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## Russia's Europe, 1991-2016: inferiority to superiority

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Neumann, Iver B. (2016) *Russia's Europe, 1991-2016: inferiority to superiority*. [International Affairs](#), 92 (6). pp. 1381-1399. ISSN 0020-5850

DOI: [10.1111/1468-2346.12752](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12752)

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Available in LSE Research Online: December 2016

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*Russia's Europe, 1991-2016: Inferiority to Superiority*

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*Bio note*

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*Abstract*

Russia defines itself as a great power in relation to Europe and the West. The first part of the article traces how, since 1991, a story about greatness centred on being part of contemporary European civilization has given way to a story of how Russia is great by being superior to a Europe that is now seen as rotten and decadent. The former story spelled cooperation with Europe and the West, where the latter spells confrontation. The second part argues that Russia's superiority complex is unsustainable. It is hard to see how, in the face of the formative structural pressure of the state system, Russia will be able to sustain its superiority complex. A state that does not order itself in such a way that it may either gain recognition as a great power by forcing its way and/or by being emulated by others, is unlikely to maintain that status. The costs of maintaining great-power status without radical political and economic change seem to be increasing rapidly. If Russia wants to maintain its status, an about-turn is needed. Such a turn may in itself be no solution, though, for if Russia does not do anything about the root causes of its perceived inferiority to Europe, then the Russian cyclical shifting from a Westernizing to a xenophobic stance will not be broken.



*Russia's Europe, 1991-2016: Inferiority to Superiority*<sup>1</sup>

As the Soviet Union fell apart, Russia opted for a foreign policy of cooperation with the Europe and the West. In 2014, having occupied the Crimean Peninsula, it aided and abetted an insurgency against the central authorities in neighbouring Ukraine. In 2015, it left the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe and began a military build-up along its entire Western border. In 2016, it came to the aid of its ally Syria in a way that brought it directly into conflict with Western powers. The last 25 years has seen an about-turn from cooperation to conflict.

There are a number of ways of accounting for such sea changes in foreign policy. Some studies set out to explain Russia's foreign policy by analyzing Russia's place in the international system, most often geopolitical in nature.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, one reason for Russia's about-turn is the state's difficulty in dealing with the downsizing in territory and resources that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the more marginalized place within the states system in which that put Russia. Other studies aim to demonstrate how Russian foreign policy is determined by structural domestic changes such as bureaucratic infighting, the

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Amanda Cellini, Minda Holm and Sophie Meislin for assistance and my reviewers for comments. Part of the funding for this article was provided by the Norwegian Research Council under the project 'Undermining Hegemony', project no. 240647.

<sup>2</sup> A typical example would be John J. Mearsheimer 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin' *Foreign Affairs*: September/October 2014, which reaches this conclusion by deducing from the premises set out in his *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2002) with admirable logic and clarity. See also Michael Wigell and Antto Vihma

'Geopolitics versus geoeconomics: the case of Russia's geostrategy and its effects on the EU', *International Affairs* 92: 3 (2016); Sten Rynning 'The false premise of continental concert: Russia, the West and the necessary balance of power', *International Affairs* 91: 3, 2015.

motives of political leaders and so on.<sup>3</sup> Once again, such factors are always important in order to understand how specific foreign policy decisions come about. A third literature traces the influence of ideas.<sup>4</sup> Given that actions depend on how people think about the world, such studies also help our understanding of radical change. Ideas were important to the rise of the Soviet Union, they were important to its downfall, and they remain important. And yet, the approach to the problem of Russia's changing European policy taken here is different. I start from the presupposition that societies and their states seek recognition in the world, and that states somehow have to relate to society's views of the grounds on which a country should seek recognition.<sup>5</sup> These grounds will be contested, and my first concern in this article is to map this contestation as it has unfolded over the last quarter century.

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<sup>3</sup> Readers of *International Affairs* have been excellently suited in this regard; for recent examples, see Roy Allison, 'Russian "deniable intervention" in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules' 90: 6 (2014); David Wedgewood Benn, 'On re-examining western attitudes to Russia' 90: 6, 2014; Andrew Monaghan, 'Putin's Russia: shaping a grand strategy?', 89: 5 (2013); Arkady Moishes, 'Russia's European policy under Medvedev: how sustainable is a new compromise?' 88: 1, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics' *International Organization*, 46: 2, 1992; Stefan Auer 'Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin: the Ukraine crisis and the return of geopolitics', *International Affairs* 91: 5, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> There are a number of approaches that pursued this broad programme, and they may all be traced back to Hegel. For an overview, see Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); also Sergei Prozorov 'In and Out of Europe: Identity Politics in Russian-European Relations' in Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin (eds) *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009): 133-159; Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelili 'The External Constitution of European Identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-Makers' *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, 1 (2012): 28-48.. One strand that is particularly productive regarding Russian studies is Social Identification Theory, which postulates that when an agent cannot find recognition on a certain set of grounds, it will simply shift the ground for comparison. For an excellent example of this approach, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy', *International Organization* 57: 1, 2003.

Where Russia is concerned, it has from its very emergence sought not only to be recognized, but to be recognized as a great power.<sup>6</sup> I have followed the Russian debate about Europe since Soviet times, and I have yet to come across a participant that has argued in favour of a policy that would give up on this foreign policy goal. It is a given in the debate that Russia should be great. This observation underlies the entire argument to be developed in the article.

The argument turns on what it means for Russians that their country should be ‘great’. I trace how, following Michael Gorbachev’s easing of censorship as part of his perestroika politics of the late 1980s, two ways of thinking about Russian greatness have clashed. 1991 was the heyday of Russia’s turn to Europe. The state, and also a whole string of public voices, wanted Russia to be ‘a normal nation state’, by which was meant a standard liberal democratic and capitalist European country. Against this westernizing or liberal representation of Europe stood what was at first a makeshift group of old communists and right-wing nationalists, who put forward an alternative representation which began to form around the idea that the quintessential Russian trait was to have a strong state. The article traces how this latter position consolidated into a fully-fledged xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe. I use the term xenophobic to stress how this strand of nationalism goes beyond a spiritual or patriotic celebration of Self by explicitly adding hostile tropes when discussing all or select

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<sup>6</sup> Anatoliy Reshetnikov, *Russia as a great power*, Ph.D thesis (Central European University, forthcoming); Iver B. Neumann, ‘Russia’s standing as a great power, 1492-1815’ in Ted Hopf, ed., *Russia’s European Choices* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 11-34; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Russia as a great power, 1815-2007’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11: 2, 2008, pp. 128-151; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian foreign policy: the return of great power politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 153.

minorities and outside polities.<sup>7</sup> During the Putin years, this xenophobic nationalist position steadfastly gained ground by largely incorporating another version of nationalism of long standing in Russia, namely spiritual nationalism. In response to the shift in societal debate traced here, but also to factors such as developments in Ukraine and rumblings of discontent amongst liberals in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the Russian state went on to adopt a xenophobic nationalist position from 2013 onwards. The official Russian stance is now that Russia itself is True Europe, a conservative great power that guards Europe's true Christian heritage against the False Europe of decadence and depravity to its West. If Russia had an inferiority complex towards Europe in 1991, a quarter century down the road, that complex has been inverted into a superiority complex.

