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# Nationalism and authoritarianism in Russia: Introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses different aspects of the political evolution of Russian President and former Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the impact of his evolution upon the type of regime that has evolved from soft authoritarianism to a 'militocracy' and 'consolidated authoritarian regime.' The article discusses seven contributions to this special issue by placing them within the broader context of how the West misread two areas pertaining to Russia. The first is how the West by wrongly believing that Russia, being a member of G8, the NATO-Russia Council and other Western structures, continued to be interested in becoming a Western political and economic system. The second is the tradition, stretching back to Sovietology, of ignoring and downplaying the issue of how the nationalities question and different nationalisms could go together with democratic revolutions, transitions and, specifically, with Russian politics.

The introductory article next discusses the seven contributions within the context of: Russian messianism, the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World), how and when nationalists and fascists became mainstream in Russian politics, Putin's great power nationalism, Ukrainophobia and Russian chauvinism, historical myths and re-Stalinization of Putin's political system. The final section compares Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014 respectively and the growing xenophobia in Russian foreign policy.



## 1. Introduction

This special issue is devoted to studying, analyzing and exploring new scholarly ground in understanding the nature of Vladimir Putin's political system in Russia and in particular the evolution of his regime from soft to hard authoritarianism and a revanchist great power. In analyzing what Freedom House (2015) describes as Putin's 'consolidated authoritarian regime' we are conscious that political systems either evolve or stagnate because they never stay fixed in stone. We are therefore laying open the possibility for the stagnation of Putin's political system, as during the Soviet 'era of stagnation' from the mid-1960s to mid 1980s which is most commonly associated with Communist Parleader Leonid Brezhnev. In fact, the corruption, nepotism and cynicism that dominates Putin's political system most closely resembles the Brezhnevite Soviet Union.

The social contract Putin forged through high energy prices with his population began deteriorating during the 2011–2012 protests and has declined even further because of low oil prices, international isolation and a growing list of states, including his recent ally Turkey and the Sunni Arab world, who have become hostile to Russia (Whitmore, 2015). Alternatively, Putin's political system could evolve into what, still only a minority of scholars such as Motyl (2007, 2010, 2016) argue increasingly resembles a fascist system. Regime types in political science literature are always ideal types, and no regime (including

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Western democracies) ever fully fulfils all the requirements of the ideal type and therefore although Russia's 'consolidated authoritarian regime' does not meet all of the criteria of a fascist system (for example, the domination of corruption in Russia) this should not preclude us from discussing whether Russia is moving in that direction. In other words, what type of political system will emerge in Russia after the 'consolidated authoritarian regime' or will this remain in place indefinitely?

## 2. Western hopes clash with Russian exceptionalism

A misplaced hope continued to exist until the 2013–2015 Ukraine–Russia crisis that the Russian Federation was an imperfect system but nevertheless in transition to a system that would come to eventually resemble Western democratic market economies. In 1998, on the eve of Putin being first elected president, Russia was invited to join the G7 even though it had a weak economy and imperfect democracy. Russia continued to be a member of the G7 from 2005 to 2014 when Freedom House defined it as 'not free' and a 'consolidated authoritarian regime.' The UK House of Lords (2015) reported that EU-Russian relations for too long had been based on the optimistic premise that Russia has been on a trajectory towards becoming a democratic 'European country' which they pointed out 'has not been the case.' Russia's evolution towards a more nationalist, 'not free' and 'consolidated authoritarian regime' was therefore known for nearly a decade prior to the Ukraine–Russia crisis. Nevertheless, 'the West found it easier at the time to disregard them and indulge in the fantasy that Russia was progressing toward a liberal-democratic model with which the West felt comfortable' (Giles et al., 2015; VII). Related to this was the assumption that Russian national identity was evolving in a normal way through decisions made by the rational choice of elites and therefore nothing out of the ordinary was taking place in Russia (Malinova, 2014, 291).

A belief in a Russia in the midst of a convoluted transition but nevertheless heading in a Western direction could never have foreseen the impending Ukraine–Russia crisis. 'The war in Ukraine is, in part, the result of the West's laissez-faire approach to Russia,' a Chatham House report concluded (The Russian Challenge, VII). The West fundamentally misread Russia ahead of the Ukraine–Russia crisis and 'failed to see that although few Russians longed for a return to Soviet communism, most were nostalgic for superpower status' (Krastev and Leonard, 2015, 52).

Putin's turn towards a nationalist and revanchist foreign policy and his Ukrainophobia and xenophobia towards the West were clearly spelled out as early as in his addresses to the February 2007 Munich security conference and to the NATO-Russia Council at the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit (Putin, 2007, 2008). In 2008, Russia held its first massive military parade since Soviet times (Brudny, 2015).

