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A NEW RUSSIAN CONSERVATISM: Domestic Roots and Repercussions for Europe

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Russia's reaction to the Maidan revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent critical deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West have reignited the otherwise diminished interest to the whole Eastern Europe all across the world. Most of politicians and experts in Europe and North America have admitted that the Russian military pressure against Ukraine was an "eye-opening surprise" for their governments, who underestimated the strength of neo-imperial momentum in Kremlin's strategy. Henceforth, professional community faces a challenge of properly understanding Russian intentions and policies, and translating the possible explanations into a policy relevant language.

Perhaps, the most intriguing question that is often asked in this respect is how consistent Russian international policies are. Indeed, the Kremlin has started its interference in Ukraine in February 2014 even without waiting for the closure of the Sochi Olympics, an exorbitantly costly project aimed at improving Russian image in the West and allegedly intended to capitalize on Russia's soft power resources. These intentions were apparently ruined by the absorption of Crimea followed by the crisis in Russia's relations with the West, including Russia's expulsion from the G8, the cancellation of "business-as-usual" relations between major Western powers and Moscow, sanctions against top Putin's loyalists, and the freezing of many diplomatic tracks.

Therefore, in the West the annexation of Crimea is widely perceived as a rupture with the previous Russian policies. Yet the Russian government perceives its action in Ukraine as a continuation rather than a cancellation of its previous efforts to "rise from the knees". In this paper this continuity will be interpreted through the analysis of a

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The question of who Russians are and where the borderlines of their collective identity lie are intentionally put in security framework and linked to the rhetoric of external threats.

Ukraine, in Moscow's eyes, is definitely not among the fully-fledged sovereign nations and represents "an interstice", a territory in-between incapable for autonomous and independent development.

The annexation of Crimea has to be understood as a practical continuation of the idea of the "Russian world" based on conservative mythology, including its civilizational component.

The state, according to the draft Concept of Cultural Policy, ought to distinguish between good and evil, the "acceptable" and "inacceptable", and ban cultural content that contradicts Russia's established "value system" and spirituality. "Liberal universalism" of the West is rejected in favor of the articulation of Russia's "civilizational specificity" and – presumably – impunity.

The Kremlin's emphasis on traditionalism and conservatism is opposed to liberal emancipation and de-sovereignization professed by the EU.

The distance with Europe seems to be a precondition for Russia's plans to institutionalize the Eurasian Union and Russia needs Europe as its weakened yet unfriendly rival.

It is with the EU that Russia symbolically competes and counter-distinguishes itself from, with the issue of either accepting or refuting European values of diversity and democracy.

conservative turn in Russian domestic and foreign policies that became the key concept for Vladimir Putin's third term in office. It is through this prism that we explain the common denominators of Russia's soft and hard power policies - from the Olympic Games held in Sochi to the territorial appropriation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. In the second part of this analysis we find out the most consequential effects of Russia's current policy toward Ukraine for Russia – EU relations.

Conservative turn

The major domestic factor that drastically changed the vector of Russia's internal and external policies was a shift from depoliticized model of governance to the progressing ideologization of the ruling regime. Genealogically, Putin's rule from the outset was predominantly apolitical and technocratic, with such nodal points as centrism, pragmatism, or adherence to the allegedly universal technical principles, economic standards and all-encompassing legal norms. Putin has inherited this depoliticized momentum from his predecessor Boris Yeltsin who - mostly intuitively - was eager to refute ideologies as a means to quell the Communist opposition. Putin's regime has incorporated ideological figures from both liberal and nationalist flanks of the political spectrum, thus having succeeded in erasing their ideological messages and transforming ideologues into state-loyal bureaucrats. Most of the key discursive markers of the regime were more managerial and administrative than ideological (modernization, innovations, 'Putin's plan', global competitiveness, etc.).

Yet this type of governance was always counter-balanced by a variety of explicitly ideological discourses grounded in such nodal points as "national idea", "Russia's mission in the world", "civilizational identity", "spiritual bonds", "moral principles", "protection of Russian speakers abroad", etc. There are voices claiming that de-ideologization started by Mikhail Gorbachev in late 1980s and continued by Boris Yeltsin in 1990s did not bring palpable effects, which explains Putin's search for ideologically differentiating his regime from the predecessors (like portraying the Yeltsin reign as a "malign decade of 1990s"). Besides, there was always a demand for ideology in Russian academic community, and in its conservative flank in particular.

