



The Sources of Russian Conduct

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In early 1946, writing from his perch at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, the diplomat George F. Kennan laid out what would become the guiding principles for America's Cold War strategy toward the Soviet Union. His missive, which came to be known as the "long telegram," articulated what Kennan understood to be the prevailing thinking in the Kremlin about the USSR's place in the world, the permanence of its competition with the capitalist West, and the modes by which Moscow might advance its strategic position and erode that of the United States. Kennan's insights into Soviet thinking were published pseudonymously the following year in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*,^[1] and were so influential that they helped lay the groundwork for NSC-68, the long war strategy that the United States erected—and subsequently prosecuted—against the Soviets across multiple administrations.

Such a framework is sorely absent today. Some three-quarters of a century after Kennan's "long telegram," the United States—and the West more broadly—has little understanding of the ideological constructs and strategic principles animating contemporary Russian decision-making.^[2] In the absence of such awareness, successive governments have fallen short in anticipating Russia's post-Cold War foreign policy maneuvers. They have likewise floundered in formulating a cogent response to them.

It's an issue worth revisiting today, against the backdrop of Russia's new war in Ukraine. For, while the original reason given by the Kremlin for its "special military operation"—the need to "demilitarize" and "de-Nazify" a Ukraine in the thrall of revanchist forces—has proven patently false, the true causes behind Russia's prosecution of the conflict remain murky for most Western policymakers. Precisely what those motivations are, and how they are informed by Russia's strategic culture and internal stressors, will help determine what Moscow does next—and the challenge the West will collectively be forced to meet in the years ahead.

A RENEWED IMPULSE

Confronted with the Kremlin's pattern of wanton aggression against its neighbors, Western leaders have tended to default to an all-too-familiar trope: that Putin, a former KGB agent, wants to recreate the USSR. "Make no mistake," former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo wrote at the outset of the latest Ukraine war, "Putin is about the business for trying to bring back the Soviet Union. We must not allow that to happen."^[3]

Unquestionably, these and similar sentiments have been fueled by Putin's own pronouncements. Back in 2005, in his annual State of the Nation address, Russia's president famously observed that he viewed the breakup of the Soviet Union as a catastrophic—and deeply traumatic—civilizational event. "The collapse of the Soviet Union," he intoned:

...was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. For the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory. The epidemic of disintegration also spread to Russia itself.^[4]

It is a refrain that Putin has repeated since in numerous other settings. In a 2014 address in Kaliningrad, he confided to audience members that "the disintegration of the Soviet Union" was the historical occurrence that he most wished he had prevented.^[5] And in a 2021 documentary entitled "Russia. New History," Putin lamented that, following the 1991 breakup of the USSR, "[w]e turned into a completely different country. And what has been built up over 1,000 years was largely lost."^[6]

Nevertheless, ascribing Putin's actions to a mere desire to recreate the USSR is a significant simplification of his strategic thinking on at least two fronts. The first is territorial. While the contours of the Soviet Union follow—and bear a striking resemblance to—those of the Russian Empire, the two entities were not identical in either form or composition. At its peak in the late 1800s, the Russian Empire encompassed nearly 14 million square miles (36 million square kilometers) and included Finland, parts of Poland, and the territory of Alaska (which was subsequently sold to the U.S. by Alexander III).^[7] By contrast, the Soviet Union, at the apex of its power and territorial reach, covered a significantly smaller area, approximately 8.6 million square miles—22.4 million square kilometers—and excluded Poland (which, though a Soviet satellite, remained nominally independent).^[8]

More significant still was the internal structure that governed the two entities. Largely agrarian, the Russian Empire functioned under ironclad control from the federal center (located first in Saint Petersburg and subsequently in Moscow). By contrast, the Soviet period saw the country undergo rapid industrialization, and while strong political control was still held by the party and the Kremlin, the USSR also erected an elaborate system of management for the various ethnicities and groupings that resided within its new confederation.^[9] Indeed, none other than the man who would go on to become the Soviet Union's most feared leader, Josef Stalin, served as its official Commissar of Nationalities, the country's top post dealing with the harmonization of internal ethnic relations, from 1917 until 1924.