The stories that a country tells about itself and others do not determine foreign policy directly. Any foreign policy action springs from a number of sources. And yet, it seems clear that the repertoire of actions that lie close to hand regarding a partner in cooperation differs from those regarding an outright adversary. It is, as a Russian would say, no coincidence that, in the 1990s, dominant social stories of Europe as an ideal that Russia would increase its greatness by following went hand in hand with a foreign policy of cooperation. By the same token, it is hardly surprising that today's dominant stories of how Russia is superior to Europe coincided with a policy of confrontation.

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<sup>7</sup> Other terms, like fundamentalist nationalists, have also been used about this group, see Margot Light (2003) 'In search of an identity: Russian foreign policy and the end of ideology', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19:3, 2003.

The about-turn in Russia's approach to Europe over the last 25 years has precedents. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, stories of how Russia was superior to liberal Europe crowded out stories of how Russia should aim to emulate Europe. After Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, it happened again, and then yet again at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stalin's turn away from European Marxism in favour of building socialism in one country presents itself as a new variant of the same basic theme. If my first concern in this article is to trace the about-face, my second concern is to argue that this about-turn fits a cyclical pattern in Russian history, where periods when Russian stories about Europe as something to emulate give way to periods where stories about European decadence and rottenness take over. This cycle seems to be driven by Russia's continuing backwardness relative to Europe in producing economic and political orders. If Russia had existed in splendid isolation, this would not have mattered. However, the states system is a self-help system where powers that do not produce enough to keep up with the leading powers are invariably marginalized. It follows that any power which wants to be recognised as great has to have an economic and political base that can sustain that claim. Two conclusions may be drawn. First, Russia's present superiority complex will yet again change into an inferiority complex further on down the line. Secondly, as long as the country does not succeed in either emulating Europe and the West or in coming up with an equally effective and so competitive social order, Russia's backwardness-driven cycle of telling stories about Europe is bound to continue.

### *The 1990s*

Gorbachev's Perestroika rekindled old Russian debates about Europe. The old Communist story



of how Europe represented a past that the Soviet Union had left behind, was no longer sustainable. In its place came a dominating state narrative about how Russia had to 'rejoin civilisation' in order to sustain its greatness, but also a very different story about how Russia should sustain its greatness by being true to one of the ideals shared by the tsarist and Soviet regimes both, namely that Russian greatness lay in rallying a state that could act swiftly, ruthlessly and decisively. In August 1991, the coup against Gorbachev was propelled by this story, and it was among other things this story that President Yeltsin attacked when he stormed the Congress of People's Deputies in October 1993. After Yeltsin used armed force against his own Parliament, the debate slowed down and became more of a war of position between liberals on the one hand and spiritual romantic nationalists on the other, with a xenophobic nationalist position building up in the wings.

The declaration of the August 1991 coup leaders is, therefore, a good place to start the analysis. It drew significantly on a xenophobic romantic nationalist text published a month earlier under the heading 'A word to the people':<sup>8</sup>

A great, unheard of disaster is happening. Our MOTHERLAND, our soil, the great state that history, nature and our renowned forefathers have trusted us with, is going under, is being destroyed, is descending into darkness and nothingness [...Shall we let the

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<sup>8</sup> 'A word to the people', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 23 July 1991. The article was signed by Yuriy Bondarev and, in Cyrillic alphabetical order, Yuriy Blokhin, Valentin Varennikov, Eduard Volodin, Boris Gromov, Gennadiy Zyuganov, Lyudmila Zykina, Vyacheslav Klykov, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Valentin Rasputin, Vassiliy Starodubtsev and Aleksandr Tisyakov. On the basis of textual analysis, Bondarev, Prokhanov and Rasputin have been mentioned as authors; however, Prokhanov has suggested that he himself penned most of it. See Magnus Ljunggren, 'Rysslands rödbruna författare', *Internationelle Studier* 2, 1992, pp. 15-23, especially at p. 17.

betrayers and criminals] take away our past, cut us off from the future and leave us pitifully to vegetate in the slavery and downtroddenness of our almighty neighbors?

Addressing the army and sundry other institutions and groups, they asked how it was that 'those who do not love their country, those who lovingly serve their foreign masters' were allowed to go on ruining and breaking up the country, leading it into a second civil war. The document, the main author of which was Aleksandr Prokhanov, since December 1990 the founder editor of the National Bolshevik newspaper *Den*', was signed not only by xenophobic nationalists, but also by key former communists and spiritual romantic nationalists. A united nationalist story was forming around a key common element: that the Russian state had to be strong -- not only in the sense that it would command and be obeyed, but also in the sense that it should be the only real power in Russia, and a great power in the world. For good reasons, this position was, and still is, often referred to as a statist one. Statists may be found either towards the right or the left – that is simply a tactical question of which political and economic models that are preferred in order to reach the strategic goal of a strong state. Since what is meant is a centralized apparatus (*vertikal*) that is keenly surveilling and directly disciplining the subjects, statists differ as to how strong is strong enough.

From the very start, the statist story about Europe stressed Russia's superiority. As Prokhanov, a self-declared 'traditional imperialist and statist' put it, Europe 'is a fake machine, a stupid one, created by great Germany, with its motivation embedded in history'.<sup>9</sup> Prokhanov's solution for Russia was to impose 'authoritarianism, which will make it possible to begin to stabilize chaos,

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<sup>9</sup> *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 2 September 1992.

blood and insanity, and then, through strong authoritarian power, the cultivation of democracy will slowly begin, not through the creation of insane parliaments, but corporative democratism.' When his interlocutor protested that this was the program of Mussolini, Prokhanov shot back that it certainly was the program of Mussolini and also of Pinochet, but that 'Mussolini did not have the possibility of reaching democracy because it all ended too quickly'. The statist position's affinity with inter-war Fascism was made explicit from the very start.

In 1991-1992, the statist story was just one of a number of nationalist stories that challenged the liberal one. Before long, however, the statist story was to incorporate other nationalist stories and consolidate into a fully-fledged story not only of Russia's spiritual greatness, but also of Europe's spiritual weakness. Eventually, this story would crowd out the liberal story how Russia's greatness lay in cooperation with an economically more advanced Europe.