## 3. Russian exceptionalism

Russia would, Putin and other Russian leaders assert, undertake a unique path of development because it is a Eurasian civilization that is neither European nor Asian and which is superior to the West. The idealization of the West in the late 1980s and 1990s had evolved into envy and hatred of the West, from which Putin promised to protect Russia because the former is seeking to impose its alien values upon the latter (Malinova, 2014). Bugajski (2015) outlines 11 aspects of contemporary Russian national identity under Putin as:

1. victimhood and the Weimar complex (a view also raised from a different perspective by Sakwa (2014));
2. alleged encirclement of Russia by hostile powers and Islamic threats in the Caucasus and from Syria;
3. imagined Russophobia lurking in Ukraine, the 3 Baltic states and Western governments and international organizations;
4. supremacism of Russian culture and Eurasianist civilization over the West;
5. campaign for Russian unity through the gathering of Russian compatriots and lands, an example of which is the annexation of the Crimea. Ukraine and Russia are the equivalent of eastern and western Germany which are destined to be 'reunited' (Tolstoy, 2015);
6. a programme of Pan-Slavism operating through the concept of the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) organization;
7. instrumental use of religion through a powerful alliance between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church that views the entire former USSR as its canonical territory, not just Russia;
8. attacks on historical revisionism (particularly dealing with World War II) in Ukraine, the 3 Baltic states, and central-eastern Europe;
9. cult of the Great Patriotic War and Joseph Stalin as a great war time leader (and marginalizing or ignoring his crimes against humanity);
10. pre-détente Cold War era anti-Americanism; and
11. dividing Europe through the provision of Russian support for populist-nationalist and fascist and extreme left parties which are in power or seeking to come to power in EU member states.

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## 4. *Russkii Mir*, NovoRossiya and Russian foreign policy

Not coincidentally, in 2007, the same year Putin gave his aggressive speech in Munich, the *Russkii Mir* organization was launched to unite and support ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living outside Russia (Wawrzonek, 2014; Blank, 2015). As Blank (2015) points out

> Moreover, Moscow subsidizes and otherwise supports a large number of organizations and movements inside all of its neighbors, from Kazakhstan to the Baltic, to ensure that the pot is kept boiling over the issue of the purported discrimination against these minority Russian communities and the Russian diaspora. Although these tactics emerged most violently in Ukraine, their origin goes back at least to Peter the Great, who legitimized his military campaigns against the Ottomans by claiming Russia was protecting the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire from discrimination. Such methods have continued to the present day.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2015) promised that 'Rendering comprehensive support to the Russian World is an unconditional foreign policy priority for Russia … we will keep enthusiastically defending the rights of compatriots, using for that the entire arsenal of available means envisioned by international law.' Blank believes 'such speeches and articles indicate the utter politicization in Russia of the ethnic card and diaspora for use as a state-breaking instrument abroad and a state-making one at home' (Blank, 2015). Furthermore, 'The idea of the "Russian people" is today a fully politicized and state-propagated concept, usable for the purpose of destroying or building consolidated states in the former Soviet imperial space' (Blank, 2015).

Six years prior to the Ukraine–Russia crisis, Putin told US President George W. Bush at the 2008 NATO summit that Ukraine was not a real country, a view of Ukraine as an 'artificial' and 'failed' state that continues to be extensively promoted in the Russian media (Tolstoy, 2015). Putin outlined a historical right to Ukraine's eastern and southern regions which he wrongly claimed were solely inhabited by 'Russians.' Putin's discourse signalled his intention of future intervention in eastern Ukraine in support of NovoRossiya (New Russia),[1] a project unveiled in 2014 that stretched from Donetsk to Odesa (Laruelle, 2016). Putin (2008) ominously warned NATO 6 years prior to Russia's annexation of the Crimea and hybrid war in the Donbas:

> But in Ukraine, one third are ethnic Russians. Out of forty-five million people, in line with the official census, seventeen million are Russians. There are regions where only the Russian population lives, for instance, in the Crimea 90 percent are Russians. Generally speaking, Ukraine is a very complicated state. Ukraine, in the form it currently exists, was created in Soviet times, it received its territories from Poland – after the Second World war, from Czechoslovakia, from Romania – and at present not all of the problems have been yet resolved in the border region with Romania in the Black Sea. Then, it received huge territories from Russia in the east and south of the country. It is a complicated state formation. If we introduce NATO problems into it, other problems may put the state on the verge of its existence. … Well, seventeen million Russians currently live in Ukraine. Who may state that we do not have any interests there? In the south of Ukraine, there are only Russians living there.

Russian leaders and media increasingly fanned anti-Western xenophobia, particularly from 2011 to 2012 when Russian protests alarmed Putin and his allies who viewed them as another example of Western interference and perfidy under the guise of 'democracy promotion' that had been pursued earlier by the Bush administration and now by the EU, an organization which Russian leaders believe is not an autonomous actor but led by a US 'puppet master.' After Putin was re-elected in 2012 for a third term he adopted a more radical nationalist agenda, particularly towards Ukraine and Russia's neighbours, a 'conservative values' agenda and even more assertive anti-US and Western foreign policy.

## 5. Contribution of this special issue to western scholarship of Putin and Russia

With scholars and policymakers sometimes getting Russia wrong in the run up to the Ukraine–Russia crisis we believe that the special issue will expand out analysis of the type of political system that has emerged in Putin's Russia. Valerie Sperling analyzes the macho personality cult of President Putin who loves to be photographed grappling with Siberian tigers, riding horses without a shirt or pumping iron with Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev leading to high levels of coverage in the international press. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev preferred the term "cult of personality" to condemn Stalinism and the cult of Stalin as leader and Sperling discusses if this term can also be applied to the cult of Putin and "Putiniana" in contemporary Russia and creation of his popular image.

