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**REASSESSING PUTIN'S PROJECT:  
REFLECTIONS ON IR THEORY AND THE WEST**

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**Introduction**

After eight years the American president is stepping down. His tenure has been eventful, dividing opinion at home and abroad as a result of both controversial domestic and foreign policies. As the media shifts focus to the next administrative line-up the attention of historians, political commentators, and perhaps also of the president himself, is shifting to questions of legacy. What went well, what badly, and will history be a sympathetic judge. This, at least, seems a reasonable reflection of the current state of American politics. Whereas previously President Bush easily commanded the attention of the global media, now he competes with the presidential candidates for air time. What now interests people in the US and the world is what the new post-Bush America will look like. Only a few years ago Bush's impact on American and world politics was frequently presented as deeply systemic, with the language of the war on terror and proclamations that 9/11 had changed the world contributing to this sense of structural transformation. Today, however, the presidential candidates compete by emphasising the mistakes of the past and that they will do things differently. In short, whether or not the Bush Administration has had a deep structural impact on global politics now appears more debatable.

In contrast, comment on Russian politics differs in at least three respects. First, although President Putin's successor is now in place considerable media attention remains focused on Putin. Whereas Bush is expected to relocate himself as an elder statesman, Putin remains at the centre of Russian politics with his move to the premiership. This has left commentators puzzling whether the Putin Presidency and regime has actually ended. Thus, in an extensive interview with then President Elect Dmitrii Medvedev on 24 March 2008 the *Financial Times* felt compelled to ask who exactly would be making the decisions. Medvedev's response about the division of powers prescribed in the Russian system and his comment that former heads of government often move to other ministerial posts in other European countries, is unlikely to assuage suspicions that Putin will remain the central force in Russian politics.<sup>1</sup>

Second, whilst the candidates, Republican and Democrat, in the American presidential election race have generally sought to distance themselves from Bush's legacy, this is not the case in Russia. Tying oneself to Putin's project has almost become a prerequisite for political success. Again, this has been clear in Medvedev's various policy pronouncements to date. Whilst this may reflect undemocratic trends in recent years that have seen opposition voices curtailed and their media outlets silenced, it is also hard to deny Putin's apparent popularity and that the emphasis in Russian politics is on continuity, not change (or phrased differently, on continuity in pursuing Putin's agenda of transformation focused on enhancing the power and unity of the state).

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<sup>1</sup> *Financial Times*, 'Interview Transcript: Dmitry Medvedev', 24 March 2008. <http://www.ft.com>.

Third, this also points to that claims of structural change may actually be better supported in the Russian, than in the American, case. The difficulty, however, becomes over agreeing what these structural changes are. For some (particularly in the Western media) Putin's legacy is likely to be written in terms of his undermining of democracy and a return to authoritarian trends, whilst globally he is often seen as pushing Russia in a revisionist direction, asserting the continued relevance of the balance of power and a much more guarded attitude towards the West. For others, Putin's centralising reforms are seen as a prerequisite for a properly democratic and coherent state, whilst internationally he is seen as a pragmatist who has reclaimed Russia's power and voice on the world stage and in this process restored pride to Russian nationhood and identity.

The articles in this special issue are thus aimed at analysing different aspects of Putin's legacy and project. More particularly, they ask what implications aspects of Putin's legacy may have for the West. Whilst these mainly relate to the development of West-Russia relations, in this introductory article I argue that elements of Putin's project are likely to have a profound and enduring impact on how the West constitutes itself and approaches the rest of the world more generally. This is interesting in that despite a general tendency in the West to pay only lip service to Russian interests since the end of the Cold War as a result of its perceived declining power, this article suggests that whilst Russia has frequently been cast as increasingly marginal it retains considerable ability to impact on the West. Theoretically, therefore, the article builds on the insights of a growing literature highlighting the power of the outside and the margins to impact on and shape the nature of the core.<sup>2</sup> There are different ways in

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<sup>2</sup> For different takes on the power of margins see: Noel Parker (ed.) *The Geopolitics of Europe's*

which the outside/margins can do this, but of specific concern here is the power that the outside/margins can wield by either granting or withholding recognition to the claims of the core.<sup>3</sup>

The theoretical aspects of the paper will be developed in more detail below. However, to illustrate the central claim that Putin's Russia has fundamentally challenged the West the article focuses on two points. The following section illustrates how Putin's Russia has posed challenges to International Relations theory. The central question here is conceptualising just what kind of state Russia is and in particular whether or not it is best characterised as a revisionist or status quo power. How this question is answered will affect the type of relationship it is possible for the West to develop with Russia and how far it can be integrated into an international society of shared norms. Here, the article suggests the prospects for a positive relationship are rather good.