The direct target of the statist story was the liberal story that emanated from the state itself. The Russian state that succeeded the Soviet Union adopted a liberal position, stressing individual rights and state predictability, as its own.<sup>10</sup> Already in his previous incarnation as the Foreign Minister of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, Andrey Kozyrev had pushed the line that Russia should join the community of civilized countries and learn from the great powers of Europe. This story was a story of Russian inferiority, for the learner is by definition inferior to

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<sup>10</sup> Liberals tend to think of state strength in terms of the ability to get a maximum of things done with a minimum of force, which is a very different way of thinking about state strength. Since this tradition is strong in Europe, and since it is at the heart of what it means for a state or power to be great, the question of what makes a state strong is at the heart of Russian-European relations; see Iver B. Neumann, 'Status is Cultural: Durkheimian Poles and Weberian Russians Seek Great-Power Status', in T.V. Paul, Deborah Larson & William Wohlforth (eds.) *Status and World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014) pp. 85-114 Press.

teacher in the areas where they interact in those capacities. The liberal story of how Russia had to rejoin a civilization it had presumably left was therefore directly incompatible with the basic premise of that Russia should be a great power. Consequently, the idea of a Russian 'return to civilization' quickly lost the tug-of-war over the state's position on its relationship with Europe. This became evident already in January 1993, when Yeltsin remarked that 'Russia's independent foreign policy started with the West' but that it was now time to 'build relations with any country, be it from the West or East, Europe, or Asia'.<sup>11</sup> Given this new state of play, Kozyrev turned to face liberalism's much more fundamental opponents, namely nationalists. He found that, with no convincing story of Russian greatness to tell, nationalists forced the government to shift its position away from the liberal and further towards the nationalist. 1993 saw nothing less than an armed confrontation over the issue. Communists and nationalists had joined hands in a National Salvation Front, often referred to as the red-browns, and ensconced themselves in the Congress of People's Deputies, first politically, then physically. Yeltsin took it upon himself to clear out parliament by armed force in October 1993. Once again, the state resorted to violence in order to redefine public political space, shooting dead a number of parliamentarians in their offices and meeting rooms, banning newspapers and censoring others. 'There will be no more leniency to communist-fascism in Russia', Yeltsin concluded in his TV speech to the nation on 6 October. And if the clash itself was part and parcel of the Russian debate about Europe, so were the reasons the state gave for the crackdown. After the October events, Yeltsin's press spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov referred to European ideals in order to justify the state's actions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Suzanne Crow, *The making of foreign policy in Russia under Yeltsin* (Munich: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> *Rossiyskie vesti*, 19 October 1993. Note the key slide away from an understanding of a strong state as one that gets things done with a minimum show of force to one that acts forcefully and directly here.

This setback notwithstanding, helped by the results of the parliamentary election in December 1993, where statist candidates took almost half the votes cast for candidates to the Duma or lower house, nationalism came bouncing back much as it had after the attempted coup two years before. The state in Russia under Yeltsin simply was not effective enough in bringing about the needed stable configuration of political space. The enthusiasm about Europe as a model which characterized the state's position upon Yeltsin's coming to power, had clearly dissipated at the end of 1993, leaving an insistence on partnership on equal terms.<sup>13</sup> The struggle between liberal and statist positions continued unabated. Statists and nationalists of all stripes were on the offensive, and the state adjusted its position accordingly. From the mid-1990s onwards, top state officials increasingly stressed Russia's Eurasian character. When Evgeny Primakov became Foreign Minister (1996-1998), he made it his main task to do away with a Western-oriented policy in favor of a multipolar orientation.<sup>14</sup> 'Europe' was backgrounded in favour of 'Eurasia'. Not only was Europe's superiority gone, so was its privileged partner status.

In the second half of the 1990s, various statist and nationalist stories about Russia's greatness began to come together in an overarching story. The dovetailing of stories was partially the result of collaboration between different groups of nationalists. As an example of how this process worked and still works, I turn to the well-documented case of the nationalist entrepreneur Alexander Dugin, not necessarily because he himself is particularly influential where foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Anne L. Clunan, *The social construction of Russia's resurgence: aspirations, identity, and security interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 60-72.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Thorun, *Explaining change in Russian foreign policy: the role of ideas in post-Soviet Russia's conduct towards the west* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 31-41.

policy making is concerned, but because his work in making disparate groups and ideas come together is symptomatic of the streamlining of statist and nationalist stories into the overarching xenophobic nationalist story about Russian superiority vis-à-vis Europe that went on to marginalize the liberal story.

The list of Dugin's collaborators down the years reads like a who's who of xenophobic nationalists in Russia. He joined Pamyat' as a 25-year-old in 1988. He worked with Prokhanov on the newspaper *Den'* (from 1993, *Zavtra*), the key press organ of the xenophobic nationalists to this day. He worked closely not only with Prokhanov and his friends at the High Command, but also with the leader of the revamped Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, to the point where Shenfield found that he 'probably played a significant part in formulating the nationalist communist ideology that was Zyuganov's hallmark'.<sup>15</sup> Dugin translated European fascists, re-published Russian Eurasianists from the inter-war period and, most importantly for the Russian debate about Europe, wrote a string of monographs. The basic one in order to understand his view of Europe is also his major work, *Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future*.<sup>16</sup>

Dugin's protagonists are masses, leaders, and topography. Except for leaders and the thinkers who provide them with operational schemes, or theory as Dugin calls it, individuals as such have no place in politics. The basic confrontation is between Land and Sea. Eurasia is Land; the United States and the United Kingdom are Sea. Civilizations, or super-ethnicities, are the key

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Shenfield, *Russian fascism: traditions, tendencies, movements* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki: geopoliticheskoe budushchee rossii* (Moscow: Arktogetya, [1997] 1999).

political entities. Like all ethnic groups, they mystically emerge out of the soil and, equally mystically, exude a quality that Dugin, following the Eurasianist Lev Gumilev, calls passionarity. Gumilev defined passionarity as the process whereby organisms absorb biochemical energy from nature,<sup>17</sup> but behind this mystical view, what seems to be denoted is something like realized collective will. Note the voluntarist focus here. Dugin resembles interwar geopoliticians like Rudolf Kjellén in treating polities as organic entities, but he is much more insistent than they were on the importance of will and, by the same token, on the irrelevance of material resources.

For Dugin, the Land, or Heartland, is Eurasia. It is a civilization, a super-ethnos. It follows that Land's basic enemy – it is important to have enemies -- is Sea and its ideological guise, which is Atlanticism. The Sea, that is United States and Atlanticism, conspired to execute the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> The historical task ahead of Russia at the present juncture is, consequently, to gather all of the Eurasian Heartland around the messianic Russian state and mobilize for a war on the United States and Atlanticism. This is in keeping with Russia's historical destiny, for Russia's passionarity remains high. Russia's destiny is therefore to build a giant state or empire out of Eurasia. To Dugin, such an empire will be a grander Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marlène Laruelle, 'Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian version of the European radical right?' (2008), p. 68, <http://www.4pt.su/en/content/aleksandr-dugin-russian-version-european-radical-right>, accessed 1 March 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, p. 367.

