

Moscow's War against Ukraine. Comments from a Historical Perspective

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The eruption of armed conflict between Moscow and Kiev and the tension between Russia and the West has caused perplexity amongst politicians and commentators, some of whom took refuge in historical analogies. In Germany, state representatives were constantly dreading a “division of Europe” or a “new Cold War”, the United States accused Moscow of 19th century-style “great power politics”, while Germany’s post-communists as well as two former chancellors expressed their understanding for Moscow’s traditional “spheres of influence” and blamed the West for disrespecting them and thereby causing the crisis. Such historical analogies, however, often bare any concrete content and do not contribute to our understanding of the conflict. Rather, it is helpful to try to understand the recent history of Russian statehood, the political culture of its leaders and their view of the West. To achieve a clear view it is necessary to dispel some of the myths that obscure an analytical view of contemporary Russia.

Since the times of perestroika European policy has been relying on the assumption that the post-Soviet states are on a path to integration with the West. Despite numerous setbacks, it is often argued, that even Moscow has not left the path of convergence. This view made Moscow’s inclusion into the G7 possible. It also allowed Berlin to establish a privileged “modernization partnership” between Germany and Russia. Ultimately, this policy is based on the belief that Mikhail Gorbachev’s “civilizing from above” of Soviet politics and society was irreversible and that his policies were continued in post-Soviet Russia.¹ The West chose to believe that Gorbachev’s successors have set different priorities here and there, but that the Kremlin was generally willing to accept the rules of international institutions and international law. To put it simple: that post-communist Russia’s policies had little in common with the pre-Gorbachev USSR. This has been an attractive as much as a comfortable view of relations with our Eastern neighbour. It has allowed the political elites of the West to see a reflection of themselves in

¹ For my elaboration of this argument, see: BEHRENDTS, Jan C.: *Oktroyierte Zivilisierung. Genese und Grenzen des sowjetischen Gewaltverzichts 1989* [Imposed civility. Origins and limitations of the Soviet renunciation of violence in 1989], in: SABROW, Martin (ed.): *1989 und die Rolle der Gewalt* [1989 and the Role of Violence], Göttingen, 2012, pp. 401-423.

the Russian counterpart, assuming that in Moscow political decisions were taken along similar premises and according to a system similar to the Western one. It took the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the occupation and annexation of the Crimea, to destroy these illusions in Berlin, Brussels and elsewhere across the continent. Startled, we realize: Russia and Europe not partners, but adversaries. How can this development be explained?

A historical perspective shows that Russia's development after 1989 differs significantly from that of other Eastern European countries. Alas, these differences have long been ignored by the political class of Europe – widespread ignorance and illusions about the Russian state of affairs are part of our dilemma. A key to understanding Moscow's foreign policy lies in the analysis of domestic political developments in Russia. Here, three aspects deserve our attention: the political constitution of Russia, the end of liberal reforms during the 1990s and Moscow's view of the post-Soviet realm. While continuities in Russian political culture are striking, it is the task of contemporary history to name concrete milestones where the political leadership of Russia has decided against a continuation of liberalization and pluralization. With the disintegration of the Communist party-state Russia as well as the other Eastern European countries faced the challenge of establishing a new political order. Mikhail Gorbachev and his team failed in their attempt to transform the Soviet Union into a democratic federation. Nevertheless, by destroying the communist monopoly of power in 1988, the Soviet leader gave an impetus for pluralization. Throughout the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev and his reform team experimented with parliamentary politics as well as presidential power in the USSR without deciding for one of the two concepts. The historical hurdles they faced were immense: after decades of despotism it would be difficult to enforce legal standards and build independent institutions. However, the prosperity promised by a liberal system served as a strong incentive and Gorbachev's creed to solve political conflicts as non-violently as possible was an important prerequisite for civil change. But his successor Boris Yeltsin who took power in 1991 would soon change course. In the early 1990s he paid still lip service to the liberal reforms of his predecessor. With the storming of the White House in 1993 and the war against break-away Chechnya in 1994 Yeltsin reintroduced violence in Russian politics. The attempt to fill the democratic institutions of the new constitution with substance failed. Instead, a network of personal loyalty began to evolve around the president. Important decisions were made in informal circles and not in the newly established institutions.² Even before the seizure of power by Vladimir Putin, the institutional structure of Russia was little more than an empty shell. It projected the illusion of political participation to the public at home and abroad. After the year 2000 a new terminology, the terms "vertical of power" and "sovereign democracy", once again disguised the core of the political order.³ The strengthening of the state under Putin was mostly a chimera. Strengthened were the security apparatus and