Putin's articulations of the key ideological tenets of conservatism are based on two pillars. *First*, Putin's interest in conservative ideas can be explained by domestic considerations: in the aftermath of the mass-scale domestic protests in fall 2011 - early 2012 the regime needed to find new tools to solidify both the society that started questioning the legitimacy of Putin's rule, and the elite. This also explains Putin's extended interpretation of sovereignty as not only a political category, but also a spiritual and ideological concept that constitutes an integral part of "our national character".

Second, Putin's conservative narrative contains strong messages addressed to Euro-Atlantic countries who allegedly are "rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual"[1]. Yet Putin's appeal to the West is pretty ambiguous. On the one hand, his conservative message purports a detour from Europe to a loosely defined Asia. On the other hand, the Kremlin definitely has a certain political audience of "Russia understanders" in Europe - from the left ("Die Linke" in Germany) to the right (Front National in France) and therefore will be eager to use these groups for expanding its influence in EU member states.

In many respects, the Sochi Olympics – apart from being an exorbitantly expensive media show – did expose to the world a conservative Russia, with one of the torchbearers and MPs who tweeted a racist photomontage of President Obama, with Cossack regiments – suspected by many in the West in neo-Nazi sympathies - assigned to preserve public order in the Games, and with explicit anti-LGBT policy that prevented many Western leaders from coming to Sochi. By the same token, for independent commentators in Russia the Sochi project became a model of a highly hierarchical state that can function only through concentrating resources on a limited number of mega-projects. Sochi was one of them, Crimea – with all its dissimilarity – is another.

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There are at least three key concepts that suture Russian conservative discourse – sovereignty, unity, and normalcy. In the following analysis we shall unpack each of them to raise a question of continuity in Russia's most recent foreign policy events - from the Sochi Olympics that was widely perceived as an epitome of soft power, to the interventionist policies toward Ukraine shortly afterwards.

Sovereignty

Russia's conservative discourse is based on a great power myth that legitimizes Putin's regime as one of few in the entire globe that possesses "real" sovereignty. It is important to note that in the Kremlin's eyes sovereignty is a rare phenomenon, and its bearers are only a small number of states. Sovereignty as the key political asset of the state that can't be exchanged for any material benefits, including – according to Putin – a better quality of life.

1. Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the Speech and Beginning of the Meeting. Valdai Club web portal, September 20, 2013, available at http://valdaiclub.com/politics/62880.html

Ukraine, in Moscow's eyes, is definitely not among the fully-fledged sovereign nations, and this is for two reasons. First, in the Kremlin propaganda Ukraine is portrayed as lacking effective statehood and representing what the head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy – a pro-Kremlin think tank – Fiodor Lukianov dubbed "an interstice", a territory in-between incapable for autonomous and independent development. To this one may add Putin's remark of 2011 that "we" (presumably Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union) would anyway win the Second World War even without Ukraine – another gesture of disrespect for this country.

Second, in the Kremlin's judgment, Ukrainian authorities themselves refused to keep their – still limited - sovereignty due to the association agreement with the EU. In particular, this thesis was many times reiterated by presidential advisor Sergey Glaziev. From here stems a political conclusion – it is only Russia who can protect sovereignties of post-Soviet countries, provided that they unite under Russia's umbrella. This thesis is applicable to Moldova, Armenia and other neighbors.

The 2014 Olympics nicely fit into the logic of sovereignty. The ceremony of the Olympic torch relay was a particularly illuminating performance of power, basically due to its high public visibility. The Sochi relay was largely covered as a showcase of symbolic vindication of Russia's sovereignty in general and over its most politically sensitive territories (Kaliningrad, the Kuril Islands, the North Pole, etc.). It was not incidental that this performative celebration of sovereignty was paralleled by the legal prohibition of public speech acts that can be interpreted as questioning Russia's territorial integrity or the role of the Soviet Union in defeating fascism during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945.

This testifies that the most instrumental *modus operandi* of the sovereign power in Russia is either restrictions or bans, and Sochi Olympics gave numerous examples of them – mandatory registration of Russian citizens residing in other regions, no-go zones for private transportation within city limits, prohibition of public meetings unrelated to the event as such, control of consumption of liquids and food at stadia, ban on mobile phones usage by journalists, price control in hotel and transportation sectors, etc. The most radical critics of the Kremlin dated back the Olympic relay festivities to – and is aesthetically reminiscent of – the times of Nazi regime in Germany that for the first time used it as a PR tool for substantiating its political legitimacy.