Second the article analyses how Putin's Russia has challenged ideas of Western identity premised on claims to universal knowledge in a more fundamental manner. Western triumphalist universalism has assumed various guises since the end of the Cold War, such as in Fukuyama's notion that Western neoliberal capitalism marks the End of History, or in the crusading claims made about democratic peace theory and the juxtaposition of Western civilisation against the barbarism of those different from us. Putin's political project challenges such triumphalist universalism in intriguing

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*Identity: Centers, Boundaries and Margins* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008); Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2004) 'Contending Discourses of Marginality: The Case of Kaliningrad', *Geopolitics* 9(3) pp.699-730; Noel Parker (2000) 'Integrated Europe and its "Margins": Action and reaction, in Noel Parker and Bill Armstrong (eds.) *Margins in European Integration* (Houndmills: Macmillan) pp.3-27; Rob Shields (1991) *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge).

<sup>3</sup> On recognition see Erik Ringmar (2002) 'The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia Against the West', *Cooperation and Conflict* 37(2) pp.115-36; Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2008) 'Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy', *European Journal of International Relations* 14(3), pp.519-52.

ways and with potential global implications. Here the article suggests the prospects for a positive relationship are less clear, though not insurmountable.

### **Putin's Project and IR Theory**

Relations between the West and Russia have fluctuated since the end of the Cold War. At times, as in the early 1990s or immediately after 9/11, the relationship has been positive, promoting talk of shared interests and identities and the final erasure of Cold War legacies. At other times relations have been more fractious, such as over Kosovo in 1998-1999 or as apparent now in US-Russian disagreements over Ballistic Missile Defence, or in the ongoing diplomatic fallout in UK-Russian relations created by the Litvinenko affair. In this respect the West frequently appears puzzled by how to understand Russian politics and policy positions or to understand adequately the kind of state Russia is or aspires to be.

From the perspective of traditional IR theory the issue is perhaps best characterised in terms of whether Russia should be understood as a revisionist or status quo power - whether it has offensive realist aspirations of changing the system, or whether it is more defensively oriented towards preserving established national interests and its established power position.<sup>4</sup> This section analyses this issue by first considering Realist/geopolitical-oriented explanations of Russian behaviour under Putin, before offering an analysis drawing on English School notions of how Russia relates to

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<sup>4</sup> On offensive and defensive realism see Randall L. Schweller (1994) 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In', *International Security* 19(1) pp.72-107. John Mearsheimer (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton) pp.29-54.

international society, and argues this offers a better way of understanding elements of Putin's legacy and their implications for the West. In both instances, however, identity elements also need to be understood as central. The core identity strands at play are arguably encapsulated in tensions between Russia's desire to be accepted into international society and its desire to reassert a great power status, and its tendency to assert a European identity whilst simultaneously remaining suspicious of Western intentions.

Evidence supporting traditional Realist and geopolitical visions of Russia is easily found. At the Realist level ideas that international politics is a zero-sum game characterised by competition over interests and material resources and struggles over power and domination is prevalent.<sup>5</sup> This was clearest from 1996-1999, immediately before Putin's presidency began, when Eurasianist sentiments came to the fore and political rhetoric was dominated by calls for regional alliances to counter-balance US hegemony and to construct a multipolar world order premised on balancing power.<sup>6</sup> However, such emphases were also evident during Putin's presidency. For example, Putin's negative reaction to America's plans for a Ballistic Missile Defence shield and its partial extension to Europe led him to warn of the inevitability of an emerging arms race<sup>7</sup> and threats to re-target Russian missiles on Europe. It was also evident in his emphasis on the need to reclaim Russia's great power status through domestic reforms reasserting Moscow's power over the federal republics,<sup>8</sup> his willingness to see Russia as the inheritor of the Soviet great power legacy, and his emphasis on

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<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Maiorov (2007) 'On Moral Principles and National Interests', *International Affairs* (Moscow), 53(2), p.38.

<sup>6</sup> Stanislav Secieru (2006) 'Russia's Quest for Strategic Identity', *NDC Occasional Paper 18* (Rome: NATO Defense College), p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Putin (2007) Speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy, 2 February 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See Mitin's article in this volume.

economic reforms and access to and development of resources as the basis for any claim to international power.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even though Putin rejected notions that international relations is necessarily a realm of Hobbesian anarchy and accepted that currently no state has overtly aggressive military intentions towards Russia, his presidency all the same emphasised self-sufficiency; that Russia must “win its own place in the international system” since no other state will ultimately help it.<sup>10</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War geopolitical thinking has also been readily apparent. For example, 1990s assertions of Russia’s pre-eminence in its ‘near abroad’ and the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as one manifestation of this have been mirrored more recently in renewed anger at the prospect of NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia. For Putin NATO enlargement has been a ‘serious provocation’ that has undermined territorial security guarantees offered to the Soviet Union in 1990.<sup>11</sup> The fact that expansion is conceptualised in terms of NATO’s ‘encroachment’ into Russia’s backyard is indicative of how conceptual frames of Russia’s sphere of influence being under threat have remained apparent.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, ever since the mid 1990s there have been concerns that Western sponsored projects of regional cooperation and the promotion of economic liberalisation are thinly veiled Western neo-imperial attempts to extract raw materials and even to dismantle the state once and for all.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Secieru, ‘Russia’s Quest for Strategic Identity’, p.27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Putin, Speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy.