It is the former construct that Russia's president clearly admires. In his February 21, 2022 speech laying out the rationale for his impending war in Ukraine, Putin obliquely condemned Soviet leaders for having permitted a semblance of federalism among the USSR's constituent parts, thereby helping to lay the foundation for a troublesome independent Ukrainian national identity. "Let's start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, by the Bolshevik, communist Russia," Putin chided. "This process began almost immediately after the 1917 revolution."^[10] The framing is telling; in Putin's conception, the Bolsheviks erred gravely by arrogating a degree of national independence, even autonomy, to the assorted Republics and ethnic groups that cumulatively comprised the USSR.

Putin, by contrast, envisions a different construct: one in which, in a throwback to tsarist times, the central government in Moscow presides over assorted, far-flung holdings deeply subservient to its rule. He thus sees himself much more as tsar than commissar—a ruler rather than merely an administrator. To this end, he has likened himself to Peter the Great, who aggressively sought to expand the borders of his empire outward during his forty-two years on Russia's throne. "Peter the Great waged the great northern war for 21 years," Putin said in June 2022, on the sidelines of an exhibition in Moscow highlighting the tsar's reign. "He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia's].... Apparently, it is also our lot to return [what is Russia's] and strengthen [the country]."^[11]

It would be easy to dismiss Putin's neo-imperial aspirations as nothing more than a fringe ideology. However, it most assuredly is not. To the contrary, more than three decades after the Soviet collapse, the restoration of empire remains a popular national project in Russia. Over the years, a range of intellectuals, officials and thinkers from across the Russian political spectrum have advocated a political unification of former Russian lands, as well as the need to create the geopolitical conditions to make such a union possible.

Thus, the late dissident Aleksander Solzhenitsyn—a fierce critic of the USSR—became a proponent of the reconstitution of the Slavic nation following the Soviet collapse. In his 1995 book *The Russian Question*, Solzhenitsyn lamented that the Soviet breakup "occurred mechanically along false Leninist borders, usurping from us entire Russian provinces." The remedy, he argued, was a restoration of Russia's union with Slavic republics and at least part of Kazakhstan.^[12] Solzhenitsyn's idea proved immensely popular in post-Soviet Russia, and the anti-Communist icon was invited to repeat his call for Slavic unity on the floor of the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, in 1995.^[13] Similarly, Anatoly Chubais, the liberal architect of Russia's economic reforms during the 1990s, weighed in in favor of imperial expansion in a 2003 article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper in which he argued that "[l]iberal imperialism should become Russia's ideology and building up liberal empire Russia's mission."^[14] And Dmitry Rogozin, the ultra-nationalist former deputy prime minister who now heads up ROSCOSMOS, Russia's state space agency, has written in the past that Russians "should discuss out loud the problem of a divided people that has a historic right to political unification of its own land," and counseled the Kremlin that "we must create conditions to result in the environment with which Germany dealt for forty years coming out united in the end."^[15]

Nor are these sentiments confined to Russia's elites. Polls of popular opinion have consistently found support among ordinary Russians for the Kremlin's imperial impulses. For instance, in recent years, multiple surveys have found high—and growing—levels of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, especially among older generations of Russians.^[16] As recently as the spring of 2021, 86% of respondents in a poll carried out by the official Russian Public Opinion Center said that Russia had been "right" to make Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula part of its territory.^[17]

Today, despite the resulting Western sanctions and global ostracism, which has rolled back decades of progress in Russia, support for Vladimir Putin and his war aims in Ukraine remains high. Thus, in two independent sociological surveys released in March 2022, three-quarters of Russians expressed support for the current war in Ukraine, and evinced "such positive emotions as pride, joy, respect, trust and hope" in their country's leadership.^[18] An April 2022 poll by the independent Levada Center subsequently found that 74% of respondents supported the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, and a nearly analogous number (73%) believed that the "special military operation" would end in Russia's victory.^[19]

To be sure, polling within Russia has been profoundly influenced by the country's deepening authoritarian climate, with results skewed—because of official pressure and individual self-censorship—to mirror (and support) the Kremlin's political priorities. Moreover, recent years has seen Russian attitudes extensively manipulated by a steady diet of state-disseminated propaganda and misinformation, which has helped generate support for the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda.^[20] Finally, it remains to be seen whether Russia's population will remain sympathetic to its government's imperial adventures when it gradually learns of the high human and economic costs associated with them—data points that, for the moment, are being actively obscured by the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the potential for imperial restoration has resonated with a citizenry deeply traumatized by, and resentful of, their country's contemporary, diminished international status. In other words, Putin feels empowered to move forward with his imperial ambitions precisely because they appear to echo the wishes of a significant segment of his electorate.