Unity / Consensus

The political platform of conservatism contains strong ideological messages that are instrumentally used by the regime for unifying the society. The key contradiction at this juncture is that in attempt to rebuild empire Putin appeals basically to nationalist feelings and instincts. His key arguments used for justifying the appropriation of Crimea are rather eclectic and fragmented – the main reference points are the idea of the "Russian world" as the sphere of Russian interest and responsibility; the rectification of historical errors (the transfer of Crimea under the formal Ukrainian jurisdiction in 1956), and the necessity to resist expansionist policy of the West.

Those messages aimed at constructing a unifying ground for the conservative – and potentially pro-Putin - majority had as their direct effect securitization of identity discourse. In other words, the question of who Russians are and where the borderlines of their collective identity lie are intentionally put in security framework and linked to the rhetoric of external threats. Indeed, what earlier was articulated as verbal confrontation with Europe on moral grounds nowadays reached far beyond policy discourses and took a decisively aggressive form. The annexation of Crimea, against this background, has to be understood as a practical continuation of the idea of the "Russian world" based on conservative mythology, including its civilizational component. In the same vein, the proverbial "spiritual bonds" initially contrived for domestic consumption became a foreign policy tool that the Kremlin intends to capitalize on.

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Normalcy

The idea of normalization, another pillar of the Kremlin conservative discourse, has a strong biopolitical dimension that asserts conservative family values and traditional attitudes to the institution of marriage, sexual practices, reproductive behavior, and children education. This part of Kremlin's conservative agenda intends, first of all, to find a new legitimation for Putin's reign by means of discursively constructing and politically relying on the conservative majority. The conservative attitudes were crystallized in the draft Concept of Cultural Policy published in April 2014. In this document the Russian government for the first time overtly stated that Russia should cease naming itself a European country and, concomitantly, refute the European concepts of multi-culturalism and tolerance as detrimental for Russian identity[2]. The state, according to the Concept, ought to distinguish between good and evil, the "acceptable" and "inacceptable", and ban cultural content that contradicts Russia's established "value system" and spirituality. "Liberal universalism" of the West is rejected in favor of the articulation of Russia's "civilizational specificity" and – presumably – impunity.

In the meantime, this agenda necessarily presupposes the discursive construction of its opposite, as exemplified by "abnormal" corporal practices whose epitome, in the Krem-

2. Minkultury izlozhilo "Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kul'turnoi politiki", *Izvestia*, April 12, 2014, available at http://izvestia.ru/news/569016

lin interpretation, is today's Europe. It is at this point that the idea of Europeanization was negatively marked as to not merely being technically incompatible with Russia, but as an incarnation of liberal emancipation (same-sex marriages, gay rights, love parades, sexual perversions, etc.). In its annual human rights report the Russian Foreign Ministry slammed EU's "aggressive propaganda of homosexual love", along with Europe's "dissemination of their neo-liberal values as a universal lifestyle. Attempts have been made to enforce on other countries an alien view of homosexuality and same-sex marriages as a norm of life and some kind of a natural social phenomenon that deserves support at the state level. Such an approach encounters resistance not only in the countries upholding traditional values, but also in those countries which have always taken a liberal attitude towards queers"[3]. Such a negative portrayal of Europe has an apparent political purpose - Moscow intends to depict the enlargement of the EU normative order as an expansion of the sphere of gay culture, thus appealing to the conservative constituencies not only within Russia, but also in the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries.

The Kremlin has a certain political audience of "Russia understanders" in Europe -from the left ("Die Linke" in Germany) to the right (Front National in France)- and will be eager to use these groups for expanding its influence in EU member states.

Implications for Russia – EU Relations

Gradual deterioration of Russia's relations with the EU is a matter of fact. Investigation undertaken by the EU Commission against Gazprom and an angry reaction by the Kremlin clearly indicate how sharp the economic tensions between Brussels and Moscow are. In fall 2013 the EU conditioned the progress in visa liberalization by a wide list of domestic headways in Russia, including civil society empowerment, efficient integration programs for migrants, reform of the judiciary, improvement of administrative regulations and data protection, etc. From its part, Russia filed a legal case against the EU over anti-dumping measures. A lack of long-term strategies from both parts became the most deplorable characterization of bilateral relations.

