

OSW | COMMENTARY

Centre for Eastern Studies

NUMBER 131 | 28.03.2014

www.osw.waw.pl

The Putin doctrine: The formation of a conceptual framework for Russian dominance in the post-Soviet area

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The statements made in recent weeks by Russian officials, and especially President Vladimir Putin, in connection with Moscow's policy towards Ukraine, may suggest that the emergence of a certain doctrine of Russian foreign and security policy is at hand, especially in relation to the post-Soviet area. Most of the arguments at the core of this doctrine are not new, but recently they have been formulated more openly and in more radical terms. Those arguments concern the role of Russia as the defender of Russian-speaking communities abroad and the guarantor of their rights, as well as specifically understood good neighbourly relations (meaning in fact limited sovereignty) as a precondition that must be met in order for Moscow to recognise the independence and territorial integrity of post-Soviet states. However, the new doctrine also includes arguments which have not been raised before, or have hitherto only been formulated on rare occasions, and which may indicate the future evolution of Russia's policy. Specifically, this refers to Russia's use of extralegal categories, such as national interest, truth and justice, to justify its policy, and its recognition of military force as a legitimate instrument to defend its compatriots abroad.

This doctrine is effectively an outline of the conceptual foundation for Russian dominance in the post-Soviet area. It offers a justification for the efforts to restore the unity of the 'Russian nation' (or more broadly, the Russian-speaking community), within a bloc pursuing close integration (the Eurasian Economic Union), or even within a single state encompassing at least parts of that area. As such, it poses a challenge for the West, which Moscow sees as the main opponent of Russia's plans to build a new order in Europe (Eurasia) that would undermine the post-Cold War order.

I. Diagnosis of the situation

1. Russia as the centre of the Russian World

The starting point of Putin's doctrine lies in a certain view of the world, which presupposes the existence of a natural civilisational community, with Russia at the centre. That community takes the form of concentric circles, the first one of which is based on **the close ties first and foremost between Russia and Ukraine, and secondly also with Belarus.** President

Putin has repeatedly underlined the exceptional nature of Russian-Ukrainian relations. For instance, in an address delivered on 18 March 2014, he explained the Russian "spiritual suffering" in connection with Ukraine by saying "we are one people (...) and we cannot live without each other"¹.

¹ The word 'nation' ('narod') as used by Putin has multiple meanings – it signifies the people, but also a nation in a political, rather than ethnic, sense. Putin's address to the Federal Assembly, 18 March 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889> [further in this text: Putin, 18 March].

Earlier, in September 2013, he told the Valdai Club that the Russian unity also included Belarus, and formed a special 'three-part Russian nation'². On another occasion, speaking about the three nations, the Russian President even declared: "Essentially, we have a common church, a common spiritual source, and a common destiny"³. It is no coincidence that President Putin's priority political project, the **Eurasian Economic Union**, is being built on the foundation provided by this cultural core (which currently includes Russia and Belarus, with Kazakhstan as an addition)⁴. Putin himself has made it clear that it is not merely an economic, or even a political project, but a civilisational undertaking.

According to Putin, Russia is the centre of a civilisation, the Russian World. A Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian community is at the core of this world, and its principal area encompasses the post-Soviet space inhabited by Russian-speaking people.

He said: "The Eurasian Union is a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world". [Putin, Valdai 2013].

The identity of this integrating post-Soviet space is to be based on a presumed **special spiritual and civilisational community, referred to as the 'Russian world' (*Russkiy mir*)**. The term has several meanings in Russian discourse. It is usually defined, by President Putin himself also, as the community of Russian-speaking people cen-

tred around Russia⁵, who identify with the Orthodox Christian religion and culture⁶ and who cherish the same shared values, irrespective of their citizenship and ethnic background⁷. The Russian-Ukrainian community therefore constitutes the core of the Russian World, all the Russian-speaking communities in the post-Soviet area make up its basic area, and in the broadest sense, the term encompasses people around the world who meet these three criteria.

2. A US-led Western conspiracy

If there exists a positive community with Russia in the centre, there must also exist its anti-thesis, an enemy intent on preventing the Russian World from attaining its unity. That enemy is the West, whose moral decline President Putin vividly described in his address to the Valdai Club [Putin, Valdai 2013].