A body of Western scholars have traditionally downplayed the importance of nationalism whether in the Soviet Union or in contemporary Russia. Chaisty and Whitefield (2014) argue that Putin developed an instrumental use of nationalism in the 2012 elections in order to counter popular protests but he was not a bona fide nationalist. Putin's counter-

[1] Putin has a very poor grasp and malleable view of Russian history, whether he is talking about the Christianization of Kyiv Rus (at a time when Moscow had never existed) or New Russia. There were 2 different New Russias in 1764–1802 and 1822–1874 and neither included Kharkiv (Slobozhanshchyna). By the 1897 Tsarist census Ukrainian peasants had become the majority of the population in all of the New Russia regions (Yekelchyk, 2015, 118).

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mobilization brought in 'conservative and nationalist intellectuals' such as Sergei Kurginyan and Aleksandr Dugin and united 'moderate patriots' and 'radical nationalists' on the basis of 'conservative values' (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2014). Nevertheless, 'We do not see the man (Putin—T. Kuzio) and the regime as defined by principled nationalism' (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2014).

Alternative scholarly analyses of Putin focus on 2 other factors: the first, his extensive and long record of corruption and collusion with organized crime groups and the second, on geopolitical factors (Dawisha, 2014; Gessen, 2012; Judah, 2013; Gaddy and Hill, 2015; Allison, 2014). There are many examples of politicians who combine a love of rent seeking with populist nationalism and these are not therefore incompatible traits. While geopolitical factors are important in understanding Putin's Russia these cannot be divorced from nationalism, Russian and Soviet history and myths and national identity questions related to Ukrainians.

## 6. Nationalism marginalized in scholarly studies

Downplaying and ignoring nationalism is not confined to contemporary Russia and has a long record in Soviet studies in Western Europe and to a lesser extent in North America where ethnic diaspora's had greater influence over the study of communist states.[2] A belief in modernization theory had assumed that national minorities would disappear in the USSR and Western European nation-states through ever greater assimilation by cores of peripheries (Hechter, 1975). Ignoring and downplaying the nationalities question in the UK was also a product of the domination of Soviet Studies by Russian experts who viewed the USSR through the lens of Moscow, a problem that to some extent continues to exist today. Scholars were ill equipped to analyze the growth of nationalities problems in the late 1980s and eventually the role of nationalism in the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 (Subtelny, 1994).

Questions of nationalism and national identity are also absent from (primarily US-based) scholarly studies of democratic ('colour') revolutions that have focused on the democratic nature of these transitions and revolutions brought about by electoral fraud. These have ignored how different types of nationalism can either support democratic transitions and revolutions or mobilize anti-democratic counter-revolutionary movements (Kuzio, 2001). Influential studies of democratic revolutions have therefore not systematically included nationalism as a factor supporting or opposing the mobilization of democratic and authoritarian movements (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; McFaul, 2005). Four scholarly responses debated Lucan Way's (2008, 2009) criticism of frameworks to discuss democratic revolutions but without integrating nationalism into their discussion (Beissinger, 2009; Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; Fairbanks, 2009; Siltski, 2009). Anti-Soviet mobilization proved to be strongest in the Soviet Union and central-eastern Europe *only* when movements espousing civic nationalism and democratization worked together in what is described as national democrats (Beissinger, 2002; Bunce, 2003; Kuzio, 2010a).

Focussing on electoral cycles cannot provide an explanation for how the Euromaidan, where civic *and* ethnic nationalism were important driving forces, could emerge outside these election cycles, nor could they explain the strength of the anti-democratic counter-revolution in the Donbas. Only civic nationalism is supportive of democratic transitions and revolutions while great power Russian, Eurasianist and Soviet nationalisms in Russia, Belarus, the Crimea and Donbas respectively underpin authoritarian regimes and separatist movements that back the *Russkii Mir* (Dimitrov, 2009; Leshchenko, 2004) and authoritarian leaders (Loxton, 2015). Great power Russian, Eurasianist and Soviet nationalisms prioritize economics, standards of living and stability over democratization (Shulman, 2005; Kuzio, 2015a,e). The Russian kin state provided ideological sustenance and covert and overt military support for anti-democratic forces in Eurasia long prior to the 2014–2015 crisis and more recently in Ukraine (Carothers, 2006). Putin's power projected through a macho culture, superbly analyzed by Sperling in this special issue, is the embodiment of stability and an antithesis to the instability of the Yeltsin era and 'chaos' and 'illegal coup' in Ukraine allegedly brought about through Western intervention and conspiracies (Myers, 2015).

Democratic breakthroughs in Central-Eastern Europe (Romania – 1996; Bulgaria – 1997; Slovakia – 1998; Croatia – 1999; and Serbia – 2000) and colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) cannot be understood without including national identity within our scholarly analyses. Opposition politicians seeking the path of 'returning to Europe' for their countries did so on the basis of a national identity that sought to leave communism, the Soviet empire and Russia behind them and forge and revive a new national identity within 'Europe.' Free elections and democratic rights could never have mobilized large numbers of people without recourse to collective will 'around which the enthusiasm and hopes of the participants were concentrated' (Zherebkin, 2009, 202). Yet 'collective agency' 'remain outside the scope of the majority of existing studies' because a majority of scholars place democratic breakthroughs and colour revolutions 'within contemporary transition theory' (Zherebkin, 2009, 204).