<sup>19</sup> Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, p. 251-253. One objection to calling Eurasianism xenophobic would be that they celebrate political community where ethnic nationalists condemn it. This is a weak objection, though, for Eurasianism is an imperial ideology, where other ethnic groups are only celebrated as underlings to Russian masters. In other capacities, they are viewed as hostiles. Just like French and English nationalism and racism were key to understanding the French and English empires, so Russian nationalism is key to understanding contemporary Russian imperialism. I disagree with the state-of-the-art volume on Russian nationalism when it states programmatically that nationalism was "[p]reviously dominated by 'imperial' tendencies" but is "now focusing more and more on ethnic issues" (see Pål Kolstø, 'The ethnification of Russian nationalism' in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud eds., *The New Russian nationalism: imperialism, ethnicity and authoritarianism*

As pointed out by Andrei Tsygankov, Dugin's is a 'discourse of war'.<sup>20</sup> Dugin's celebration of having enemies and of waging war on them, his celebration of the strong-man model for politics, his anti-Semitism, his religious mysticism which co-habits with his techno-optimism, his railing against American consumerism and materialism, his backing of an anti-enlightenment conservative revolution, his explicit building on European fascist thinkers such as Julius Evola (1898-1974) and Jean Thiriart (1922-1992), and also his contacts with the extreme right in France, Greece, Serbia and elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> have led many observers to classify him as a fascist.<sup>22</sup> (Umland 2008) This is warranted, and in fact Dugin himself embraces fascism. The name he chose for the party he launched in 1993 was the National Bolsheviks, a name that historically specifically denotes communist-fascist collaboration. The main point where views on Europe is concerned, however, is that Dugin stands in a solid fascist tradition that puts stock not only in fervent nationalism on behalf of one state, but also in the building of a fascist Europe. Fascist all-European movements thrived all through the inter-war period. The alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany lasted until Mussolini's fall from power. In most if not all inter-war European parties, there was a key ideological debate between those who would draw the line of the nation according to spoken language (say, High German) and those who would draw it around a wider cultural community (say, pan-Germanism or Eurasianism). The latter built a fairly strong international fascist movement.

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2000-15 [Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 1), for it is not the case historically that states and empires are discrete phenomena, and I do not think Eurasianists and other imperially oriented contemporary Russian tendencies are free of ethnic thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, 'Hard-line Eurasianists and Russia's contending geopolitical perspectives', *East European Quarterly* 32: 3 (1998), p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Laruelle, 'Aleksandr Dugan'

<sup>22</sup> Dunlop, 'Aleksandr Dugan's foundations'; Andreas Umland, *Theorizing post-Soviet Russia's extreme right: comparative political, historical and sociological approaches* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008).



Dugin and his neo-Eurasianist movement is heir to the latter tradition. The neo-Eurasianist or xenophobic nationalist position in Russian discourse, as resuscitated by Dugin and associates, also rests firmly on the Russian xenophobic nationalist position as it evolved during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. As an even more distant anchor, Dugin alludes to the state's position of official nationalism as it looked from 1833 onwards, by stressing how Russian nationalism is a question of *narodnost'* (people-mindedness) and *pravoslavie* (orthodoxy).<sup>23</sup> Recall that the third concept of the official nationalism of the Russian empire as defined 190 years ago was *samoderzhavie* – autocracy. Dugin's embrace of the strong leader in general, and, as we shall see, of Putin in particular, in effect means that today's xenophobic nationalist representation puts itself forward as an heir not only to Gumilev and older Eurasians, but also to the Pan-Slavic nationalism of the late nineteenth century and the official nationalism of the early nineteenth century.

To Western readers who are unfamiliar with European interwar fascist thinking and the Russian tradition, Dugin may sound idiosyncratic. That would be a weak reading. I suggest that we rather think of Dugin and today's xenophobic nationalist representation of the enemy as the last instalment of Russian anti-modern thinking about Europe. Europe has become a False, Americanized Europe that has to be rid of its consumerism and Atlanticism in order to re-emerge as a true Europe under Russian suzerainty.<sup>24</sup> Dugin's line, that Russia is true

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<sup>23</sup> Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, p. 255. The doctrine was hatched by then Minister of Education, Count Uvarov, in response to what was seen as the threat of home-grown liberalism; see Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Inspired by Dostoevsky, I introduced the term in *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, whence, as noted by Viacheslav Morozov, 'V poiskakh Evropy: possiyskiy politicheskiy diskurs i okruzhayushchiy mir', *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 4, 30: 1-7 (2003), it finds its way back to the Russian debate itself. See also: Dmitry Shlapentokh, 'The great friendship: geopolitical fantasies about the Russia/Europe liance in the early Putin era

Europe because it has remained true to pre-enlightenment and pre-modern values, is firmly rooted in Russian Messianic tradition. It also succeeded in telling a story of Russia and its relationship with Europe that brought seeming continuity to the three periods of tsarist, Soviet and Putin rule, under the rubric of 'strong state'. Given that history is the chronological aspect of a polity's identity, such a national narrative is potentially productive, and not only nostalgic, and so highly potent political stuff. This became increasingly clear in the 2000s, as the political debate as such became ever more stylized, even frozen, and the xenophobic nationalist position came ever more to the fore.

### *Putin's Russia*

The 2000s saw the return of a political landscape dominated by a strong leader – President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Following the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, there was an opening to the West. This was also a time when Putin's immediate entourage included staunch liberals like Andrey Illarionov. Still, the key development of the new millennium so far has been a further weakening of the westernizing representation towards an overhauled and consolidated nationalist representation, and the state's embrace of the latter position in President Putin's third election period (2012-2018).

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(2000-2008) – the case of Alexander Dugin', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 22: 1 (2014), p. 58.

In the autumn of 1999, when Putin was Prime Minister, the Russian MFA published a 'Medium-Term Strategy for the Russian Federation's Development of Relations with the European Union (2000-2010)', where the EU was named Russia's strategic partner.<sup>25</sup> The EU was not Russia's sole partner – Primakov's policy of multipolarity had done away with that – and it was no longer an entity to be emulated as a matter of course, but one of many entities with which Russia had to interact. The state took up a position between a liberal representation of Europe and a nationalist one, but closer to the former.

On the eve of the new Millennium, Putin published an article to the nation which presented a broad overview of Russia's place in the world. The distinctive ambiguity of the 1990s between seeing Europe as something else and as something to be emulated in one respect or the other, dominated the article, which is worth quoting at length:

The main thing is that Soviet power did not let the country develop a flourishing society which could be developing dynamically, with free people. First and foremost, the ideological approach to the economy made our country lag increasingly behind (*otstavanie*) the developed states. It is bitter to admit that for almost seven decades we travelled down a blind alley, which took us away from the main track of civilization [...] The experience of the 1990s vividly shows that [...] the mechanical copying of the experiences of other states will not bring progress. [...] Russia will not soon, if ever, be a replica of, say, the US or Great Britain, where liberal values have deep-seated

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<sup>25</sup> Mankoff, 'Russian foreign policy', p. 153.

traditions. For us, the state, with its institutions and structures, always played an exclusively important role in the life of the country and its people. For the Russian (*rossiyanin*), a strong state is not an anomaly, not something with which he has to struggle, but, on the contrary, a source of and a guarantee for order, as well as the initiator and main moving force of any change. Contemporary Russian society does not mistake a strong and effective state for a totalitarian one.<sup>26</sup>

This is the typical positioning of a politician: there is a nod to the liberal representation -- Europe constitutes 'the main track of civilization -- and there a nod in the xenophobic nationalist representation -- Russia must have a strong state and its own path. By the same token, throughout the 2000s, Putin took turns insisting that Russia was a European power, and also a Eurasian one.<sup>27</sup> The most striking thing about this speech, however, is that the head of state speaks about the state he rules as having a discontinuous history. A polity -- any polity -- must by definition have some we-ness that is shared, at least by its elite. We-ness must indicate that a number of relevant identities are all tied together in the concept of a we with some degree of permanence in time and space. It runs against this root metaphor of a polity's unity in time to see former instantiations of the polity as bad.<sup>28</sup> When it nonetheless happens, as it did in Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's Millennium article, it is evident that there is a problem, and that resources will be used to address that problem. In other words, we should

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<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Rossiya na Rubezhe Tysyacheletii', *Nezavisimaaia Gazeta*, 30 Dec 1999, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4\\_millennium.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html), accessed 12 Dec 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Thorun, *Explaining change*, p. 35 *et passim* argues that top state personnel emphasized Eurasia less when Putin came to power, but produces no evidence to prop up the claim. See also Dunlop, 'Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations'.