<sup>12</sup> Luke Harding (2008) ‘Putin issues nuclear threat to Ukraine over plan to host US shield’, *The Guardian*, 13 February 2008; Alexander Sergounin (1998) ‘The Russia Dimension’, in Hans Mouritzen (ed.) *Bordering Russia: Theory and Prospects for Europe’s Baltic Rim* (Aldershot: Ashgate) pp.60, 65-6

<sup>13</sup> Andrey S. Makarychev (2001) *Islands of Globalization: Regional Russia and the Outside World* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies and Conflict Research, Working Paper 2), pp.25-27.

Geopolitical thinking, however, has also been ascribed more positive elements. As Bassin and Aksenov note, whereas historically geopolitics has lacked any real status as an academic discipline in Russia, today it plays a much more important role. This is evident in the establishment of a permanent Committee for Geopolitical Analysis in the Duma and the fact that geopolitical ideas have been broadly embraced within the political elite.<sup>14</sup> For example, prominent intellectuals like Gennadii Zyuganov and Aleksandr Dugin have reclaimed Harold Mackinder as a source of intellectual inspiration. In this respect Mackinder's "designation of the Heartland as the 'pivot of history' becomes an affirmation of the absolute pre-eminence and centrality of Russia itself throughout modern world history".<sup>15</sup> In this instance, therefore, geopolitics is seen to resurrect Russia from its marginality. What such geopolitical analysis also does, however, is generate a preoccupation with affirming borders and spheres of influence, while also feeding identity discourses proclaiming Russia's difference from the West and its distinctive civilisational traits.<sup>16</sup>

Arguably, Putin's position has been more sophisticated. Such views seem to call for irreconcilable opposition towards the West, the assertion of Russia's exclusive control over the Heartland and arguably promote a mercantilist economic vision opposed to free trade and globalising economic linkages.<sup>17</sup> Putin's position on each of these is rather ambiguous. As noted below, Putin's construction of Russian identity in relation to the West is not one of outright rejection. However, another good example is energy policy. The key point is that whilst in the West Russia has frequently been accused of wielding energy as a geopolitical instrument (by allegedly hiking prices in Ukraine,

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Bassin and Konstantin E. Aksenov (2006) 'Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse', *Geopolitics* 11(1), pp.99-100.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.102-103.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.106-107.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

Belarus and Georgia in order to influence local politics) a different interpretation is also available. As Makarychev notes in this volume, charging its neighbours market prices could be viewed as an inherently normalising move, indeed, the antithesis of previous practices whereby geopolitically important neighbours received preferential treatment. By contrast, though, a geopolitical/geoeconomic logic has clearly been evident in the emphasis Putin has placed on energy as the fundamental source of Russian claims to a great power status.

This indicates a more general tension in Putin's Russia whereby Russia aspires to be accepted as both a 'normal state' and 'great power'. Secieru conceptualises this as a tension in Russian foreign policy between a desire for integration in the international community (enabling it to assert its normalness) and a desire for isolation premised on carving out a sphere of influence as a basis of claims to being a great power.<sup>18</sup> This tension between being treated concurrently as equal and exceptional helps explain how realist and geopolitical frames of reference are variously avoided and endorsed in Russian rhetoric and contributes to what sometimes seems an overly suspicious attitude towards organisations like NATO and the EU. In its quest for acceptance and normalcy Russia is drawn towards such institutions and to developing strategic partnerships with them, but is also repelled by concerns that too close a relationship will undermine its influence and great power status. The fear is that Russia will become just another 'normal power', whereas Russia aspires to be a 'normal *great* power' with room for manoeuvre.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Secieru, 'Russia's Quest for Strategic Identity', p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Susanna Hast (2007) 'Constructing Russian "Great Powerness" and the Hierarchy of International System', presented at the INTAS seminar on 'Rethinking Russia', Keele University, 18 May 2007.

It is here that aspects of English School thinking can provide insights into understanding elements of Putin's legacy beyond that of traditional realist and geopolitical frames. Fundamental is that instead of positing the predominance of a global Hobbesian anarchy Putin clearly accepts the existence of an international society able to moderate anarchy's effects. Indeed, Putin has explicitly sought to position Russia as an upholder and defender of this international society. In this respect, Putin's Russia is not a 'revisionist power' or 'balancing', as classical realists might argue. The question is rather what form of international society Putin's Russia has sought to defend and promote and whether this corresponds with Western visions of international society.