Placing breakthroughs and revolutions within transition studies leads to a teleological perspective where democracy is the end point, as in former assumptions about Russia. Yet, hybrid-mixed semi-authoritarian regimes are very prevalent in the world and democracy and good governance is not always the end result of democratic transitions (Carothers,

[2] When undertaking an MA programme in Area Studies (USSR and Eastern Europe) in 1983–1985 at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London my professors were convinced the nationalities problem had been resolved and was therefore not an issue facing the Soviet Communist Party or a threat to the Soviet Union. From 1985, just after I completed my studies, the nationality question exploded in the USSR after Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader.

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2002). Russia could have a 'consolidated authoritarian regime' for the foreseeable future or could either stagnate, as during the Brezhnev era, or in the view of Motyl (2007, 2010, 2016) is already evolving towards fascism.

## 7. Russia is not Ukraine and Ukraine is not Russia

To understand the different outcomes of transitions in Russia and Ukraine scholars should integrate different types of nationalism and national identity into their analyses. Weak attention devoted to civic nation building in the 1990s by President Yeltsin and Russian democratic political parties (Tolz, 2001) coupled with their over-focus on marketization and privatization, which were unpopular because of growing social problems and rise of a rapacious oligarch class. This produced a vacuum into which ethnic, imperial and chauvinistic forms of national identity could become dominant under Putin. Making it more difficult for Yeltsin and Russian democrats in support of a civic Russian identity was the blurring of Soviet and Russian identities in the USSR where the Russian SFSR had not possessed republican institutions until 1990. The Russian SFSR did not therefore declare independence from the USSR and after the failed putsch in August 1991 absorbed Soviet institutions in Moscow.

These factors facilitated Putin's rise to power and the evolution of Russia's political system as the antithesis of the instability of the 1990s into a 'consolidated authoritarian regime.' In contrast, Ukrainian identity from the late 1980s (and in the Soviet Union within the Ukrainian dissident movements) was anti-imperial and liberation-seeking, that is, national democratic (Beissinger, 2002). From 1991, nation-building was therefore an important aspect of Ukraine's transition of which the end goal was 'returning to Europe' which required a commitment to building a democratic system (Brudny and Finkel, 2011). When authoritarian Viktor Yanukovych sought to come to power through election fraud in 2004 or emulate Russia's authoritarian system and re-Sovietization in 2010–2013, Ukrainians mobilized first, to prevent Yanukovych from becoming president in the Orange Revolution, and then to oust him from power during the Euromaidan (Kuzio, 2015d, 77–116).

## 8. Great power Russian nationalism and fascism

There is inordinate evidence of the influence of Russian nationalism on Putin and the question scholars grapple with is whether it will lead to the building of a new type of political system beyond the current 'consolidated authoritarian system.' In 2005, the pro-regime youth movement Nashi, which is anti-colour revolution and 'anti-fascist,' was officially launched in Russia and United Russia signed a cooperation agreement with the Ukrainian Party of Regions whose leader, Yanukovych, believed he had been prevented from becoming president by a Western-orchestrated Orange Revolution. In the same year Putin began to reach out to White Russian émigrés and General Anton Denikin's remains were brought back to Russia for reburial. In May 2015, a two-and-a-half hour propaganda film called "President", produced to celebrate his 15 years in power, surveyed the victories Putin has won for Russia. These included the 'reunification' of the Crimea and exhumation and reburial of Denikin and white émigré sympathizer Ivan Ilyin showing Putin laying flowers at their new Moscow graves (Gessen, 2015). In 2007, the émigré Russian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Church in Russia were re-united.

Another source of evidence is the elevation of the career of an ardent ideologue of Eurasianism Aleksandr Dugin from the fringes to the mainstream of Russian politics long before the 2012 elections. 'Numerous studies reveal Dugin – with different degrees of academic cogency – as a champion of fascist and ultranationalist ideas, a geopolitician, an 'integral Traditionalist', or a specialist in the history of religions' (Shekhovtsov, 2008, 492). Dugin, as well as an editor of an extreme-right newspaper Zavtra Alexander Prokhanov, and Sergei Kurginyan represent the red and white wings of Russian and Soviet great power nationalism and fascism. These ideological proponents of Russian messianism and anti-Western xenophobia were increasingly courted after Putin was re-elected in 2012 through the Izborsk Club, the first Russian neoconservative think tank to receive state funding, and they influenced the third redaction of Russia's foreign policy concept released in February 2013, just 10 months ahead of the Ukraine-Russian crisis (Engstrom, 2014). Russia's foreign policy 'fuelled the views of the imperialist character of contemporary Russia' (Teper, 2015, 4), her empire-building; legitimized imperial rhetoric and entered the mainstream of Slavophile and Eurasianist ideologies (Teper, 2015).

Since the early 2000s there has been a takeover of the Russian state by the *siloviki* (security forces) who are nostalgic for the USSR and Soviet power and yearning for respect in the world, termed by Kryshtanovskaya and White (2003) as a 'militocracy.' These *siloviki* supported the growing influence of Russian nationalism within the political leadership. The influence of Russian nationalist thought and Eurasianism became Putin's main source of ideological nourishment, as well as émigré Russian nationalist and fascist admirer writer Ilyin (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2015).