² For a *longue durée* perspective on the importance of personal ties in Russian politics, see GETTY, J. Arch: *Practicing Stalinism. Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition*, New Haven, Conn, 2013.

³ For valid interpretations of the current regime, see GESSEN, Masha: *The Man Without a Face. The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, London, 2013; ARUTUNVAN, Anna: *The Putin Mystique. Inside Russia's*

the army. While some social services functioned more reliably than under Yeltsin and rising standards of living boosted the legitimacy of the regime, the dependence on informal networks continued to increase. Institutions like the State Duma, the Russian parliament, completely lost their meaning. The courts lost what was left of their independence and were turned into instruments of power. Local elections were cancelled and replaced with appointments by the Kremlin. The mass-media as well as freedom of expression were curtailed.⁴ National elections were acclamation of decisions already made behind closed doors: Political alternatives ceased to exist. The leader cult and the idolatry of state power replaced competitive politics. This tendency also holds true in the economic sphere: In Russia, a close connection to the leader can decide about the future of any business. Local as well as big businesses need protection from power.

The rise of authoritarian rule became possible because Russia failed to dissolve or reform the Soviet security forces in the 1990s. Although the totalitarian past was confronted in the media, it had little consequences for the security apparatus. After the failed coup d'état in 1991, the security services fell into a brief state of shock. But early in his reign Boris Yeltsin began to rely on the 'services' for his hold on power. For the men serving in the "organs" violence continues to be a political option, in domestic as well as foreign policy. The simple fact that the secret services were neither disbanded nor reformed was a crucial factor that prevented the establishment of a *Rechtsstaat* in Russia. Ultimately, the attempt to establish rule of law was abandoned in the 1990s. This meant that not only in politics but also in the economy, personal allegiance and informal practices became more important than norms and laws. Rackets and other means of informal protection became part of everyday life.⁵ The vulnerability of citizens before the state shaped the USSR and characterizes Russia today. This fundamental experience affects every citizen from the homeless to the oligarchs and even foreign companies that invest in Russia. A political system marked by lawlessness on the inside has little reason to abide by international law in its foreign relations - unless breaking the rules has consequences. During the wars in Chechnya or against Georgia, however, Moscow's leadership has learned that the West is not able to defend its values. The international community turned a blind eye to state terror in the Caucasus.⁶

Finally, it is crucial to understand how fundamentally Russia's foreign policy differs from the European mainstream. While after 1989 the Wilsonian principle of self-determination of nations has been accepted in Europe, the ruling élite in

Power Cult, London, 2014; see also GABOWITSCH, Mischa: *Putin kaputt!? Russlands neue Protestkultur [Putin kaputt!? Russia's New Culture of Protest]*, Berlin, 2013, pp. 33-76.

⁴ RYKLIN, Michail: *Mit dem Recht des Stärkeren. Russische Kultur in Zeiten der ‚gelenkten Demokratie [The Right of the Strong. Russian Culture in the Times of ‚guided democracy‘]*, Frankfurt, 2006; MOMMSEN, Margarete & NUSSBERGER, Angelika: *Das System Putin. Gelenkte Demokratie und politische Justiz in Russland [The Putin System. Guided Democracy and Political Justice in Russia]*, Munich, 2007; ARUTUNYAN, Anna: *The Media in Russia*, New York, 2009.

