instance, Russian journalists quoted his family's neighbour: 'We all drank and we're going on drinking [...] the President's uncle [...] can tell you the recipe for home-brewed alcohol in details', while in January 2007 even the normally measured analyst Iuliia Latynina denounced Lukashenko as 'the demonstrative parasite in Minsk' (Bobrova 2006) (Ivanov 2007). Still, Lukashenko knew that such comments would be resented by inhabitants of Belarus in general, and he was determined to exploit any waning in Belarusian public support for the Russian leadership. In January 2007, dismissing Western and Russian interference alike, he stated that 'as long as we're not disturbed [by other states] our people can figure out things for themselves. We don't need either "coloured" or "gas revolutions!"' ('My' 2007). Putin's administration was hardly impressed and continued to undermine Belarusian governance, not least by halting energy supplies. Ukraine could be damaged, too. In September 2007, following the Ukrainian parliamentary elections where Tymoshenko's bloc gained 31 per cent of the votes, threats by Gazprom to cut supplies to Ukraine were followed by Putin's announcement that Ukraine should pay a price closer to the international average (Copsey 2008, 306). Even though Tymoshenko was now much more reconciliatory towards Russia, Putin intended to demonstrate the consequences of challenging Russia.

Ideology

Law: Ukraine in the EU

Russian respect for Belarusian and Ukrainian ideological sovereignty had decreased during the first term of Putin's presidency. During the second term, he did profess his support for Ukrainian membership in international organisations such as the EU, but his professed support, given in December 2004, can easily be linked to his desire to persuade Ukrainians to vote for Yanukovich in the presidential election. Moreover, Putin was clearly aware how impossible it was for Ukraine to become a member of the EU even in the medium term (Tsygankov 2005, 148). To refuse any sort of sovereign international identity for Ukraine would have forced Putin to specify a Russian vision, and this had not been worked out yet. As Russian analysts complained: 'What can we offer Ukraine and the other post-Soviet states today? Builders of a "new empire" must have a no less weighty domestic ideological foundation and no less serious foreign policy intent. At present there is neither the one, nor the other' (Vladimirov 2004). Without a Russian vision, Ukrainians looked to GUAM, the organisation they had helped found almost a decade earlier, which in May 2006 became the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development. One of its stated aims was to 'secure rule of law [and] strengthen European integration', squarely positioning the organisation within established, Western norms (*Organizatsiia* 1997). Yet in order to achieve these aims, cooperation with democratic states such as the Baltics and Romania were in order, and these now thought of little else than their newly-attained membership of the EU. Iushchenko's Ukraine was therefore somewhat left to itself. Belarusians, too, felt increasingly peripheral in Russian international affairs. In October 2006, members of the Belarusian political elite argued that the Russian elite no longer viewed Belarus as a priority, and that the Belarusian state therefore should seek a different source of inspiration (Rubinov 2006b). Yet no one any longer knew what that source might be.

Power: Modern Russian Identity and the Spiritual Leader

Putin's imperial ideology had been clear already during his first presidential term. Iushchenko's election in Ukraine brought the momentum of this project to a halt, but Russian political analysts did not believe that Ukrainians could construct an identity for their state that would be both European and separated from Russia. In December 2004, Tsipko announced: 'Russian language and Russian culture are an inseparable part of European civilisation. At the same time, Ukrainian language – which was preserved through south-Russian folklore – remains to this day on the fringes of European civilisation' (Tsipko 2004). Tsipko and his colleagues believed that Belarus, too, was peripheral in Europe, unable to have any international impact without Russian assistance. Similarly, inhabitants in Belarus still agreed that their future was close to Russia, although, as seen above, not necessarily united with it. A survey in Belarus from April 2006 showed that 85 per cent perceived Russia as one of the five friendliest countries towards Belarus, as opposed to 1 per cent who perceived that Russia was one of the five most unfriendly countries towards Belarus (Ioffe 2008, 201). And according to Anatolii Rubinov, deputy chief of the Belarusian presidential administration, in July 2006 there was no ideological content in the oft-repeated phrase calling for a 'revival' of the Belarusian nation. Rubinov instead argued that the identity of the state was bound to the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (Rubinov