REVERSING THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF DECLINE

Russia's imperial interest is not uniform, however. For all its bluster, the Kremlin does not covet its former territorial holdings equally. In fact, despite persistent trepidation in those capitals over the past decade, Moscow has given little sign of renewed designs on the majority Muslim nations of Central Asia. Rather, in their imperial yearnings, Russian officials have prioritized the re-acquisition of Slavic parts of the former USSR and Russian empire above other locales.

The reasons have everything to do with demographics. Russia, after all, has been on a trajectory of protracted demographic decline for more than a half-century. As long ago as the 1960s, early signs of a population downturn were already evident in the Soviet Union, and by the 1970s, total fertility had dropped to below “replenishment”—or just over two children per woman, on average—in almost all of the Soviet Union's European republics.[21] The Soviet Union's collapse exacerbated the situation still further. According to World Bank statistics, in the decade following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia's total fertility rate (TFR) declined precipitously, and by the early 2000s averaged just 1.3, far below the level required to maintain a stable national population.[22] Thereafter, however, it rose significantly, before ultimately settling to match European levels of fertility (roughly 1.5 live births per woman).[23] Notably, this figure remains well below the level required for a sustainable replenishment of the Russian population. It is also stubborn, having stayed largely static despite the numerous policies adopted by the Kremlin in recent years in an attempt to alter this demographic trajectory. These include the “maternity capital” campaign, initiated by the Russian government in 2007 to provide state support to families with multiple children,[24] or the more recent Kremlin pledge of tax breaks for bigger families.[25]

The drivers of this decline are manifold. They include high mortality (which, at 14.5 per 1,000 Russians,[26] remains considerably higher than in both Europe and the United States). Russia also lags in terms of life expectancy, with its current level of roughly 73 years having remained largely static for the last half-decade.[27] As a result, “Russia ranks 96 in the world— lower than comparatively poorer countries like Moldova, Vietnam and Venezuela,” explains Evgeny Gontmakher of the Russian Academy of Sciences.[28] And while contributing factors, like alcohol consumption and infant mortality, have improved in recent years, according to UN estimates, Russia still trails most of the developed world across a number of indices.

Another significant contributing factor is emigration. According to a 2021 study conducted by the Takie Dela portal, as of that October approximately five million people had fled Russia in the two decades since Vladimir Putin took power.[29] Nor has this emigration been uniform. Rather, it has been heavily weighted toward what demographer Judy Twigg collectively calls the “creative class”—“scientists, educators, artists and knowledge-based workers” who have left Russia to escape deepening authoritarianism and a stifling intellectual climate.[30]

Russian officials are painfully cognizant of the problem. In Putin's May 2018 presidential order outlining national goals and strategic priorities for his government, attaining stable population growth was listed first in order of importance.[31] And in his January 2020 address to the Federal Assembly, Russia's upper chamber of parliament, the Russian president admitted that Russia's birth rate, which had been temporarily buoyed by the social measures enacted by the Kremlin in years past, is “falling again,” and stressed that the country had entered “a very difficult demographic period.”[32] In the same address, he staked out a goal of raising the national fertility rate to 1.7 by the year 2024.[33] Yet even if the Russian government manages to achieve this objective, it would not reverse Russia's demographic decline, but only slow it slightly. The long-term trendline of Russia's population remains one of decay.

Just how significant is a matter of some dispute. As of early 2022, Russia's population stood at 145.8 million people[34]—a total which includes the addition of some two million comparatively new citizens as a result of the Kremlin's 2014 occupation and subsequent annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. But authoritative studies have painted a grim picture of Russia's long-term demographic trajectory. For instance, Russia's own state statistical service has mapped out an “average” path of decline of the Russian population to 143 million by 2035, and a “worst case” scenario of 135 million by that year.[35] A 2019 United Nations study tallied the data differently, and outlined a “median” scenario in which Russia experiences a population decline of some seven percent, to 135 million, by the year 2050.[36] Under its most “pessimistic” scenario, the same UN study projected that Russia's population could plummet to 124.6 million by 2050 and 83.7 million by the year 2100.[37]

Other prognoses are starker still. In a 2015 report, the prestigious Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANPEA) argued that, without significant remedial action on the part of the Russian state, the country's population could shrink to 113 million by the year 2050 owing to structural problems in Russia's population pyramid.[38] “In 10 years the number of women in the most active reproductive age (20-29 years, when almost two-thirds of all births take place), will fall by almost half; this will inevitably lead to a reduction in the number of births,” it outlined.[39]

Whatever the true direction of Russia's population, it is clear that under all but the most optimistic scenarios, it remains a downward trajectory rather than an upward arc. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's foreign policy priorities have significantly exacerbated this trend. By mid-March of 2022, for instance, as many as 200,000 Russians were estimated to have fled the country because of the war in Ukraine.[40] (More have departed since, although accurate tallies are not readily available as of this writing.)