Even though Russia has friends (persons rather than states) and partners in the Western world, the Kremlin perceives the West as fundamentally anti-Russian because of the leading role that the United States plays in the Western community. For years, it has been a standard practice for the Russian leadership, and especially President Putin, to lace their rhetoric with accusations against the West, and especially the United States, and to allege that they routinely violate international laws, employ a policy of force, and pursue an effectively neo-colonial approach in order to strengthen their geopolitical position. The Ukrainian crisis seems to have elevated this rhetoric to an entirely new level. President Putin has unequivocally accused the West, and

² President Putin's meeting with members of the Valdai Club on 19 September 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007> [further in this text: Putin, Valdai 2013].

³ Interview with Vladimir Putin for the documentary film *The Second Baptism of Rus*, 23 July 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5747>

⁴ For more information see Iwona Wiśniewska, 'Eurasian integration. Russia's attempt at the economic unification of the post-Soviet area', *OSW Studies* 44, Warsaw, July 2013, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_44_eurasian-integration_net.pdf

⁵ President Putin's reception to mark National Unity Day, 4 November 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6216>

⁶ Meeting with delegates to the Bishops' Council, 1 February 2013 r., <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4926>; Interview with Vladimir Putin for the documentary film *The Second Baptism of Rus*, *op.cit.*

⁷ Putin elaborated on the concept of the Russian civilisational community based, inter alia, on common set of shared values, in his programmatic text on national policy: V. Putin, 'Rossija – natsyonalnyi vopros', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 January 2012, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

especially the United States and its backers, of having sponsored a Ukrainian *coup d'état* (as the Ukrainian revolution is referred to in the Kremlin's rhetoric), the preparations for which (including the training of militants) took place "at special bases in neighbouring states: in Lithuania, Poland and in Ukraine itself too"⁸. It has also been claimed without any ambiguity that the US-led Western conspiracy in Ukraine was in fact only one link in a whole chain of events. Putin elaborated on this claim in his address of 18 March when he said: "There was a whole series of controlled "colour" revolutions", referring both to the post-Soviet area (including Ukraine in 2004), and North Africa and the Middle East since 2011.

On the same occasion Putin also clearly stated that the social engineering employed by the West in the course of the current crisis was directed against Ukraine, Russia "and against Eurasian integration". Moreover, the present situation was part of a long track record of anti-Russian Western policies aimed at the containment of Russia, which have been in place since the eighteenth century. It is therefore not surprising that faced with such an act of 'aggression' ("crossing the line", in Putin's words) on the part of the West – which, according to Putin's warnings, was intent on using a "fifth column" in Russia in an effort to destabilise the country socially and economically – Moscow had to react because "Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from".

II. Principles of Russia's policy

Statements by Russian officials, and especially those by President Putin, not only offer a diagnosis, but also provide information about the guidelines and principles which Russia should follow in its foreign and security policy.

⁸ President Putin's press conference, 4 March 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6763> [further in this text: Putin, 4 March].

1. Russia as the guarantor and defender of the rights of Russian-speaking people

Many comments made on the situation in Ukraine have referred to the alleged serious threats faced by Russian-speaking people in that country. It is notable that Russia has been invoking the Russian citizenship of those allegedly under threat less and less frequently;

Putin believes that the West, with the United States at the helm, is Russia's enemy and has long been involved in a conspiracy to undermine Russia's aspirations to restore the unity of the Russian World.

in contrast, it has increasingly been referring to a broader category encompassing inhabitants and citizens of Ukraine, including both Russians and Ukrainians [cf. Putin, 4 March]. This has been followed by steadfast pledges that Russia is prepared to defend this category of people: "Millions of Russians [*Russkikh lyudei*] and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend their interests using political, diplomatic and legal means." [Putin, 18 March]. There is no reason to believe that the above declaration applies to Ukraine only; there is no doubt that it also refers to the entire Russian World, including the post-Soviet area in particular.