<sup>28</sup> A major exception is post-Second World War Germany; see Ole Wæver, 'European Security Identities' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 34 (1), 1996: 103-132.

expect discursive change. And indeed, change appeared fairly quickly. By 2005, at the beginning of his second Presidential period, Putin's representation of Russia's relationship to Europe had evolved and gained temporal cohesion. For example, in his recent 'Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation', he stressed how 'above all else Russia is 'a major European power' which had for three centuries, passed hand in hand with other European countries

through reforms of Enlightenment, the difficulties of emerging parliamentarianism, municipal and judiciary branches, and the establishment of similar legal systems. Step by step, we moved together towards recognizing and extending human rights, toward universal and equal suffrage, toward understanding the need to look after the weak and the impoverished, towards women's emancipation, and other social gains. I repeat we did this together, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards.<sup>29</sup>

Suddenly, Russia no longer has a discontinuous history. Its history is rather like a continuous, as opposed to a discontinuous, march, it happens 'step by step'. A key phrase where Europe is concerned is 'we moved together'; Russia and Europe emerge on parallel tracks. Note, furthermore, that where, in 1999, Putin stressed how Russia has a history of 'lagging behind' Europe, by 2005, Russia and Europe are more like two marchers taking turns in being the field's hare. In only five years, the representation of centuries Russian-European relations has been thoroughly rearranged. In his famous Munich speech, Putin ended by wryly noting how

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<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobranyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii' (2005), [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru), accessed 8 Jan 2016; Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Finding a civilizational idea: "west", "Eurasia", and "Euro-east" in Russia's foreign policy', *Geopolitics* 12: 3, 2007, p. 385.

European exhortations for Russia to active role in world affairs were hardly necessary, given that ‘Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy’.<sup>30</sup>

Russia, a cover term for a temporal and discontinuous string of different polities, has not only become an entity with unity across an entire millennium, but also one which has always had a coherent foreign policy. As one would expect from a leader that aims to incarnate the state that he leads, Putin’s speeches evolve at the same pace as the Russian debate at large. In 2003, one of the leading self-proclaimed westernizers in Russia, Anatoly Chubays, had stated that Russia’s destiny was to be an empire, but it should be a liberal empire. This was something new for the period, for the wish to see of Russia as a ‘normal country’ – read, a European-style nation state – had been a constitutive element of a westernizing representation, articulated in direct opposition to the nationalist idea that Russia had always been and should always be an exceptional and imperial great power. The westernizing representation was, in other words, eking closer to the nationalist position. This was indicative of how the bandwidth of the Russian debate about Europe shrunk. A second characteristic of the westernizing or liberal position of the period was its failure to produce any new elements that could have compensated for the moving closer to nationalism and set it firmly apart from it.

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<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 10, 2007’, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912type82914type82917type84779\\_118123.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml), accessed 26 Feb 2016.

There is, however, a crucial exception to this, and it has to do with statements and actions that demand free elections. Particularly after the 2008 Presidential elections, Moscow and St. Petersburg saw demonstrations and rallies featuring a broad range of self-proclaimed oppositional figures, but dominated by liberals. State officials repeatedly compared these activities to the run-up to the so-called color revolutions in the former Soviet Union, particularly to the ‘orange revolution’ in Ukraine in 2004, which ushered in a liberal President. On 6 May 2012, during a mass demonstration in Bolotnaya Square, Moscow, the state decided to put a stop to these activities and staged a crack-down.<sup>31</sup> Long prison sentences were doled out. Almost four years later, more than two dozen people are still in prison, waiting for their sentences. Snetkov has suggested that this movement took over from terrorists as the perceived number one threat to the regime and internal security, and that the demonstrations were crucial in pushing the state further towards a nationalist position on Europe.<sup>32</sup>

The state also took action against outspoken nationalists, though. A special operations colonel, Vladimir Kvachkov, who held that Russia was occupied by a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy, served a three-year prison sentence for an attempt at leading liberal Anatoly Chubays’s life in 2005. Furthermore, the state broke up a number of nationalist demonstrations, including so-called Russian Marches. The kind of all-round state policing of the debate on display here is not only fully in keeping with Russian traditions. It is also in

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Greene, ‘Beyond Bolotnaia: bridging old and new in Russia’s election protest movement’, *Problems of Post-Communism* 60: 2, 2013, pp. 40-52

<sup>32</sup> Aglaya Snetkov, ‘When the internal and external collide: a social constructivist reading of Russia’s security policy’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 64: 3, p. 534.

keeping with a general Weberian view of the state as the institution that aims to stand as it were above clashing social forces in order to maintain societal order. The thing to note, I think, is that state policing did obviously favour either liberals or nationalists. The steady shift in the balance between the two cannot be ascribed to state intervention alone, but must be ascribed to the growing appeal of the xenophobic nationalist representation.

The xenophobic nationalist representation remained dynamic in at least three senses. Firstly, it continued to gain ground in the overall debate, forcing some Westernizers to adopt some of its elements in order not to be marginalized as the center of the debate shifted closer to nationalism. Secondly, it continued to subsume spiritual nationalists, so that it remained the stronger of only two major representations, as opposed to three. Thirdly, it was able to spawn elements that appeared to be new. I write ‘appear’, for the two most important elements were not historically new, but rather regurgitated from older and by now half-forgotten Russian representations of Europe. The two most important elements are closely intertwined, and concerned, first, how contemporary Europe is rotting, and, secondly, that the rot implies that contemporary Europe is a false Europe. True Europe, on the other hand, is still alive, first and foremost in Russia itself, but also in the Russia-friendly European far right movement.