2006a). In Ukraine, wistful memories of the Soviet Union belonged to the opposition, particularly the Communist party. Yet the more general idea of some sort of Eurasian unity together with Russia was much more widespread. By 2006, the controversial politician Natalia Vitrenko's party, Blok, controlled approximately 1,000 seats in local eastern and southern Ukrainian councils. With her close connections to Russian Eurasianists, such as Aleksandr Dugin, this political presence was a significant boost for pro-Russian ideology in Ukraine (Velychenko 2007, 11). However, Ukraine, and Belarus, too, had to receive benefits from Russia in order to stay loyal, and this had latterly not been the case. The outcome was increased alienation between the states. And this remained one of the few venues where Russian political opposition could criticise Putin. In January 2007, Aleksandr Prokhanov complained that 'there remains one Belarus that is the gateway to Europe, that Gazprom were so thoughtlessly prepared to slam, positioning the relationship of our states and peoples on an "economic foundation", which preserved "Russian state [rossiiskii] oil" and the "Russian state [rossiiskii] budget"' (Prokhanov 2007). This comment might not have seen fair to Gazprom as Belarus had repeatedly failed to fulfil its contractual obligations to the Russian company. The purpose of Gazprom as a company was hardly to subsidise the Belarusian economy and regime. Still, Gazprom was a state-controlled company and Prokhanov was correct to point out that naked profit-seeking to the detriment of the Belarusian economy would not fit with government policies making Belarus into a subsidised vassal of Russia.

At the same time signs existed that a Russian leadership prepared to subsidise Belarusian and Ukrainian economies might be able to prevent Belarus and even Ukraine from allying with the West against Russia. Iushchenko might have become Ukrainian President, inaugurating Westernised international policies, separate from and at times, even opposed to, Russia, but his government was soon beset by infighting. Less than two years after his electoral defeat, Ianukovych had thus come back as Prime Minister, and with his return Ukraine looked to Russia again. In January 2007, the new government even ensured that Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasiuk, who had been closely identified with a pro-Western line for more than a decade, was dismissed as he had been in the past, following a pattern previously set by Kuchma (White and McAllister 2008, 10). Despite worries from the Russian opposition, therefore, powerful indications appeared that Ukraine and Belarus would remain closely aligned with Russia.

Nation: Rejecting West Ukrainian Leadership

Yet Ukraine and Belarus would only remain closely aligned with Russia if Russians would tolerate the right of Belarusians and Ukrainians to sometimes take differing opinions. Some indications existed that intolerance toward difference was growing in Russia, particularly among so-called panslavists, who enjoyed a state-tolerated renaissance. In May 2004, at the first Ukrainian-based congress of the Conference of Slavic Peoples of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, the leader of the Slavic National Patriotic Union, Petro Tolochko, stated: 'If we wish to survive as a civilisation then we have to unite [if] we [...] should tear ourselves away from Belarus, Russia [...] we would [...] "come undone"' ('Slavianskii' 2004). The onus here was on Russia to preserve the bond, but it was obvious that Lukashenko and other Belarusians criticising Russia would not be tolerated, either. Iushchenko was seen by Tolochko and his allies as a straightforward enemy. It was therefore tempting for Iushchenko's Russian opponents to emphasise this animosity, framing him as hostile to Russians. In