One of the most extreme nationalists Putin has drawn upon is the xenophobe and fascist Dugin who threatened that Ukraine would cease to exist as early as 2009 and during the 2014 crisis called for 'genocide' to be committed against 'Ukrainians' because they are a 'race of bastards that emerged from the sewer manholes' (Dugin, 2014).

## 9. Nothing is true and everything is possible

In this issue, Paul Goble analyses propaganda as an increasingly important aspect of Putin's 'consolidated authoritarian regime' that is used to mobilize domestic support and marginalize and mobilize vitriolic xenophobia against domestic

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opponents and foreign funded NGO's and external enemies – the 'West,' particularly the US, 'Ukrainian fascists,' Islamic State terrorists and now Turkey. The clash between Ukrainian and Russian identities and the civilization projects they envision (European and Eurasianist respectively) have gone against the grain of scholarly expectations of a strong Russian versus a weak Ukrainian identity. Goble, in fact, argues the opposite is true and Ukrainian patriots successfully withstood Russia's annexation of the Crimea and hybrid war invasion of the Donbas, with a majority of Russian speakers supporting Kyiv. Goble investigates the intensification of Russian state intervention in the media in seeking to mobilize Russians against the Western-backed Ukrainian 'fascist' threat and in so doing forge a new and united identity. Goble believes Putin will be unsuccessful because of 'the fundamental weakness of Russian identity' and the sensitivities of the numerous national minorities who fear an evolution from a state-centre Rossiyske to ethnic-based Russkii statehood identity for the Russian Federation. Many commentators (Pomerantsev, 2014; Lucas and Nimmo, 2015; Wilson, 2015) have pointed to Russia's xenophobic discourse and television propaganda that greatly contributed to fanning conflict and violence during the Ukraine–Russia crisis, a subject analyzed in Taras Kuzio's paper in this special issue, through stereotypes of 'Banderites,' 'fascists' and 'Ukrainian nationalists' (Esch, 2015). The vitriolic level of Russia's television onslaught is reminiscent of Soviet propaganda barrages in the Cold War's pre-détente era but, with annual spending at $1.4 billion, modern technology, social media and political technology, today it is on a completely different and expanded level (Hutchings and Tolz, 2015).

## 10. Long history of Ukrainophobia

Ukrainophobia in Russian political and social thought has been studied by scholars of Ukrainian history, rather than Russian. Mykola Riabchuk's paper places contemporary Ukrainophobia in a historical context that stretches back to the eighteenth century where a historically informed Russian hegemonic view was first elaborated of Ukrainians as 'younger brothers' who should be both patronized and kept in their place. Russian attitudes towards Ukrainians are embedded in deeply held ethnic stereotypes in folklore and ideologically constructed in cultural and political discourses where Russians are the dominant group and Ukrainians the subjugated people. Kuzio describes how the Tsarist and Soviet portrayals of 'Ukrainian nationalists' has been consistent through and up to its revival by Putin's Russia. These ideological onslaughts are not confined to party political programmes but in fact are widespread in the media, scholarly institutions, political parties, NGO's and more broadly in Russian society. The basic problem is rather banal but nevertheless important, namely, Russia's inability and unwillingness to accept Ukrainians are a separate people to them, Ukraine is a sovereign state and the belief that 'Ukrainian separatism' is promoted by the 'West' to weaken Russia. Russian nationalistic views of Ukrainians are very common across a wide political spectrum and often include those who are traditionally defined as Russian democrats who, as Lynch points out, also support Russian hegemony over Eurasia.

Putin follows in a long line of Russian nationalists stretching back to the 1917 revolution who believe the West (Austrian-Hungarians, Nazi Germans, US intelligence and democracy promoting foundations, and more recently the EU) are seeking to break apart two branches of the 'Russian people.' In such a view, Ukrainian 'separatism' has no domestic roots and is being artificially propped up by Western conspiracies. Russian leaders merged Tsarist and Soviet discourse to come to terms with Ukrainian realities. In the USSR, liberal and nationalist dissent and national communism was collectively denounced as 'bourgeois nationalism' or 'national deviationism' while today supporters of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan and Ukrainian backers of European integration are dubbed as 'fascists.' All of them were allegedly in the pay of the West.

## 11. Russian chauvinism

Pre-Soviet and émigré Russian nationalism have increasingly influenced Putin's conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people. If Ukrainians and Russians are 'one people' then Ukraine is an organic part of the *Russkii Mir* (Wawrzonek, 2014; Blank, 2015). Putin's Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov (2015), talking of Ukrainians said, 'We are one people. Mentally, religiously, and culturally, between us there is infinitely a lot in common. Including language. That we are a single Slavic people cannot be disputed.'