The representation of Europe as ‘rotten’ (*gniloy, gnilyushchiy*) came back from a 150-year long hibernation with a vengeance in the second half of the 2000s. The specific practices that were evoked to demonstrate the rottenness were once again sexual in nature. In 1869, commenting on the popularity of CanCan and operettas, the populist Mikhaylovskiy was reminded of Europe in the days ‘when the Popes lived in incestuous relations with their



mothers and sisters, and maintained brothels’, and ‘when Roman Caesars had public weddings with men’.<sup>33</sup> Upon the return, this focus on homosexuality was yet again singled out,<sup>34</sup> but there was also transsexualism, pedophilia, incest and so on. These practices heralded the ‘Decline of Europe’, as an *Izvestia* (11 October 2007) headline had it.<sup>35</sup> The Russian Orthodox church has been particularly active in arguing that only by fighting the emerging European norms that accept homosexuality and same-sex marriages can ‘Russian civilization contribute to building a peaceful and civilized life on the planet’, as the then Metropolitan Kirill put it in 2006.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Patriarch himself chose this as a main theme when he spoke to the Council of Europe the following year.<sup>37</sup> President Putin took up this representation in 2013 when he stated that Euro-Atlantic countries were undergoing a ‘moral crisis’ by ‘implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with belief in Satan’, and it has since been part of the state’s representation of Europe.<sup>38</sup> Once again, as the balance in the debate between liberal and xenophobic nationalist views tilted towards the latter, the state followed suit.

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<sup>33</sup> James H. Billington, *Mikhailovskiy and Russian populism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> For a 2007 example, see ‘Kakaya-to v derzhave Datskoi gnil’?, *GlobalRus.no*, 6 November 2007, <http://www.globalrus.ru/opinions/784449/news/>, accessed 4 Feb 2016; and from 2008, see ‘Gomoseksualizm pokhoz na Rak Obshchestva?’, <https://otvet.mail.ru/question/12765280>, accessed 4 Feb 2016.

<sup>35</sup> See ‘Zakat Evropy’, *Izvestia*, 11 October 2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/329597>, accessed 4 Feb 2016. For a full discussion, Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova (2014) ‘The Decline of Gayropa? How Russia Intends to Save the World’ *Eurozine*, 5 February 2014, available as <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-02-05-riabova-en.html>, accessed 20 February 2016.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Ustanavlivat’ ugovnoe nakazanie za evtanaziyu - nepravil'no, zayavil mitropolit Kirill’, *Izvestiya*, 4 April 2006, <http://izvestia.ru/news/375872>, accessed 4 Feb 2016.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Patriarkh vseya Rusi [Aleksiy II] prizval PACE ne pooshchryat gomoseksualizm’, *Izvestiya*, 2 October 2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/410121>, accessed 4 Feb 2016.

<sup>38</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, 19 September 2013, see also Andrew Monaghan ‘A “New Cold War”? Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia’, Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme, May 2015, p. 5; available as [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150522ColdWarRussiaMonaghan.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150522ColdWarRussiaMonaghan.pdf).

The entire point of the metaphor of rottenness is that there is no future other than decomposition. What, then, may come of a rotten Europe? Logically, there can only be one answer: Europe has to be restored and renewed. Rotten, decadent Europe is a Europe that has left its true character behind. It is a false Europe. What, then, can be more logical than that Russia, with its social conservatism, is actually the last true European nation standing, and will bring restoration to False Western Europe? This idea of superiority, which was the entire basis of Bolshevik views of Europe (true, vital proletarian Europe was chasing out false, rotten bourgeois Europe), now came to the fore once again. Gleb Pavlovskiy argued that Russia is a ‘better European than Europe itself’.<sup>39</sup> Dmitriy Rogozin, then Ambassador to NATO, wrote in the nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* that ‘Russia indeed is also Europe, without “gay” rule, pederast marriages, punk mass culture and the lackeying to the United States. We are indeed the true Europeans’.<sup>40</sup> To Rogozin, the final proof of Europe’s decadence seems to be that Europeans see Russians not as European, but as something from outer space, as ‘cosmonauts’.<sup>41</sup>

If we ask how this metaphor of Europe as ‘rotten’ returned, we once again run into the main xenophobic nationalist, Aleksandr Dugin. In a 1994 book aptly titled *The Conservative Revolution*, he argued that ‘the liberalization of sex, pornography, feminism, homosexuality,

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<sup>39</sup> Gleb Pavlovski, “‘Rossiya vse eshche ishchet svoy rol’ v mire’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 31 May 2004; see also Andrei P. Tsygankov, ‘Finding a civilizational idea’, 394.

<sup>40</sup> Vittorio Strada, ‘Posle imperii: staraya I novaya Rossia’, *Vtoraya Nayigatsia: Almanach*, No. 10 (Khar’kov: Prava Liudiny, 2010). <http://library.khpg.org/files/docs/1293605762.pdf>, accessed 20 Jan 2016. See also *Zavtra*, “‘Est’ i drugaya Evropa” (2014), <http://zavtra.ru/content/view/est-i-drugaya-evropa>; Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, *Identities and foreign policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: the other Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 112-114.

<sup>41</sup> Dmitriy Rogozin, *Yastreby mira: Dnevnik russkogo posla* (Moscow: Al’pina non-fikshn, 2010), p. 397.

and the fashion for Freudianism and psychoanalysis are part of the process of forced Westernization of the world. This “era of gynecocracy” heralds the “castration” of men and, along with it, the disappearance of traditional society’.<sup>42</sup>

As noted in the previous section, the xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe was forged into a coherent representation from various bits and pieces, most of them gathered from Fascist and Communist traditions, by Dugin and others in the turbulent 1990s.<sup>43</sup> Under Putin, as exemplified by what happened to the official adoption of the representation of Russia as ‘True Europe’, it became ever more dominant. In 2012-2013, the state followed up on its steady slide towards a xenophobic nationalist position by embracing such a position wholeheartedly. One consequence of the state’s shift was actually a further radicalization of the xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe. As noted in the introduction to this section, key carriers of this representation came out with a critique of the state for not being decisive enough in its support of what was for all intents and purposes a war. The state did not respond to these calls, but in February 2016, Russia’s Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, stated that Russia and the West might be sliding into ‘a new Cold War’.<sup>44</sup>

Societal debates do not determine foreign policy moves, but the general tenor of policy debates have the effect of making certain moves easier to legitimate than others. It cannot be

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<sup>42</sup> Laruelle, “Aleksandr Dugin”, p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> An authority on Russian nationalism like Verkhovsky even identifies the national ‘mainstream’ as ‘typically oriented towards various neo-fascist ideas and racist violence’. Alexander Verkhovsky, ‘Radical nationalists from the start of Medvedev’s presidency to the war in Donbass: true till death?’, in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *The new Russian nationalism: imperialism, ethnicity and authoritarianism 2000-15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> As reported worldwide, for example: ‘Russian PM Medvedev says new cold war is on,’ 13 February 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35569094>, accessed 14 Feb 2016.

argued that the societal shift towards xenophobic nationalism somehow caused Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, its remilitarization, its lingering support for Ukrainian separatists, the 2016 intervention in Syria or any other specific action in the recent marked shift away from cooperation towards confrontation with Europe and the West. By the same token, Andrei Tsygankov may well be right that 'although Putin's rhetoric is indeed increasingly nationalist, it is designed more to reach out to traditional critics of the state, than to faithfully follow their recommendation'.<sup>45</sup> We have no way of knowing. What we do know is that xenophobic nationalism and a confrontational foreign policy are mutually reinforcing. In keeping with this, 2014 was also the year when the basic xenophobic rejection of Europe was articulated by a state organ for the first time since the end of the Cold War. On 10 January 2014, the newspaper *Izvestiya* published the entire text of the Ministry of Culture's basic draft for an overall Russian cultural policy. The document stressed Russia's uniqueness and vitality, and, evoking Russian thinkers like Danilevskiy and Gumilev, but also Arnold Toynbee and Samuel Huntington, contrasted it with Europe by stating that Russia 'must be seen as a unique and autonomous civilization which belongs neither to "the West" ("Europe"), nor to "the East"'. The position may be summed up in a pithy formulation: "Russia is not Europe".<sup>46</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the state did not get the last word on this key formulation. In a statement signed by all 27 members of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Culture's draft was said not only to be below

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<sup>45</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31: 4, 2015, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> Russian Ministry of Culture, 'Materialy i predlozheniya k proektu osnov gosudarstvennostoy kul'turnoy politiki', printed in *Izvestiya* 10 January 2014, <http://izvestia.ru/news/569016>, accessed 5 Feb 2016, p. 3.

student level, but to positively false.<sup>47</sup> As a result of the critique, the phrase that Russia is not Europe was removed from the document. The Russian debate on Europe goes on.