2. "Good neighbourly relations" as a precondition of Moscow's recognition of independence and territorial integrity

The statements President Putin has made during the Ukrainian crisis have contained many, often controversial, claims about the history of Ukraine. Some of them have unequivocally called into question the legitimacy of Ukraine's current borders. This does not apply only to Crimea, in relation to which President

Putin directly challenged the legality of its incorporation into Ukraine in 1954 by a decision of the then Soviet leadership (claiming the decision had been taken “in clear violation of the constitutional norms that were in place even then”, behind the scenes and without asking the opinion of the people of Crimea). Putin has also implicitly called into doubt the legitimacy and justness of the incorporation of the lands which today constitute Ukraine’s southern and eastern regions into the emerging Soviet Ukrainian republic in the early 1920s⁹.

Moscow is prepared to recognise the independence and territorial integrity of post-Soviet states only on the condition that they pursue a policy of “good neighbourly relations”, meaning in fact limited sovereignty.

President Putin has gone even further than that in his thoughts. He has suggested that perhaps the Ukrainian state should be deemed to have ceased to exist, and therefore all treaties signed with it (including the base treaty of 1997, which recognised Ukraine’s territorial integrity) should be deemed invalid¹⁰.

Both claims, along with the dramatic descriptions of the alleged chaos and violence reigning in Ukraine which Putin and other Russian officials have been quoting recently, could lead observers to the conclusion that independent Ukraine is in effect a ‘seasonal state’, a ‘whim of history’, which is what Putin had already hinted at during his ad-

dress to the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008¹¹. However, President Putin has left some hope for Ukraine’s survival. In his broad historical discourse he has implied that Russia always supported Ukraine and sought to meet its needs, and even gave it parts of its own territory (Crimea, when Ukraine was part of a bigger state together with Russia (the USSR), or at least there was still hope that the two countries could maintain close brotherly relations (after the USSR broke up and the Commonwealth of Independent States was created)¹².

This leads to a conclusion which apparently applies not only to Ukraine, but expresses a broader rule addressed to all the post-Soviet states: Moscow will recognise their independence and territorial integrity only if they pursue a policy of “good neighbourly relations” with Russia.

A careful analysis of President Putin’s statements, together with the documents and actions of Russian diplomacy in recent months and years, provides some indications as to what such a policy should mean in practice. Its basic conditions seem to be the following:

- **The given state must not participate in integration processes alternative to the structures controlled by Russia** (be they political, economic or military), and certainly not in Western integration structures (the European Union and especially NATO)¹³. This is related

⁹ “After the revolution, the Bolsheviks, for a number of reasons – may God judge them – added large sections of the historical south of Russia to the Republic of Ukraine [USSR]. This was done with no consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population, and today these areas form the south-east of Ukraine.” [Putin, 18 March].

¹⁰ “Yes, but if this is revolution, what does this mean? In such a case it is hard not to agree with some of our experts who say that a new state is now emerging in this territory. This is just like what happened when the Russian Empire collapsed after the 1917 revolution and a new state emerged. And this would be a new state with which we have signed no binding agreements.” [Putin, 4 March].

¹¹ President Putin argued on that occasion that present-day Ukraine was a conglomerate of various territories belonging to its neighbours; he also argued that as its inhabitants were mostly Russians and Russian-speaking people, its aspirations to integration with NATO could threaten its territorial integrity. See Vladimir Putin’s address at the NATO summit in Bucharest, 4 April 2008, <http://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putins-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html>

¹² Cf. Putin, 18 March; Putin, Valdai 2013.

¹³ “We are against having a military alliance [NATO] making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory.” [Putin 18 March] The condition of broadly understood neutralisation of Ukraine is also laid down in a draft document handed over by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the US Secretary of State John Kerry in London on 14 March 2014. See the statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the support group for Ukraine, 17 March 2014, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/49766426492B6E9644257C9E0036B79A

to an implicit broader condition: that the given state should not permit, without Russia's consent, any non-Russian military presence on its territory (and certainly no Western military presence), and should not participate in any bilateral or multilateral projects of political, economic or military co-operation if they infringe the interests of the Russian Federation;

- **The given state should fully respect the political and cultural rights of its Russian-speaking inhabitants** (especially ethnic Russians and Russian citizens, but not only)¹⁴. Naturally, it is up to Russia to determine the legitimate scope of such rights and assess if they are being respected;

- **The given state should participate in the process of close political and economic Eurasian integration, as dictated and controlled by Moscow** (through membership in the Eurasian Economic Union), if its participation is in line with Russia's interests [Putin, Valdai 2013]. It should also implement bilateral and multilateral co-operation projects that further Russia's interests; this implicitly means that the state should reject development models based on European standards and stick with the post-Soviet model.