In the English School international society is divided into pluralist and solidarist variants.<sup>20</sup> At root in English School debates are competing claims about the 'thickness' of international society's normative content. Solidarists argue this content is relatively thick, meaning the level of solidarity existing between states is well developed. For example, solidarists support a strong distinction between just and unjust wars and contend that individual human beings are members of international society and subjects of international law in their own right. Pluralists, in contrast, are more sceptical about the thickness (the amount of solidarity regarding international norms) of international society and not least reject the solidarists' focus on individuals. Instead pluralists argue states are only able to agree on minimal norms for

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<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the English School and the debate between pluralists and solidarists see, Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami (2006) *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.59-74.

specific purposes whilst they are adamant that it is states, not individuals, that are at the heart of international society and that have moral priority.<sup>21</sup>

Within the West attempts to push international society in a solidarist direction are clear and are evident in the arguments in favour of humanitarian intervention and the international community's 'responsibility to protect' in the case of gross violations of human rights. According to this view, protecting human rights trumps states' rights to sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> The recent creation of the International Criminal Court to bring to justice perpetrators of human rights violations in instances when a citizen's state refuses to act against them is another example of a thickening solidarist web of norms in international society. Put briefly, as champions of 'universal values' of human rights, democracy and liberal economics Western states have increasingly promoted a solidarist agenda.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, Russia is typically understood as favouring and defending a pluralist model of international society premised on a Westphalian model of sovereign equality.<sup>24</sup> This is evident in Russia's preoccupation with preserving norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, territoriality, the maintenance of boundaries, its focus on international law and emphasis on the UN as the fundamental institution of international society.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, Putin's criticisms in his 2007 Munich speech concerning the West's apparent "disdain for the basic principles of international law"

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp.64-65; Andrew Linklater (2005) 'The English School', in Scott Burchill et al. *Theories of International Relations* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan) p.93.

<sup>22</sup> For an English School analysis along these lines see N. J. Wheeler (2000) *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>23</sup> Obviously this is not without tensions, as demonstrated by America's opposition to the creation of the ICC.

<sup>24</sup> S. Neil Macfarlane (2006) 'The 'R' in BRIC: Is Russia an Emerging Power?' *International Affairs* 82(1), p.56.

<sup>25</sup> Pami Aalto (2007) 'Russia's Quest for International Society and the Prospects for Regional-Level International Societies', *International Relations* 21(4), pp.462-63.

when it does not support Western preferences; or concerning the EU's and NATO's growing propensity to proclaim themselves equal with the UN in their ability to legitimate the use of force; or his veiled criticism that Western governments are using the OSCE to impose a normative agenda on other countries and are therefore undermining further principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, are all indicative of such a pluralist agenda.<sup>26</sup>

The focus on the UN is important in that as a result of its seat on the Security Council and its emphasis on great power management of international society it reinforces Russia's claims to great power status. As several authors in this volume argue, it has therefore become common to argue that Putin's project indicates a preference for seeing international society evolve in a fashion similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Concert of Europe. This implies a framework built around several privileged great powers charged with providing for international order. This explains Putin's preference for multilateral forums like the G8, the Middle East Quartet, or the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India, China). As Averre notes in this volume, the emphasis is not on a classical balance of power vision of multipolarity, but one of great power stewardship premised on shared interests where Russia retains a privileged position. This outlook has also been central to what Secrieru calls Russia's multivector approach to foreign policy. The focus on asserting great powerness and interests, rather than say prioritising shared identities, has led Russia to reject too close relations with individual groups of states. The emphasis is on cooperating with everyone, whilst everyone also needs to be kept at a distance. This, he argues, captures Putin's attempt to circumvent the dilemma between integration and isolation, where integration is

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<sup>26</sup> Putin, Speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy.

seen as undermining the sovereignty and freedom of manoeuvre perceived essential for preserving a great power status. This also enabled Putin to avoid taking a stance on whether Russia is a Western or Orientally-directed country, since the whole point is to avoid stating whether Russia has a Western or Eastern preference or priority.<sup>27</sup> Another implication of this approach, of course, is that ultimately Putin's version of international society is one of a society of the great powers where Russia is treated equally with the rest of the Concert. It is not a society where small states are also presumed to have an equal voice. Indeed, as Hast notes, entailed within this view is a conflation of sovereignty with freedom of action in world politics – something small states are presumed to have relatively little of.<sup>28</sup>

Pami Aalto, however, argues this tendency to locate Russia in the English School's pluralist camp misses key elements of Putin's project and tensions embedded within it between pluralist and solidarist dimensions. It is in this context that a more nuanced understanding of Russia can provide avenues for building more positive relations. On the one hand, and before exploring Aalto's argument, it is important to note that in Secieru's view Putin's multivector foreign policy (of trying to balance the dilemma between integration – to claim normalcy – and isolation – to protect claims to great powerness premised on freedom of movement) has failed. Whilst Putin emphasised the need to avoid permanent alliances to retain freedom to manoeuvre between different power centres the result has been a failure to develop stable relations with any power centre.<sup>29</sup> The failure to prioritise between power centres has therefore been a sub-optimal policy actually undermining Russia's influence on the world stage.

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<sup>27</sup> Secieru, 'Russia's Quest for Strategic Identity', pp.35, 38-40.

<sup>28</sup> Hast, 'Constructing Russian "Great Powerness" and the Hierarchy of International System'.