Putin's description of Ukraine to President Bush as an 'artificial state' is echoed in over 50 Russian novels and books with huge print runs (some written by future separatist leaders) published in the decade prior to the Ukraine–Russia crisis and numerous films attacking Ukrainian-Nazi collaboration, depictions of Ukraine as a failed state and predictions of a future conflict with NATO and the US over Ukraine that leads to a 'civil war' (Brudny, 2015). In 2009–2012, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev headed a Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. Medvedev (2009) sent an 'address' (rather than a friendlier open letter) to President Viktor Yushchenko that claimed

> Russian–Ukrainian relations have been further tested as a result of your administration's willingness to engage in historical revisionism, its heroization of Nazi collaborators, exaltation of the role played by radical nationalists, and imposition among the international community of a nationalistic interpretation of the mass famine of 1932–1933 in the USSR, calling it the 'genocide of the Ukrainian people.'

Some scholars lay blame for the Ukraine–Russia crisis on the Ukrainian authorities for not taking into account regional pluralism and the interests of Russian speakers. In Putin's speech to the 2008 NATO-Russia Council, he mistakenly merges Russians and Russian speakers into one group ('compatriots'). These are not cognizant with reality in Ukraine where over 80

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percent of Russian speakers do not feel their language is threatened in Ukraine (Public Opinion Survey of Ukraine. Residents of Ukraine, 2015). Two of Ukraine's four presidents (Leonid Kuchma and Yanukovych) up to the Ukraine–Russia crisis were eastern Ukrainians. Ukraine has the largest concentration of free Russian-language television, print and internet media in the world.[3] Russia's claims of alleged discrimination of Russian speakers in Ukraine (Sakwa, 2014) and the ostensible reason given for Russia's intervention and annexation of the Crimea, does not accord with the fact the majority of them did not support Putin's 'New Russia' project (Laruelle, 2016). Two thirds of Ukraine's soldiers and volunteers in the Anti-Terrorist Operation are Russian-speakers.

## 12. Historical myths and re-Stalinization

A central battleground for the evolution of Putin's political system into a 'consolidated authoritarian regime' is the re-writing and interpretation of history which is analyzed from different angles by Thomas Sherlock and Dina Khapaeva (2009). Sherlock argues that the Putin regime is not imposing a uniform historical narrative that would support the building of a fascist system. Official use of the Russian and Soviet past 'are episodic and lack purpose, persistence, and coherence' which 'reflects the regime's lack of ideological conviction.' Partly this reflects, in Sherlock's view, the low levels of public trust in Russian state institutions. Khapaeva (2009) takes a different perspective of investigating what is behind Putin's policies of re-Stalinization, promotion of the myths of the Great Patriotic War and Stalinism as a 'Golden era' as 'a mass movement that is grounded in the unprocessed memory of Soviet crimes and atrocities.' Re-Stalinization and Eurasianism represent, in Khapaeva's view, the Soviet denial of individuality with the idea of a state-dependent patriarchal society and Russian historical messianism that creates a social basis for the further criminalization and militarization of Russian society.

Putin has promoted re-Sovietization (Kryshtanovskaya and White, 2009) and re-Stalinization at home, and placed centre stage the myth of the Great Patriotic War in his resurgent Russian nationalism. Stalin and later Soviet leaders who admired Stalin, that is, Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov, were ubiquitous covering 45 out of the 69 years of the USSR's existence. The cult of the Great Patriotic War was launched by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in the mid-1960s at the same time as the re-Stalinization of Soviet society and turn away from the liberalization and de-Stalinization of the Khrushchev era. In 1971–1972, the greatest repression since the Stalin era took place in Soviet Ukraine that targeted dissidents, national communists and the cultural intelligentsia and was followed by an intensification of Russification and de-nationalizing policies against the Ukrainian language and culture.

Gulag museums run by the Memorial NGO since the 1990s to educate the Russian public about Stalin's crimes have been reorganized by the Russian authorities and, incredibly, dedicated to the criminal secret police that ran them (Walker, 2015). 'In Germany, questioning the extent of the Holocaust is a crime. In Russia, saying the gulags were not so bad is now mainstream' (MacKinnon, 2015). Igor Gladnyev, the new regional minister of culture, youth policy and mass communication explains: 'If we talk about the gulag and political repressions, we have to consider the context that created the situation on the territory of the Soviet Union' and continues 'It's not a question of avoiding something, or of bias. But within the framework of historical events there were people who helped the fascists, and committed crimes. And there were those who protected their homeland and thought about the future.' 'The museum was dedicated to the political prisoners,' says Robert Latypov, the head of the Perm chapter of Memorial, but 'Now they say: "If you had Banderites[4] in this prison, then the museum is a Banderite museum." It is pure manipulation' (MacKinnon, 2015).

The contradictions between European-Ukrainian de-communization and de-Stalinization (Motyl, 2015) and Russia's re-Stalinization came to a violent head in the Ukraine–Russia crisis. Russia has returned to pre-Gorbachev arguments on Stalin's holodomor publishing articles with titles reminiscent of the Brezhnev era entitled 'Holodomor Hoax: The Anatomy of a Lie Invented by West's Propaganda Machine' (Blinova, 2015) that claim the 1933 famine was, and continues to be, part of the West's Cold War campaign against the USSR and Russia (Young, 2015). Within Ukraine itself, 600 monuments of Vladimir Lenin have been removed since the Euromaidan in Ukrainian-controlled eastern-southern Ukraine. Meanwhile, a cult of Stalin is underway in separatist-controlled regions of the Donbas, echoing the re-Stalinization taking place in Russia (Stalin portraits emerge in heart of Ukraine's rebel-held territory).