3. National interest, truth and justice above the law

The Russian Federation had employed international law as its weapon in the political game with the West. Hitherto Moscow had steadfastly and strictly defended such principles as the non-use of force against other countries without a UN Security Council mandate (Moscow justified its attack on Georgia in August 2008 by claiming it was applying its right to self-defence), or the respect for territorial integrity of states (its own recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions of

Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008 was explained as an exceptional situation in reaction to 'Georgian aggression'). Russia had condemned the Western states, especially the USA, on many occasions in the past for alleged systematic violations of those and other principles of international law (for example, it condemned the recognition of Kosovo's independence by some Western states in 2009).

Russia is currently putting national interest and a sense of justice above the rules of international law, and is prepared to resort to military force under the pretext of defending the Russian-speaking populations in the post-Soviet area.

Now, however, President Putin has pointed to examples of Western powers using force (especially the US operations, but also the French military interventions in Africa) to argue the case for Russia's right to take similar actions in the context of the Ukrainian crisis.

It is also notable that Moscow has recently become increasingly disinclined to refer to the principles of international law to justify its actions towards Ukraine. It is true that Russian diplomacy and President Putin have been invoking the alleged request from (former) President Yanukovich to justify the armed intervention in Ukraine, and have been presenting the annexation of Crimea as a realisation of the "right of nations to self-determination". However, in neither case have they cared much about maintaining the appearances of legality and purity of procedures.

Moreover, President Putin's rhetoric now strongly relies on extralegal arguments to justify Russia's policy, such as references to truth, justice, national interest and the will of the nation, which hitherto had hardly been present

¹⁴ "But it should be above all in Ukraine's own interest to ensure that these people's rights and interests are fully protected. This is the guarantee of Ukraine's state stability and territorial integrity." [Putin, 18 March].

in his discourse¹⁵. This means that, given the weakness of Moscow's legal arguments and the case for its actions under international law, it has chosen to place what could be described as unwritten principles of legitimacy and justice associated with specifically defined national interests above those of the law.

4. Use of force as a legitimate way to defend compatriots

Ever since the Russian Federation was established, one of its declared priorities has been to defend the Russian (or Russian-speaking) populations abroad, especially in the post-Soviet area. However, before now Moscow had avoided making a clear statement of the rules that would govern the use of military force to this end. It is worth remembering that the attack by Russian troops on Georgia in August 2008 was formally justified as a reaction to the firing of shots at Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia.

The Putin doctrine provides a justification for efforts to restore the unity of the 'Russian nation' through Eurasian integration or even through the creation of a single state spanning at least a part of the post-Soviet area.

However, recent statements by President Putin and some Russian publications clearly suggest that Moscow is now claiming the right to use military force for the declared purpose of de-

¹⁵ For instance, speaking about Crimea after 1954, Putin said on 18 March: "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This firm conviction is based on truth and justice (...) This country was going through such hard times then that realistically it was incapable of protecting its interests. However, the people could not reconcile themselves to this outrageous historical injustice." And when justifying the decision to annex Crimea, Putin said: "Now this is a matter for Russia's own political decision, and any decision here can be based only on the people's will, because the people are the ultimate source of all authority."

fending Russian-speaking people outside Russia¹⁶. Those statements and documents imply that there are two principal, interrelated implicit criteria for any decision to use military force:

- the existence, according to Russia, of a serious threat to the security (especially life and physical well-being) of Russian-speaking people (Russian citizens and/or compatriots¹⁷ and/or Russian soldiers stationed abroad)¹⁸;
- a request for assistance made by such people to Russia (there are no detailed conditions for such requests).