June 2004, a report allegedly written by Russian spin-doctor Marat Gel'man appeared in Ukraine. It advocated presenting Iushchenko as an enemy of Crimean Russians by using unwitting Ukrainian nationalists to provoke land disputes and Tatar retaliation on the peninsula, showing Iushchenko's inability to protect local Slavs ('Tretii' 2004). This plan was not successful, but the impression that Iushchenko and Ukrainian nationalists were out to hurt Russian neighbours was only reinforced as the divisive presidential campaign developed towards the end of the year. Already in October, Russian commentators complained: 'If the "west-Ukrainians" are used to see themselves as oppressed, why should Ukrainians in the east accept such a detrimental role? [...] why should the "westerners", who worship the Polish lord and the American decree, declare themselves to be the only real Ukrainians' (Serkov 2004)? This impression, as I indicated previously, was only reinforced among Russians following the election. Ukrainians, too, could vilify Russia, denouncing it as almost barbaric. This shows, for instance, in Tarasiuk's comment while he still held the post of Foreign Minister in October 2006: 'Russia is the Eurasian outskirts. It won't enter the EU, since it wants to gain the status of a global great power at the centre of a Slavic Union' (Schuler 2006). Although the latter part of Tarasiuk's statement could be viewed as recognition of Russia as a great power, the former part linked Russia to a Tatar past, with Ukraine, incidentally, as the bulwark of civilised Europe. Lukashenko was prepared to use similar rhetoric in January 2007, in the wake of yet another energy dispute with Russia: 'You know, [Belarusians] are an inalienable part of Europe, the heart of Europe [...] Today has come the time when Europeans realized that [...] they also have to link their security with that of Belarus' ('My' 2007). Tarasiuk and Lukashenko seemed to have gone too far; Russia was in many ways as European as the two smaller states. The lack of tolerance went both ways, however. In the Russian government Belarus and Ukraine were seldom denounced as alien to Europe since Russia, as Tarasiuk had correctly pointed out, was simply not just part of Europe, but a special international actor. Yet less prominent Russian politicians did highlight the insular, xenophobic nature of Ukraine. This was most forcefully indicated to me in an interview with a member of the Russian Federation Council in May 2007. Repeatedly, claims appeared that Ukrainians wanted a state purified of *Moskali* (a derogatory word for ethnic Russians), Muslims and other outsiders (*Interview with member* 2007). This was presented as a disease unique to western Ukraine, whereas the eastern regions had much more in common with Russia. To me it was quite clear that the politician in question would view a split Ukraine as a natural development and, although the Russian leadership might not overtly share this sentiment, it no longer sought to counter it.

Conclusion

Between 2004 and 2008, the paradigm of Power dominated Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty. In territorial matters, Putin ensured Belarusians that integration would go as far as they were ready for it to go, while the Union budget indeed increased substantially. Furthermore, opinion polls taken among executive elites in Russia showed that Putin had strong domestic support for his plans for integration with other post-Soviet states. In matters relating to governance, Russian elites openly and consistently supported Ianukovych during the Ukrainian presidential election. Putin complained about Western interference, while Sergei Ivanov claimed that old stereotypes continued to dominate thinking in the EU and North America. What these and other actors indicated was subsequently confirmed by

Voloshin, the former senior aide to El'tsin and Putin, who told the American administration that Ukraine and the rest of the post-Soviet region constituted part of a Russian sphere of interest. Finally, in matters relating to ideology, prominent Russian commentators, such as Tsipko, portrayed Russia as spiritual leader of the Slavic community and the only medium through which peripheral Ukrainians and Belarusians could enter Europe. Many Russians believed their state had a duty to assist this development, for instance, through unquestioned, generous subsidies or through political alliances with dominant parties abroad, such as that existing between Dugin and Vitrenko in Ukraine.

The paradigm of Nation also significantly influenced Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty. In issues concerning territory, Putin showed that any previous border agreement could be annulled. Most notoriously, he threatened revanchism against Ukraine if it joined NATO, and he endorsed Luzhkov to visit eastern Ukraine and support regional separatism. Strongly voiced protests resulted, not just from Ukrainians but also from Belarus, where Lukashenko compared Putin with Stalin and threatened a new Chechnia. In matters concerning governance, the Russian government showed a distinct lack of respect for the Ukrainian democratic choice of Iushchenko. Energy and other types of disruption were introduced at the most critical times for the Ukrainian polity, for instance, during its transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system, while the Russia-endorsed presidential candidate in Ukraine, Ianukovych, warned of civil war when his election did not progress smoothly. Finally, in issues concerning ideology Russian commentators increasingly appealed to Russians in Ukraine, who should rebel against the alleged hijacking of their state by West Ukrainian nationalists. Although rumours that a Russian spin-doctor in Ukraine tried to provoke inter-ethnic strife to discredit Iushchenko were not confirmed, local political elites certainly took offence. If Tarasiuk and Lukashenko could agree on one thing, this was apparently that their states were more European than Russia.

Conversely, the paradigm of Law was insignificant. Russians declared that territorial disagreements with Ukraine should be solved by international law, but they did not follow up such words with action. Similarly, Iushchenko's visit to Moscow early in his presidency, a visit intended to alleviate some Russian concerns following his election, was not appreciated by Putin. Finally, Putin could easily suggest Ukrainian membership of Western organisations such as the EU when he knew this would not soon become a possibility.

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