<sup>29</sup> Secieru, 'Russia's Quest for Strategic Identity', pp.55-56.

As Aalto notes, though, Russia is making choices that of themselves create tensions in the multivector pluralist driven approach to foreign policy. In particular, Putin's embracing of the global market and his emphasis on economic stability and performance as the basis of Russian claims to power has created solidarist contradictions with the pluralist emphasis. As Aalto points out, "the market challenges many core pluralist values, most distinctively sovereignty, territoriality and the balance of power. At the same time the global market and the resultant regulation pose the classical solidarist test of enforcement of rules in Russia".<sup>30</sup> In other words, owing to its growing economic links with the global economy Russia is being drawn into more solidarist dimensions of international society.

Aalto, however, makes a further claim. Despite the emphasis on interests and pragmatism over identity and ideology in Putin's foreign policy, issues of mutual identification do influence in which regions pluralist links may be more likely to develop along solidarist lines. Thus, he notes that the limited sense of common identity in the Asian direction (and Russo-Chinese relations more specifically) has also limited the level of cooperation that can be developed. The result is that Russia's relations with Asia fail to satisfy "Russia's quest for international society".<sup>31</sup> The point is that if shared identifications are understood as central to any form of international society, then the stronger those identifications are the greater the possibility for developing a thicker set of solidarist norms.

In contrast, Russia's European leanings and traditions are strong. In consequence, far-reaching proposals are underway to integrate Russia into the broader EU international

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<sup>30</sup> Aalto, 'Russia's Quest for International Society and the Prospects for Regional-Level International Societies', pp.463-64.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.465.

society through the project to build four ‘common spaces’ in the realms of economics, internal security, external security and education and culture. Although full membership is not envisaged integration in many parts of the EU *acquis* is. Such ‘selective adoption’, Aalto argues, “represents a much thicker application of the institution of the market than has been seen to date among the CIS states within wider European society”.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on a common space of internal security offering the prospect of a future EU-Russia visa free regime may ultimately soften Russia’s rather traditional view of sovereignty when dealing with its European partners.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, whilst the pluralist emphasis in Russia should not be under-emphasised prospects for developing more solidarist elements of international society between Russia and the West (and particularly between Russia and the EU) are there. As such the traditional frame of depicting Russia as either a revisionist or status quo power is limiting and arguably impedes envisaging the development of deeper relations with Russia. What the English School can highlight instead, is how tensions in West-Russia relations may be better conceptualised in terms of different preferences for international society. Meanwhile a more dynamic reading of the relationship between pluralist and solidarist international society highlights the possibilities for movement between them. Clearly, there will always be tensions between the solidarist and pluralist positions, and in Russia’s case this is amplified by tensions between identity narratives depicting Russia as both European and a great power and where emphasising too close relations with Europe is perceived as potentially undermining its ability to be a great power. What Aalto’s argument highlights, however, is that

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp.469-470.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.470.

despite these tensions Russia is being drawn into European society. This, however, leads into the following section and a further exploration of West-Russia relations.

### **Putin's Project and Western Universalism**

The article's second argument concerns how Putin's Russia has challenged Western identity, particularly ideas of Western identity premised on claims to universal knowledge about what constitutes good governance. This challenge not only concerns differences between pluralist and solidarist visions of international society, but also who gets to set the normative agenda in the first place. As noted in the introduction Western claims to pre-eminence in this context have a long history, but in the post-Cold War period have been notable in the triumphalist universalism of Fukuyama's notion that Western neoliberal capitalism marks the End of History and the only viable road to development and modernity,<sup>34</sup> and in crusading claims about democratic peace theory that has supported drawing distinctions between the 'civilised' democratic world and the rest (and where 'civilised' is often a euphemism for 'the West'). Putin's political project challenges such triumphalist universalism in Western identity narratives in intriguing ways, with potential global implications.

To understand why requires returning to Russian discourse concerning the West since the end of the Cold War. As is well documented, during the 1990s Russia was gripped by a renewal of nineteenth century debates between Westernisers, calling for Russia's full integration in Western society and civilisation, and Slavophiles, arguing a

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<sup>34</sup> Francis Fukuyama (1989) 'The End of History?' *The National Interest* 16, pp.3-18.

Western orientation be rejected on the basis that Russia is culturally and civilisationally distinct from the West. In the early 1990s the Westernisers briefly gained the upper hand, seeing Russia's future as dependent upon its full integration into the Western community (including EU and NATO membership) and its absorption of what were perceived as distinctly Western values.<sup>35</sup>

Today, however, things are different. Indeed, much of Putin's political legitimacy is driven by a strong critique of 1990s Westernising policies, which are now characterised as a period of chaos and destruction.<sup>36</sup> However, this does not mean Putin has given up on the West. As Hopf notes, the idea of Europe remains central to Russian identity. Indeed, Putin has argued Russia has a 'European calling', though notably, whilst he speaks of Russian relations with Europe in terms of a shared identity, culture and spiritual legacy, when drawing links with the United States Putin's rhetoric extends only to shared interests.<sup>37</sup> However, Putin's vision of Europe has actually proved somewhat troubling to his other European partners. Whereas elsewhere in Europe values of democracy and freedom have been tied to the process

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<sup>35</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev (2007) 'Russia: European But Not Western?' *Orbis* 51(1), p.138.