As has been the case since its inception, the Russian debate about Europe is a debate about what Russia itself should be. Viacheslav Morozov sums up well what it means at the present juncture that Europe is one of Russia's constitutive outsides when he writes about the domestic repercussions of the state's subscription to the xenophobic nationalism position since 2012-2013 that:

the Kremlin's entire conservative turn comes down to nothing more than an offensive against "the fifth column". This label lumps together all "freaks" – the *Pussy Riot* punk band, NGOs, intellectuals, scholars supported by foreign funding [homosexuals, feminists]. They are all stamped as Western collaborators, whose main goal is to undermine Russian traditional values. At the same time, the values that are being championed tend to recede in the background, while center stage gets occupied by the epic fight against forces of evil; for pro-government forces, of whatever stripe, the national interest is reduced to anti-Westernism.<sup>48</sup>

Since this European outside is held to be inferior in the present, there is a rush to demonstrate how it was also inferior in the past. In today's Russia, history is being rewritten on a massive

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<sup>47</sup> 'Zayavlenie chlenov Uchenogo Soveta Instituta Filosofii PAN o kontseptsii osnov kul'turnoy politike', April 2014, [http://iph.ras.ru/cult\\_polit.htm](http://iph.ras.ru/cult_polit.htm), accessed 5 Feb 2016. I thank Sverre Rustad for directing me to this source.

<sup>48</sup> Viatcheslav Morozov, 'What is the meaning of "national" in the Russian debate about the national interest?', Policy Memo, *Ponars*, [www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos/pdf/Pepm414\\_Morozov\\_Jan2016pdf](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos/pdf/Pepm414_Morozov_Jan2016pdf).

scale, be that in school textbooks, exhibitions or monuments. As it was in Soviet times, it has once again become a commonplace to argue that most things European commenced in Russia. To pick but one example, Egor Kholmogorov recently argued that ‘Russian national consciousness is not younger, but older than the German, French or English one. It is the oldest of all European modern nations’.<sup>49</sup> In terms of foreign policy, the immediate consequence of this shift was confrontation with neighboring Ukraine and an openly confrontational policy against the West.

In 1991, the liberal story about Russia and its relationship to Europe ruled the roost. The statist text ‘A word to the people’, with which this analysis began, told one of a number of other and competing stories. 25 years later, statism has evolved into a xenophobic nationalism that dominates the societal debate, and liberals have been marginalized. To give but one example, in 2015 former imprisoned oligarch (2003-2013) and present exile Mikhail Khodorkovsky argued that the number one priority for Russia should be to get its economy in order and that the ‘inevitable’ way to do this would be to integrate Russia with the ‘Euro-Atlantic world’. If Russia would not ‘Go West’, then it would sink deeper and deeper into economic and political isolation. Rather than turning to authoritarianism, Russia should aim to join NATO and the EU.<sup>50</sup> As will readily be seen, this was basically the state’s position in the early 1990s, and in the autumn of 1999, this basically liberal stance would still have been one of the two major representations in the debate.

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<sup>49</sup> Egor Kholmogorov ‘Rossiya -- rodina mamontov i patriotov’ *Russkiy dozor*, 10 April 2016, <http://rusdozor.ru/2016/04/10/rossiya-rodina-mamontov-i-patriotov-egor-xolmogorov/>.

<sup>50</sup> Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, ‘Go West: kak vyvesti Rossiyu iz tupika’, *PBK*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/16/06/2015/557fcfdc9a79477ac18d95bc>, accessed 24 Jan 2016.

At the present juncture, however, it has become a marginalized view. Igor' Strelkov, a *nom du guerre* for Igor' Vsevolodovich Girkin, who had in-depth field experience from various theatres and is a mainstay of the Novorossiia movement that works for the expansion of Russian state territory, answered by identifying Khodorkovsky as a key fifth columnist.<sup>51</sup> Khodorkovsky's attempt to 'help the West once again to destroy what Putin began to rebuild in the 2000s' will not succeed, Strelkov wrote, for 'God is with us, the Russians!'<sup>52</sup> That seemed to close the debate. It is not that liberals are all but gone from Russia. Within the state apparatus, a liberal party still argues along the same broad lines as Khodorkovsky. Where the societal debate is concerned, however, xenophobic nationalism rules the roost.

### *Back to the Future*

What is striking about the debate on Europe since the fall of the Soviet Union, is its centrality to Russian political life at large, and the invariance of its positions. When polities exist in proximity to one another, they vie for overlapping social space. That spells an imperative to keep up, or go bust. In evolutionary theory, this is referred to as the Red Queen Syndrome: one has to run in order to stay in the same place.<sup>53</sup> This explains why, over the centuries, Europe has been what we may call Russia's main Other: Europe kept producing new ways of

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<sup>51</sup> Igor' Strelkov, "'Krugom izmena, trusost' i obman': Igor' Strelkov polemiziruet s Mikhailom Khodorkovskim'", *Sviobodnaya pressa*, 21 October 2014, <http://svpressa.ru/blogs/article/101665/>, accessed 28 January 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Strelkov, "'Krugom izmena'", 11.

<sup>53</sup> Matt Ridley, *The red queen: sex and the evolution of human nature* (London: Penguin, 1984).

arranging polities, and Russia could not afford simply to neglect this fact. It was forced to respond by the very nature of the states system.

If this explains the invariance in focus on Europe, it does not explain the invariance in positions. An added factor that goes a long way towards doing this, is a constant within the overall Russian debate itself, namely that Russia has to be a great power, or it will be nothing.<sup>54</sup> What has been at stake in the debate for all participants is not only how to keep up with general European developments, but how to do so in a way that will secure Russia's standing as a great power. There has been no consensus regarding what it means to be a great and glorious polity, with nationalist positions favoring a strong, commanding leader who is obeyed simply because he is the leader, and westernizers favoring a deliberative system where fair and free elections make up the crucial legitimating mechanism. The Russian debate has also had problems with embracing the two subject positions that has been held out to new entrants to the European-centered states system, namely those of apprentice and barbarian at the gate.<sup>55</sup> Rather, these two subject positions have marked the unstable bookends of the debate. Statements to the fact that Russia would have to learn from or even go to school with Europe, become a normal country, (re)join civilization etc. have been out of synch with the underlying premise that Russia must be great or it must be nothing, for Great Powers do not go to school. On the contrary, they lay down the line and teach others. By the same token, embracing a position as barbarian -- that is, as inferior in the eyes of European great powers --

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<sup>54</sup> See n. 8 above.