## 13. Georgia as a precedent for the Crimea

The special issue concludes with an article by Allen Lynch which analyses how Russian foreign policy has evolved since 1991 through three political systems (weak democracy under President Yeltsin, soft authoritarianism and 'consolidated authoritarian regime' under Putin). Lynch argues that Russian foreign policy is not an outgrowth of domestic policies in an authoritarian setting 'but rather from the interaction of that political system with other political systems.' Lynch outlines two contradictory Russian foreign policy goals of maximizing the benefit of its relations with the West and securing recognition of Eurasia as a zone of Russian 'privileged interests.' Lynch believes that these two goals are commonly supported by Russian liberals and nationalists alike and were pursued under Presidents Yeltsin and Putin 'albeit expressed in different ways over

[3] This is evident from any cursory glance at what is on sale in a newspaper kiosk anywhere in Ukraine.

[4] Soviet and Russian slang for followers of Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalist leader Stepan Bandera who was assassinated by a KGB agent in Munich in 1959.

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time and with differing expectations of being able to reconcile the two.' Frozen conflicts created by Russia's interventions in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova took place under Yeltsin, not Putin, who has himself 'waged war along the Russian periphery' in Georgia and Ukraine leading to deterioration in Russia's relations with the West in the second case. Lynch defines Putin's regime as a 'state-nation' with a 'strong imperial imprint' that will not fundamentally change if Putin were to be replaced because a consensus exists among Russians for their country to act, and be recognized as a great power.

Some scholars blame the Ukraine–Russia crisis upon the West for allegedly shutting Russia out of international organizations since 1991 and 'provoking' Russia by expanding up to its borders (Sakwa, 2014). Realists also blame Ukraine and the West and argue that Ukraine should become a buffer state within Russia's sphere of influence (Mearsheimer, 2014; Menon and Rumer, 2015). These scholars believe Ukraine's membership of NATO and the EU is too 'provocative' to Russia and that Ukraine should therefore be 'Finlandized.' Both groups of scholars analyze the crisis from great power perspectives with Ukraine merely an object of great power rivalry and decision making. The Ukraine–Russia crisis has tempted other scholars such as Kalb (2015) who also proposes a realist prescription, to write about Ukraine, although his study 'is reminiscent of a school textbook, but differs in its remarkably high number of factual errors' (Sobchenko, 2015).

A neutral Ukrainian state within Russia's 'zone of privileged interests' would not resemble Austria or Finland during the Cold War but rather Belarus under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. A majority of Ukrainians opposed the New Russia project and therefore do not wish their country to become a Russian buffer state and dominion, as indeed opinion polls show (Kuzio, 2015c). The Ukraine–Russia crisis, in the manner of all conflicts, has helped to forge Ukrainian national unity as a large proportion of those fighting the separatists are Russian-speakers and include Ukrainian citizens of diverse ethnic background, like the Russian-speaking Jewish community of Ukraine which supports Kyiv in the crisis. A majority of Ukrainians for the first time support NATO membership and the foreign leader with the highest negative rating in Ukraine is Putin (Kuzio, 2015c). Putin's aggression against Ukraine has served to produce the opposite of what he intended; namely, it has turned Ukrainians away from the *Russkii Mir*. The transfer of the Crimea to Soviet Ukraine in 1954 was promoted by Soviet nationalities policies as an act to commemorate 300 years of Russian–Ukrainian union since the Treaty of Pereyaslav and therefore Russia annexing the region is viewed by Ukrainians as breaking apart that friendship at a time when Ukraine was weak.

NATO and the EU have never offered membership to Ukraine; the 2008 NATO summit postponed membership for Georgia and Ukraine into an unknown future date while the EU's Eastern Partnership only offers 'enlargement-lite', that is, integration without membership (Popescu and Wilson, 2009). The West imposed belated and weak sanctions after Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and Moscow's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia threatened to invade eastern Ukraine at that time (Judah, 2013, 164) if President Yushchenko had refused to permit the Black Sea Fleet, which had participated in the invasion, to return to its base in Sevastopol. Six years later, Putin expected to be similarly treated in a lenient manner by the West after the annexation of the Crimea.

The framework for the annexation of the Crimea was developed by Russia as far back as 2008 (Allison, 2014) and Putin was not charting new territory in the Crimea 'He was circling around familiar territory because the Crimean operation relied on the Georgian template' (Gaddy and Hill, 2015, 263). The contours of how Russia would annex the Crimea was known earlier (Kuzio, 2010b) and Moscow invested in the hybrid war it unleashed in Ukraine using organized crime, intelligence services and military special forces (Galeotti, 2014; The Battle for Ukraine, 2014). Crimean Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov has a background in organized crime and is a leader of a small Crimean Russian nationalist group with ties to the fascist Russian Party of National Unity which members have fought alongside Donbas separatists (see photographs in Shekhovtsov, 2014a,b).