<sup>36</sup> Viatcheslav Morozov (2008) 'Sovereignty and Democracy in Contemporary Russia: A Modern Subject Faces the Post-Modern World', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11(2), p.156.

<sup>37</sup> Ted Hopf (2007) 'Russia's Identity Relations with Europe, the EU and the United States: 1991-2007', presented at the NORFACE Conference, *The Transatlantic Relationship and the Struggle for Europe*, University College, Dublin, Ireland, 30-31 August 2007. Arguably this represents a deeper issue in Russian identity debates concerning the relationship between the concepts of Russia, Europe and the West. According to GoGwilt and Heller, the concept of the West as a politically loaded civilisational marker actually originated in Russian debates between Slavophiles and Westernisers in the early nineteenth century. The invention of the West in these debates provided a way to distinguish Russia from Europe, without giving up its Europeanness, which it is argued is fundamental to any understanding of Russian identity. In turn, this may explain Hopf's observation that Putin is more prone to focus on a shared cultural, identity and spiritual legacy when talking about Europe, but speaks about America (the quintessential West) mainly through emphasising shared interests. Chris GoGwilt (1995) 'True West: The Changing Idea of the West from the 1880s to the 1920s', in Silvia Federici (ed.) *Enduring Western Civilization: The Construction of the Concept of Western Civilization and Its 'Others'* (Westport CT: Praeger) pp.37-61; Kathleen M. Heller (2006) *The Dawning of the West: On the Genesis of a Concept* (PhD Dissertation, University of Kings College, Halifax, Canada, November 2006).

of European integration, the downplaying of borders and the dispersal of sovereignty, for Putin enhancing Russian sovereignty has been a core value and goal. Putin's argument is that the failures of the 1990s resulted from the disintegration of the state and its appropriation by oligarchs, which undermined the state's capacity for autonomous action. As such, Putin argues enhancing sovereignty and reclaiming modernist state power is central to enhancing democracy in Russia.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, Morozov argues Putin (and Russia) challenge the West in a particular way. Invoking Derrida, Morozov argues Russia functions as an 'irreducible signifier', meaning that as a country proclaiming its Europeaness and asserting the importance of values of democracy, Russia has developed an identity which cannot be described by the West as an enemy and driven into outright otherness. Instead, Russia exists in the margins, in-between, "neither a member nor a complete alien in the family of liberal democracies". This "produces dislocation in the structure of meaning which underlies the entire (neo)liberal world order" and causes considerable irritation to Western leaders because "it hampers liberal universalist efforts to construct a world neatly divided into the 'well-ordered peoples' and the 'outlaw states'".<sup>39</sup>

Put more succinctly, whilst Putin claims a European identity for Russia he also claims Russia's emphasis on sovereignty represents the 'True Europe' in contrast to the 'False Europe' of the postmodernising, debordering EU. Similarly, whilst Putin readily proclaims the value of democracy he refuses to let the West assert ownership over the concept and establish itself as the guardians of civilisation. As such, Putin does not follow the Slavophile/Eurasianist (or Huntingtonian) tradition of arguing for

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<sup>38</sup> Morozov, 'Sovereignty and Democracy in Contemporary Russia', p.162.

<sup>39</sup> Viatcheslav Morozov (2007) 'Russia and the West: Dividing Europe, Constructing Each Other', presented at the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual ISA Convention, Chicago, 28 February – 3 March 2007.

the existence of multiple competing civilisations. Instead, Putin views civilisation in the singular but sees the issue in terms of contending visions of how best to get there. To quote Morozov, for Putin and his team democracy is a universal term and “exists above all as an abstract principle...and this principle can be put into political practice in many different ways”.<sup>40</sup>

Putin’s objection, therefore, is not the West’s emphasis on values like democracy, but its presumption that these are uniquely ‘Western’ values and that the West is therefore justified in pronouncing on others’ democratic development. This was the tenor behind Putin’s controversial speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007 in which he criticised the ‘unipolar world’ promoted by the West as a world of “one master, one sovereign”, where the legal system of one state, “first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way” and is imposing its economic, political, cultural and educational policies on other nations.<sup>41</sup> Putin’s point is that whilst democracy is not perfect in Russia, but is a work in progress, so is it in the West. The problem with the West is its habit of lecturing to others without listening to their criticisms in turn, a habit which smacks of arrogance.<sup>42</sup> As Putin expressed it in Portugal in May 2007: “let’s not see the situation as one side being white, clean, and pure, while the other side is some kind of ‘monster’ that has only just crawled out of the forest, with hoofs and horns instead of a normal human appearance”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Morozov, ‘Sovereignty and Democracy in Contemporary Russia’, p.172. As President Elect Dmitry Medvedev made the same point. *Financial Times*, ‘Interview Transcript: Dmitry Medvedev’, 24 March 2008. <http://www.ft.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Putin, Speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy; Morozov, ‘Global Democracy, Western Hegemony and the Russian Challenge’.