⁵ SATTER, David: *Darkness at Dawn. The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, New Haven, Conn, 2003.

⁶ GILLIGAN, Emma: *Terror in Chechnya. Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*, Princeton, NJ, 2010.

Moscow thinks in categories similar to Carl Schmitt's *Großraumlehre* of 1939.⁷ Schmitt argued that every imperial power has the right to establish an exclusive sphere of influence. Again, a decisive turning point can be found in the 1990s: after a short time of cooperation with the West Moscow's leadership began to revive the imperial gaze on its neighbours. Russian politicians started to speak of the post-Soviet states as the "near abroad". With this terminology Russia claimed an exclusive influence in the territory of the former USSR and - in line with Schmitt's theory - a prohibition of foreign influence in this realm. From the Kremlin's perspective, the West has been violating this regional order by integrating the Baltic States into NATO. The "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004 and the anti-authoritarian revolution in Kiev at the beginning of 2014 are seen by the Kremlin as further transgressions by the United States and the European Union, just as any social movement or opposition at home and in the "near abroad" is instantly identified as financed by the West and its secret services. The ruler and his inner circle, who believe to be surrounded by aggressive foreign powers that intervene in their sphere of influence, would perceive themselves as weak if they did not respond to these challenges. And since Moscow does not fear any serious penalties, it has decided to enforce its own conception of a Russian-dominated space of the "near abroad" with the help of its military. We can safely assume that it is prepared to use violent means not merely in Ukraine but in the entire post-Soviet realm. The post-Crimea Kremlin is openly acting as a revisionist power.

Those who have grown up in the years of perestroika and peaceful change in Europe have hoped that Russia would further pursue the path of liberalization. In retrospect, we realize that that Gorbachev's project was abandoned a long time ago. In the *longue durée* Gorbachev and his team were an exception of Russian history. It is time for the West to adopt a realistic picture of Russia. Europe has to deal with the Russian state which is confronting us now because Moscow is no longer willing to accept the post-Cold War order. We must bury our illusions and accept the realities. Only a clearer understanding of Russia and her neighbours will help to develop strategies to limit conflict on the one side and scenarios to stabilize the situation in Eastern Europe on the other side. It is crucial to realize that for a policy of partnership Europe needs a partner that accepts international norms. This is clearly no longer the case in Moscow. Where partnership is impossible, returning to the principle of containment is the only option. Yet, already George F. Kennan, the architect of US-policy in the Cold War, realized the importance of understanding Russia in order to limit its power.⁸ The mastermind of American diplomacy recognized that the West will only interpret Russia's actions correctly, if it decrypts the historical and cultural contexts that guide the Kremlin.

For European intellectuals it is paramount to stand up against the authoritarian temptations of our times. The enemies of our liberal order are gaining strength – both on the left and on the right. They are often sponsored by or enjoy close

⁷ See SCHMITT, Carl : *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung und Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte. Ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht* [International Spheres of Influence and Restrictions on Interventions for Foreign Powers. A Study of the Notion of Empire in International Law), Berlin 1939.

⁸ "X" (KENNAN, George F.): "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs*, 25, (1947), pp. 566-582.

relations to the Kremlin. These are challenging times for the post-Cold War generation of Europeans. In times of crisis of the European Union we will have stand up against the authoritarian challenge within the EU and beyond the Union's borders. Becoming illiberal is once again an option in Europe, the defence of our freedom and our rights needs to be addressed.⁹ Our liberty can no longer be taken for granted. And the freedom of Europe is tied to the fate of Ukraine.

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⁹ For a history of European intellectuals during the crisis of the 20th century, see DAHRENDORF, Ralf: *Versuchungen der Unfreiheit. Die Intellektuellen in Zeiten der Prüfung* [Temptations of the Illiberal. Intellectuals in Challenging Times], Munich, 2006.