The West's weak reaction to the Georgian invasion sent a signal to Russia that it could get away without consequences when it invaded and dismembered a neighbouring state. After the invasion, US President Barack Obama sought to reset relations with Russia, a company headed by former German chancellor Gerhard Schroder built a gas pipeline from Russia to Germany and certain EU leaders courted and supplied military equipment to Russia. Germany built the training centre for Russian 'green men'[5] who intervened in the Crimea in spring 2014 (Rogin, 2014). Initial Western reaction to Russia's annexation of the Crimea and hybrid war in the Donbas was similarly feeble to Georgia in 2008 and tougher sanctions were only introduced after the shooting down of MH17 civilian airliner in July 2014 by a Russian BUK missile and Russia's overt military invasion of eastern Ukraine a month later (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). Russian leaders not only failed to understand Ukrainian internal politics, regionalism and identities but completely under-estimated the successful and ferocious fight-back by Ukrainian forces. Russian-backed separatists failed to capture and hold on to either New Russia or the entire Donbas and control only a third of the latter region. This makes the conflict far more of a Russian–Ukrainian war and unresolved conflict than in Transdniestr, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh where Russian-backed separatists defeated central governments and froze their control over entire separatist enclaves.

Russia is unlikely to end its annexation of the Crimea in the near future and it will therefore remain another frozen conflict in Europe. While the West imposed sanctions for Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory the Crimean question was not included in the Minsk-1 and Minsk-2 negotiations. More importantly, it will be difficult for the EU and US to lift sanctions without at the same time rewarding Russia for invading a foreign country and annexing its territory.

[5] They became known as 'little green men' or '*zelyonye chelovechki*' in Russian, because they lacked country insignia on their uniforms, but in fact were Russian military intelligence – GRU, or special operations forces. '*Zelyonye chelovechki*' also refers to outer space humanoids which come from nowhere and nobody knows who they are, a sarcastic response to Russian stubborn denial that these military forces had anything to do with Russia.

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Western scholars and journalists who are sympathetic to Russia continue to write about the Crimea as a region 'returning' to its rightful home of Russia (Simpson, 2015). Paton (2015) believes the 'Crimea is part of historic Russia, and was only given to Ukraine (by the same Khrushchev) as a post-Stalin — intra-USSR — symbol of change. Khrushchev was not ceding Crimea to a state independent of, let alone hostile to, the USSR.' Simpson (2015), Paton (2015) and others adopt a Russian imperial approach to Crimean history that begins in 1783 when the peninsula was annexed by the Russian Empire while ignoring 6 centuries of earlier Tatar and Ottoman influence and rule (Magocsi, 2014). Such a view would be the equivalent of beginning the history of North America with Christopher Columbus in 1492, Quebec in 1604 or Jamestown in 1607 (Kuzio, 2015b).

While sending wrong signals to Putin, Western policymakers and scholars who had ignored and played down Putin's nationalism did not appreciate that he was no longer just opposed to NATO enlargement but had also set his sights on opposing EU enlargement into Eurasia, a region that President Medvedev had outlined in 2009 is a Russian 'zone of privileged interests.' A year after the drawing of this red line, Russia launched the CIS Customs Union that was to become the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 with Yanukovych-led Ukraine as an important member. The EU's eastern neighbourhood was in reality a zone of rival competition with Russia in its western neighbourhood with only one side possessing hard power. In seeking to remove Ukraine from the Russian 'zone of privileged interests' the EU was not only encroaching into territory beyond the boundaries of the European Union but in Moscow's eyes was following an age-old strategy of seeking to divide the 'Russian people.'

Nevertheless, the hostility of Putin's Russia to EU enlargement-lite came as a shock and the EU 'sleepwalked' into the biggest crisis since World War II in Europe. 'The EU should not have been taken by surprise. The evidence has been in plain view' (Giles et al., 2015, 2). Georgia and Moldova, two members of the Eastern Partnership who seek to integrate into Europe, also lie in Russia's neighbourhood but Georgians and Moldovans are not considered to be part of the 'Russian people' and therefore Russian attitudes to them have never been as venomous as in relation to Ukraine.

## 14. Conclusions

The authors collected in this special edition expand our understanding of Putin's political system through analyses of his macho cult (Sperling), ethnic and cultural stereotypes and Ukrainophobia (Riabchuk, Kuzio), fanning propaganda and xenophobia (Goble), abuse and use of history and re-Stalinization (Sherlock, Khapaeva) and the consensus among liberals and nationalists to seek, and be recognized as exerting, Russian hegemony in its 'zone of privileged interests' in Eurasia (Lynch). Putin's evolution towards nationalism and Ukrainophobic chauvinism took place simultaneously with the transformation of Russia into a 'consolidated authoritarian regime' after the Rose and Orange Revolutions and these developments became evident in his ideological tirades to the 2007 Munich conference and 2008 NATO summit. As Lynch points out, Russia's demands for recognition of its hegemony in Eurasia, which was patently evident in its 2008 invasion of Georgia, always clashed with its desire to develop productive relations with the West and this came to a head in the Ukraine—Russia crisis. The crisis came as a shock because some scholars and policymakers had 'sleepwalked' through the earlier decade when analyzing, conducting and handling relations with Russia. In particular, there was little understanding of Russian attitudes to Ukraine that became progressively hostile and chauvinistic and which culminated in annexation and aggression. An important objective of this special issue is to throw a light on Putin's Russia and thereby to ensure 'sleepwalking' remains a feature of the past.

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