<sup>42</sup> For example, following the 2005 riots in France Russian political and intellectual leaders argued the West could learn from how Russia has tried “to develop a workable synthesis between European and non-European cultures” as a model of ‘inter-civilisational’ tolerance. Gvosdev, ‘Russia’, p.135.

<sup>43</sup> Putin quoted in Hopf, ‘Russia’s Identity Relations with Europe, the EU and the United States’.

Thus, in so far as he proclaims values of democracy to be universal, Putin follows Western leaders in rejecting the clash of civilisations in favour of viewing civilisation in the singular. However, when the West uncritically presents its narrow version of (neo)liberal democracy as the fulfilment of a utopian vision (*a la* Fukuyama's end of history), this is problematic in that it is blind to its own narrowness, its own shortcomings, demonstrates significant arrogance in claiming 'Western' ownership over universal values, and fails to recognise the unique situations confronting other societies and which may mean that the Western path to civilisation may not be appropriate elsewhere (the lesson of 1990s neo-liberalism in Russia).<sup>44</sup>

Putin's challenge to the West here is twofold. First, by insisting values like democracy need to be seen as idealised abstracts Putin has sought to deprive the West of its claim to ownership over them and has re-asserted the need for thinking about their attainment in a diverse range of ways. As such, Putin has problematised the West's boundaries by resisting Western leaders' attempts to draw clear borders of inside/outside around concepts like democracy and civilisation.

Second, whereas Western leaders have used the concept of civilisation to avoid tying the promotion of democracy and the market economy around the world to a neo-imperialist Western project, Putin's rhetoric recasts this attempt precisely as 'Western' for the global audience. Put slightly differently, by tying democracy closely to enhancing sovereignty and state power Putin reintroduces politics into the debate about what in the West is often presented as the purely technical details concerning

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<sup>44</sup> Gvosdev, 'Russia', p.134; Also see *Financial Times*, 'Interview Transcript: Dmitry Medvedev', 24 March 2008. <http://www.ft.com>.

promoting ‘good governance’. Whilst the West presents a particular vision of ‘good governance’ as universally valid and uses this to justify intervening in the management of other societies, with the claim to universality seen as putting such interventions beyond politics and as simply a matter of management (of good governance), Putin’s discourse on democracy unsettles such claims.<sup>45</sup> In this respect, Putin’s challenge also resonates with Western concerns that the rise of China with its state-led autocratic approach to development may undermine the Washington consensus of economic liberalism and democracy, particularly if states like China and Russia are able to invest in states reluctant to sign up to the conditionality mechanisms of the IMF and World Bank.<sup>46</sup>

This raises the question whether reconciliation between Western universalism and Putin’s more pluralist approach to democracy and development is possible, or are West-Russia relations doomed to be characterised by constant sniping and disagreement. Put otherwise, to what extent does Putin’s challenge to Western universalism undermine the prospects of enhancing the state of international society between the West and Russia? In this context a brief analysis of the development of the EU’s new European Neighbourhood Policy as it relates to Russia is instructive in two respects. First, it highlights Russia’s continued ability to have a constitutive impact on the West; second, it also supports Aalto’s contention about the possible development of more solidarist notions of international society based around ideas of selective adoption.

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<sup>45</sup> Pertti Joenniemi (2008) ‘Russia’s Narrative Resources’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11(2), pp.125-6.

<sup>46</sup> *The Economist*, ‘A Ravenous Dragon: A Special Report on China’s Quest for Resources’, March 15 2008, p.4.

Haukkala's article in this volume provides a developed analysis of EU-Russian relations through the ENP. Here, therefore, it is enough to note just the broad contours of this relationship. As Haukkala notes the ENP draws on a post-Cold War heritage in which the EU has sought to act as a regional normative hegemon, utilising various regional cooperation projects (Northern Dimension initiative, Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Balkans Stability Pact, etc.) to try and impose its norms and values on its neighbours. It has done this through the conditionality mechanism, whereby states reforming in line with EU norms and values are rewarded with a closer EU relationship (sometimes even membership). The underlying dynamic therefore is one of the EU as teaching the good life to those in need of salvation.<sup>47</sup> In this respect the ENP is simply an updated version designed to consolidate the other regional projects within one homogeneous policy. Again, in return for aligning national legislation with aspects of the *acquis* the EU will open itself to closer economic integration with the partners, except now membership is precluded. Although designating its ENP partners as constituting a new 'ring of friends',<sup>48</sup> the important point is that the ENP's normative agenda is set by the EU beforehand, all that is required of the neighbours is that they endorse this agenda.