Another criterion, that of a request for assistance made by the legal government of the given state, may serve as an additional argument to legitimise such action for the international community (as Putin himself suggested in March), but this does not necessarily need to be met for Russia to use force. The use of military force will therefore be based on two premises: the obligation to offer assistance to compatriots, and the need to act in line with Russia's national interest. [Putin, 4 March].

¹⁶ As President Putin said on 4 March in reply to a question about the use of Russian armed forces in Ukraine: "Therefore, if we see such uncontrolled crime spreading to the eastern regions of the country, and if the people ask us for help, while we already have the official request from the legitimate President, we retain the right to use all available means to protect those people. We believe this would be absolutely legitimate. This is our last resort." [Putin, 4 March].

¹⁷ The term 'compatriot' (*sootchestvennik*) has a broad definition in Russia. Under the *Law of 24 May 1999 on the state policy of the Russian Federation towards compatriots abroad*, it includes (in slightly simplified terms): Russian citizens living abroad and former citizens, or descendants of citizens, of the Soviet Union, the Russian Republic and the Russian Empire.

¹⁸ "However, we cannot remain indifferent if we see that they are being persecuted, destroyed and humiliated." [Putin, 4 March]. A "threat to life" was also directly mentioned in President Putin's request to the Federation Council for endorsement of the use of Russian armed forces on the territory of Ukraine; that request also mentioned the three previously mentioned categories of people under threat. See 'Vladimir Putin appeals to the Federation Council', 1 March 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20353>. On the other hand, the alleged request by the (former) President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich to send in troops refers to the need to protect "the life, health and freedom" of the citizens of Ukraine. Cf. Putin, 4 March.

III. Outlook for the future: the unification of the 'Russian nation'?

Moscow considers Ukraine to be a priority country, and believes that the Western world's stance towards Kyiv crossed a 'red line'. At the same time, the Russian leadership is convinced that the West is strategically weak and divided and lacks determination, and Moscow has thus decided to challenge it. The general objective is to largely undo the order that has existed since the end of the Cold War, which in Moscow's view has been based on the West's exploitation of Russia's weaknesses for geopolitical gain. Today Russia believes in its power and determination, and is seeking to reclaim as much as possible of what it has lost, unjustly in its own opinion. Its aim is therefore to establish a new political, economic and security order in Europe (or more broadly, in northern Eurasia). This new order should be based on Russian-defined, effectively post-Soviet standards, as an alternative to European standards. Russia's first and main task is to regain strategic control of the post-Soviet area (for the time being, probably excluding the Baltic states), establish a sphere of exclusive Russian influence in that area, and force the West to accept this new *status quo*. In this context, however, it is not fully clear how one should interpret President Putin's suggestions about the annexation of Crimea as an element of a process of restoring the unity of the

Russian nation, which so far remains divided, as the German nation used to be: **"I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity."** [Putin, 18 March]

In a maximalist interpretation, this could be seen as a **project to rebuild Russian statehood** within the borders of the former USSR (possibly without the Baltic states), or spanning only Russia, Belarus and Ukraine¹⁹. In the minimalist version, it could be a **plan to transform the Eurasian Economic Union** (which should also incorporate Ukraine, or at least its southern and eastern regions, as well as Moldova, or at least Transnistria, and Georgia, or just Abkhazia and South Ossetia) **into a tight economic bloc** that would partly resemble the European Union in form, but would **pursue a development model different from the Western one**. Either way, taking strategic control over Ukraine is crucial for the success of Russia's plans²⁰.

¹⁹ This is a possible interpretation of the following statement by Putin: "At the foundations of the Russian nation and the centralised Russian state are the same spiritual values that unite the whole of that part of Europe now shared by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This is our common spiritual, moral and values space, and this plays a very big part in uniting the people." Interview with Vladimir Putin for the documentary film *The Second Baptism of Rus*, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Cf. the statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the support group for Ukraine, *op. cit.* The document effectively envisages the creation of a Russian protectorate in Ukraine, with formal legal and international guarantees.

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