<sup>55</sup> See Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other. The 'East' in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2000).



has largely been out of the question, for such a position rules out being recognized by the leading powers of Europe as being on a par with them. The result of the inherent unstableness of these two extreme positions is that the debate has largely played itself out in the space between them. This largely explains the relative invariance in positions on Europe over the centuries.

And yet, there has been variation. How to explain that? If the key underlying factor that drives the debate is socially understood backwardness, then it becomes important just how backward Russians have understood their country to be, and in which degree it has been understood as a handicap or an advantage.<sup>56</sup> The more intense the backwardness is felt as a social fact, the stronger the urge to catch up with the West. Exceptionally, attempts have even been planned to overtake the West (the 1930s would be the primary example of this). An added factor in this regard is that the backwardness is experienced differently by different groups in the polity. It is not the case that the more well informed by European developments, the more acutely aware of the challenge of backwardness. All innovation in representations of Europe - be that as something to emulate or something to recoil from -- has been done by elites. It holds true, though, that the less informed about developments in the West, the more dismissive of the need to take what is happening there into consideration. The result of this has been spelled out most eloquently by Yuriy Lotman.<sup>57</sup> Elites in Russia and other countries which find themselves in a structurally backward position within the states system will

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander Gerschenkron, 'Economic development in Russian intellectual history of the nineteenth century', in *Economic backwardness in historical perspective. A book of essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>57</sup> Yuriy Lotman, *Culture and explosion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, [2004] 2009).

periodically try to play catch-up. These attempts will be met with reactions from nationalist elites, who will have an easy time mustering broad support from non-elites for resisting change in the name of local traditions. The most clear-cut example of this we find in the 1979 Iranian revolution, but the logic is the same in the Russian case. This logic will also make for a regularity in how the state represents the West. In periods when the state embraces a westernizing position, it has tended to look to elites for support, while in periods when it has embraced a nationalist position, it has looked to non-elites. A clear-cut example of this logic can be observed in recent years; at the end of the twentieth century, the state looked primarily to big city elites. In the twenty-first century, it has so far leaned increasingly on non-elites.

Choosing non-elites as a base comes at a cost, for elites are by definition the ones that implement change and so make for political dynamism and economic growth. If backwardness spells an imperative for social change, and social change means emulating the West, then closing down elite activity is a guarantee that backwardness will continue, and probably even grow. Here we have yet another mechanism that has made for variation. At regular intervals – in the twentieth example only, we have the Stalypin reforms of the 1900s, the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, the Lieberman reforms of the 1960s, perestroika of the 1980s and the reforms of the 1990s -- the state has attempted to play catch-up with the West by easing restrictions on economic production. Put differently, it has eked closer to the way of thinking about politics that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century, namely that the state has to see to it that society produces as much as possible by opening up for civil society's self-organization.

The basic problem with such a strategy is that, by opening up for new economic agents, new political agents may also emerge, for economic power is easily translated into political power.<sup>58</sup> Since a key tenet of Russian discourse has been that Russia should be a great power, and since 'great' has been understood as paternalistic, in the sense of being able to lie down the law to other agents, a pluralistic political situation has consistently been seen as a direct threat to the strong state.<sup>59</sup> This anti-liberal tenet has not only set Russian political thinking apart from the broad European tradition. It has also been a key factor in curbing attempts at economic reforms. Every time the state has attempted to liberalize economic life, it has worked according to intention, in the sense that new economic agents have emerged. As these agents have invariably tried to convert their economic resources into political power, however, the state has panicked, and closed down the reform.<sup>60</sup> As a result, Russian backwardness has continued. The latest example of this logic so far came in the 1990s, as the state endowed so-called oligarchs. As these oligarchs proceeded not only to innovate, as was intended by the state, but also to dominate political life, the state brought them to heel. As long as emerging groups of innovators have a narrow social base, this can be fairly easily done, and can even be popular. The problem is that the economic backwardness that reform and innovation was supposed to curb invariably returns when innovation comes to a halt. So, as long as the state cannot tolerate independent bases of power and the social power of these bases remains too weak for them to be perpetuated, the basic structural challenge that Europe and the West poses to Russia remains the same.

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<sup>58</sup> Easily, not necessarily, as the Chinese experience since 1979 clearly demonstrates.

<sup>59</sup> Lenin referred to this as *kto-kogo*; who commands whom.

<sup>60</sup> Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

## *Conclusion*

I began this article by tracing how the Russian societal debate about Europe over the last quarter century. I found that the debate has gone from being dominated by a liberal story of how Russia should be great by taking its place amongst the leading democratic states of Europe, to being dominated by a xenophobic nationalist story of how Russia itself is actually True Europe to Western Europe's False, Americanised and rotten Europe. In the last couple of years, this has also been the Russian state's story about its relationship with Europe. I went on to argue that this about-turn is part of a cyclical pattern in Russian history, and that there are clear structural reasons why the Russian debate about Europe is characterized by invariance. There are also clear structural reasons for the variations that nonetheless exist. These reasons spell a cyclical pattern, where periods of westernization alternate with periods of nationalist celebration of nativist models for political and economic life. Einstein once defined madness as doing the same thing under the same conditions and thinking that the result would be different. It follows that, as long as the structural reasons that spell a context of backwardness hold -- that is, as long as Russia looks primarily to Western powers for recognition as a great power, and as long as some new, alternative way of ordering economic and/or political life does not emerge from within Russia itself -- we must expect the cyclical pattern of the Russian debate about Europe to continue.

Although China, and in a lesser degree India, are emerging as alternative great powers from which to seek recognition as a great power, the point when such recognition would make the

recognition of western powers superfluous for Russia to maintain its great power status remain a long way off. There are no signs whatsoever that historically new models for overall political and economic life are brewing in Russia. A prediction seems warranted. The state's position will, before long, change in the direction of westernization. Russia's self-understanding as a great power demands it. As long as Russia insists on being a great power, it will therefore come to pass.

The question to ask, though, is whether the next bout of westernization will break the cyclical pattern. The analysis performed here yields a clear answer to this question. The cycle will only be broken if one of four preconditions are fulfilled. Two of these preconditions are internal and modular: the state sees pluralism as a direct threat to itself and there exists no independent social element that can withstand the state's attempts to curb its emergent standing as a self-sustaining power base partially independent of the state. Two are external and also entangled with one another: Russia has to relate first and foremost to Western great powers rather than non-western ones, and there does not emerge a new international social standard for what a great power should be. If one or more of these preconditions do not change, then the Russian debate about Europe and the West will remain central to Russian political life. It will also retain its cyclical alteration between periods of westernization and periods like the present one, when Russia represents Europe as false Europe, and Russia itself as true Europe.

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