Haukkala contends that by refusing to submit to such a subordinate relationship, and refusing participation in the ENP, Russia has fundamentally dented the EU's aspirations to establish itself as a regional normative hegemon. In contrast, Russia has insisted on a more equal relationship with the EU as framed through the EU-Russia strategic partnership and the project of developing the four Common Spaces. Given

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<sup>47</sup> For such an analysis of EU-Russian relations in the context of the Northern Dimension initiative see, Christopher S. Browning (2003) 'The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North', *Geopolitics* 8(1) 2003, pp.45-71.

<sup>48</sup> European Commission (2003) *Wider Europe Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and southern Neighbours*, COM (2003) 104 final, Brussels, 11.3.2003. p.4.

Russia's aspirations to be treated as a great power this is hardly surprising. In Haukkala's view Russia's assertion of its sovereignty, great power status and emphasis on equality has questioned the feasibility of Russia's normative convergence with the EU. This again raises questions about the prospects of moving towards a more solidarist international society with Russia.

There is, however, another possibility, where Russia's rejection of the ENP could be seen as marking the end of EU idealism in its relations with Russia in favour of a more pragmatic approach that in turn indicates that Russia's recalcitrance is having an important impact on the EU's own self-constitution in its relations with Russia. Put provocatively, the suggestion is that Russia has been successful in its aspiration to conduct relations with the EU in a manor similar to the Concert of Powers. Instead of Russia's convergence to EU norms being the goal, the emphasis is shifting towards convergence on the part of both the EU and Russia towards each other. The implications of such a shift are notable if a comparison is made with how the EU articulates itself in the ENP context.

In the ENP the EU presents a rather uncompromising vision of itself with EU norms, values, and practices essentially non-negotiable.<sup>49</sup> Within the ENP the difference between friendship and threat, security and insecurity is related to how willing outsiders are to become like us. Security is thus conceptualised in terms of the EU's ability to reproduce itself (its model and practices) in its neighbourhood. In the developing relationship with Russia, however, a different logic and conception of self are operative. Russia's non-compliance and rejection of the ENP (and its

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<sup>49</sup> This paragraph summarises a more developed argument made in Browning and Joenniemi, 'Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy', pp.545-46.

universalising notion of what constitutes good practice) has not resulted in its exclusion from the 'ring of friends', or its designation as a threat. Instead of the totalising liberal security view (that the outside must become like us or be considered potentially unfriendly and threatening) Russia is now being approached in a more traditional negotiated common security manner. The emphasis is therefore on generating stability and understanding, without this preconditioned on Russia's acceptance of key liberal values. Essentially, in its relations with Russia the EU is exhibiting greater willingness to compromise. Somewhat ironically given Russian criticisms of the West, the result is that in its relations with Russia the identity of the EU being constructed is much less imperialistic in tone than in the ENP where much less space is provided for dialogue and compromise with the other.

The point here is that the debate that has evolved with Russia regarding its rejection of the ENP again supports Aalto's argument about the possibilities of developing an international society with Russia based around selective adoption. Thus, Russia's rejection of comprehensive normative convergence with the EU through the ENP need not be read as a complete rejection of solidarist international society in favour of pluralist international society. Instead, it represents a demand that Russia too gets a constitutive voice in what a more solidarist international society might look like rather than the West dictating the terms from the beginning. That the EU has responded is, in turn, indicative of the constitutive power Russia still possesses over the West.

## **Conclusion**

This article has tried to show how Putin's project has had important implications for the West in terms of policy formulation and the construction of identity. In conclusion I would suggest these impacts are likely to be enduring. To summarise, whilst in the West there has been a tendency to try and ignore Russia as a result of its perceived declining power, ultimately this has not been possible. While Russia is obviously not as powerful as the Soviet predecessor it still has enough resources (symbolic, political, economic) to unsettle Western policies and ambitions. Putin's articulation of a great power project for Russia premised on emphasising its independence and links in all directions, rather than opting submissively for a Western orientation, has simply illuminated this fact.

Ultimately, fundamental to Russia's ability to impact on the West, and the aspect of Putin's project likely to have the most enduring impact, has been his understanding that Western claims to normative power rely on the West being accorded recognition regarding their claims about the nature of good governance and international norms from the global audience. Russia's power therefore resides in its ability to either grant or withhold this recognition. At times Putin has opted for both strategies, granting recognition over things like aspects of the War on Terror, and withholding it when it comes to issues of the nature of democracy and rights of humanitarian intervention *versus* sovereignty and non-intervention. Putin has therefore avoided any simple casting of Russia as a revisionist or recalcitrant state which can be ignored, and has instead emphasised the politics underlying various Western claims about the nature of international society.

At the same time, and as the English School reading of the nature of West-Russia relations developed above illustrates, this also means that while possibilities for developing a more solidarist relationship with Russia are possible, the nature of international society between the West and Russia is likely to be characterised by a mix of pluralist and solidarist elements. Arguably, however, what stands for the West's relationship with Russia is also likely to have a broader impact on how the West approaches global politics in general and how others in turn approach the West. Putin's contribution in this sense is in exposing the limits of the West's claims to normative power and in this sense highlighting that history is far from over.