Against this backdrop, Russia's imperial impulse has become something of a solution to the country's persistent population deficit. As seen from Moscow, territorial conquest has the potential to fix what social programs and state funding to date have not, and rectify the country's deeply adverse demographics.

Indeed, the concept of a “greater Slavic state” has long been a fixture in the geopolitical imagination of post-Soviet elites. In late 2001, the Russian government even passed a law establishing the legal framework for the Russian Federation to peacefully reabsorb a number of former Soviet territories.[41] Conceivably, this would include Russia's territorial acquisition of the entirety of Belarus, as well as parts of Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. Theoretically, at least, the basis for such an expansion exists. Belarus, population 9.4 million, is 8.3% Russian, but has been formally federated with Russia as part of a “Union State” since the late 1990s[42]—a status that makes it a prime candidate for absorption. In Georgia (population 4.9 million), Russians make up a tiny fraction of the population[43]—although their number is now growing, thanks to immigration spurred by the current war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan's population of 19.3 million is approximately twenty percent Russian.[44] Meanwhile, more than 17 percent of Ukraine's population of 43.5 million is ethnically Russian.[45]

The results would be massively beneficial to Moscow. If successful, American Foreign Policy Council president Herman Pirchner has noted, such an ethnically-based expansion would swell Russia's size by more than 20 million people.[46] Even a more modest version— one reflecting Russia's current, limping war effort in Ukraine—could see the Kremlin annex enclaves in Georgia and Ukraine cumulatively housing millions of ethnic Russians as part of efforts to erect what scholar Mark Galeotti has termed a “budget empire.”[47]

A EURASIAN CURRENT

But demographics alone do not provide sufficient basis to explain the Kremlin's neo-imperial maneuvers. The extent and resilience of the phenomenon is difficult to comprehend without understanding the ideological infrastructure that underpins it. That infrastructure is, at least in part, attributable to the renewed influence in Russian politics of Eurasianism, an early 20th century philosophy championing the cultural and political struggle between the West and a distinct Russia-led "Eurasian" subcontinent. In the last two decades, a noticeable reversion to "new right" balance-of-power politics has taken place among Russia's policy-making elite, providing the ideology with new salience. And the person who best embodies, and articulates, its tenets today is someone most Westerners have never heard of: the far-right Russian political thinker Aleksandr Dugin.

Since the mid-1990s, Dugin—a former KGB archivist, political agitator and activist—has emerged as both the public face and the most prominent champion of a revamped version of the philosophy previously propounded by Count Nikolai Trubetskoi and Lev Gumilev. Dugin's magnum opus, 1997's *Osnovy Geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoye Budushie Rossiyi* [The Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future],[48] lays out the main tenets of his revamped take on Eurasian exceptionalism. Central to them is the idea that Russia is destined to be an empire. Russia "cannot exist outside of its essence as an empire, by its geographical situation, historical path and fate of the state," Dugin has argued.[49] As a result, he posits, Russia is destined to be in perpetual conflict with the "atlanticist" West. Indeed, in a throwback to the theories of such strategists as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Halford Mackinder, Dugin sees contemporary global politics as an existential battle between land powers, like Russia, and sea powers (such as the UK and U.S.). This contest, in Dugin's conception, is intrinsically anti-Western. As he explains it, "the strategic interests of the Russian people must be oriented in an anti-Western fashion (deriving from the imperative to preserve the identity of Russia's civilization)."[50]

Yet how popular is Dugin, really? In the West, it has become fashionable in recent years—and especially since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine—to overstate the man's importance to Russian strategic doctrine. In numerous Western journals and periodicals, Dugin has been depicted as a contemporary version of Grigori Rasputin, the "mad monk" who held Tsar Nicholas II in his thrall in the early 20th century.[51] The reality is, naturally, more nuanced. Dugin's career has ebbed and flowed with the vagaries of the Kremlin. In the early 2000s, he served as a foreign policy advisor to a number of senior Russian parliamentarians, including the communist-"patriotic" Duma speaker Gennady Seleznev, as well as to high-ranking officials in Russian defense and foreign policy circles.[52] Subsequently, during the Russian government's more pragmatic phase—roughly coinciding to the Presidential tenure of former Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev—the firebrand ideologue was relegated to the halls of academia.[53] More recently, he has reemerged as an independent political activist and thinker, agitating in favor of Putin's Ukraine campaign and laying out new targets for Russia's eventual expansion.[54]

Yet it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact that Dugin's ideas about Russian greatness have had upon the self-image of the Kremlin's imperialists over the years, insofar as they align with—and provide justification for—the foreign policy priorities of those actors. For instance, Dugin's formulation of the Slavic parts of Ukraine as "Novorossiia" (New Russia) in 2013 and 2014 were subsequently embraced by the Kremlin and used in official propaganda in support of the invasion and annexation of Crimea.[55] His view of the "spiritual unity" of Russia and Ukraine has similarly been echoed in President Putin's unfounded (but deeply-held) assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" that must be unified.

Indeed, Dugin's writings have become influential precisely because they so adroitly weaponize "Derzhavnost," the idea of Russia as a great power that wields great strategic and convening power in the country's conception. As former Russian parliamentarian Sergei Kovalev has explained, "Derzhavnost is the view of the state as a highly valuable mystical being that every citizen and society as a whole must serve." [56] Dugin's theorems have thus gained favor among Russian elites discontented with their country's diminished post-Cold War international status. Russia scholars Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy have noted that Russian president Vladimir Putin himself articulated "Derzhavnost" as central to the ideological conception of the state that he propounded in his "Millennium Message," immediately upon taking the reigns of power in Moscow in the last days of 1999.[57]

Nor is Putin the only influential Russian politician to embrace these precepts. Sergey Shoigu, Russia's current Defense Minister and the Kremlin's pointman for its current campaign in Ukraine, is a known Eurasianist and adherent to imperial aspirations.[58] So, too, is Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who has praised the writings of Lev Gumilev, the Russian intellectual and philosopher who, in his day, championed the notion that the nations of the Soviet Union were all part of an Eurasian collective.[59] Then there is Vladislav Surkov, a top advisor to Putin and the mastermind of the Kremlin's concept of "managed democracy," who has argued in the past that "[h]aving fallen from the level of the USSR to the level of the Russian Federation," Russia has now "returned to its natural and only possible state of a great, growing ... community of peoples." [60] In a February 2019 article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper, Surkov went further still, lionizing Russia's "innate status" as a great power as a "starring role... assigned to our country by world history." [61]

Russia's current decisionmaking elite, in other words, is united around a common vision of historical destiny—one that views their country as an expanding, revanchist imperial power at odds with the prevailing world order.

SEEING RUSSIA STRAIGHT

Cumulatively, these factors—persistent imperial nostalgia, internal demographic pressures, and an appealing ideology of expansionist destiny—help to explain a great many of Russia's contemporary foreign policy maneuvers. They can also serve as useful guideposts for what the West can expect from the Kremlin in the years ahead.

This holds true whether or not Vladimir Putin remains in the country's top post. Amid the Russian military's spectacular stumbles in the early phases of its current war in Ukraine, and as the economic and political costs of the conflict have mounted for Moscow, speculation has run rampant that Russia's president might soon leave the political scene, either willingly or by force. In a Spring 2022 interview, Sir Richard Dearlove, the former Director of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, speculated that Putin could be pushed aside in a matter of months as part of a soft political transition in Russia that removes Putin from power.[62] Other scenarios have posited the possibility of a successful assassination attempt against Russia's president, or a "palace coup" of some sort orchestrated by his inner circle.[63]

What type of regime might follow any of these developments is unclear. While at least some hope in the West remains that, post Putin, Russia will trend in a more pluralistic and open direction, such a future is far from assured.[64] In fact, in historical terms, it is far more likely that Russia undergoes what political scientists Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz have described as an “autocratic to autocratic” transition,[65] in which Putin is replaced by another strongman or analogous illiberal figure. Once he is, the same strategic factors that have preoccupied Putin to date can be expected to weigh upon his successor as well, irrespective of the way in which they ascend to power in Russia’s fractious domestic political scene.

By understanding these drivers more fully, policymakers in Washington and European capitals can better predict Russia’s behavior, and its foreign policy priorities, in the years ahead. They can also, at long last, begin to formulate a policy response that is calibrated to the sources of contemporary Russian conduct.

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NOTES

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