Under a closer scrutiny it turns out that most of the legal concepts central for the EU are profoundly value-ridden, which means that normative gaps seem inescapable as soon as it comes to the implementation of the rule of law, right for assembly, freedom of speech and other legal categories The same goes for disagreements between Russia and the EU over the Energy Charter stretching far beyond purely legal issues and touching on different understandings of consultation mechanisms, investment protection, the reciprocity of the rules, and other dividing issues. In fact, many issues that the Kremlin portrays as purely legal – like, for instance, the 'Pussy Riot' trial – reveal what the Kremlin itself dubs a "civilizational conflict with the post-modernist Europe that forgets about its Christian roots"[4]. Russia's conceptual disagreements with the Council of Europe and, in particular, with its Parliamentary Assembly, over the content of the key concepts of democracy, is another case in point that strengthens political estrangement from Europe. This is obviously the case of the Kremlin's emphasis on traditionalism and conservatism, as opposed to liberal emancipation and de-sovereignization professed by the EU. Normative conflicts with European neighbors – mainly the Baltic States and Poland – over the interpretation(s) of the Second World War history, the constitutive event for Russia's European narrative, also rendered bordering effects on Russia's relations with the EU.

In the opinion of most Russian experts, chances for overcoming the split between the two parties are miniscule, which is due to resilient zero-sum-game mentality both in Moscow and Brussels. Against this background, many in Moscow believe that the Eurasian Union project ought to ultimately foster Russia's U-turn from Europe to Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region.

It is evident that self-reliance and self-assertiveness are playing an increasing role in Putin's foreign policies. With the beginning of the third Putin's term in office, the Kremlin has started more consistently to construct and discursively fix a political borderline (and thus accentuate political differences) between Russia and Europe. The distance with Europe seems to be a precondition for Russia's plans to institutionalize the Eurasian Union and bring Ukraine as close as possible to the sphere of Russian influence. For effectuating these projects, Russia needs Europe as its weakened yet unfriendly rival.

Identity-wise, Russia is no longer "Europeanizing", i.e. drifting closer to the EU. Moscow has not only wittingly accepted the value gap between itself and the EU, but began to proudly advertise its own conservative values that stand in sharp contrast with Europe's allegedly unchecked freedoms that, in the Kremlin's view, erode and corrupt the society. Consequently, according to the pro-Kremlin voices, it is only an insignificant group of liberals who promote in Russia the ideas of European choice.

Of course, Russia does have a record of policy initiatives aimed at de-bordering, which include the ideas of Common Euro-

3. Report on the Human Rights Situation in the European Union. Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013, available at http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-dgpch.nsf/03c344d01162d351442579510044415b/44257b100055de8444257c60004a6491!OpenDocument

4. Comments by Russian Foreign Minister spokesperson Alexander Lukashevich in Kommersant, 22.08.2012, available at http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2006739

pean House (initially coined by Mikhail Gorbachev) and common European economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok (propelled by Vladimir Putin but resembling very much old ideas developed by de Gaulle), as well as Dmitry Medvedev's proposal on European Security Treaty. Yet the positive effects of these moves were counter-balanced by multiple steps in the opposite direction. They include Russia's refusal to participate in the European Neighborhood Policy, the dislocation of Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad *oblast*, the appointment of Dmitry Rogozin with his controversial reputation in Europe as presidential representative in Transnistria, etc.

The well-recorded ambiguity of Moscow's policies toward Europe can be explained by the very nature of Russia's European orientation that is not a normative choice (as it was the case of Central European and Baltic Sea states), but a combination of two other factors. The first one is pragmatism of the Russian ruling elite: for most of them the EU is more an attractive economic partner and a successful market, rather than a source of institutional inspiration and normative learning. Secondly, Russia's attachment to Europe is due to the lack of self-sufficiency of Russia's post-Soviet identity: for years the Kremlin's discourse not only used Europe as a constituent signifier for defining the Russian Self, but sought recognition and legitimation from Europe. This translated into Moscow's hyper-sensitivity to each criticism from the EU and its member states.

For Russia, the function of external Other is ascribed to Europe (or the West in a broader sense) as representing the liberal emancipatory agenda.

Each of these two factors, instead of linking Russia to the European polity, only sustained political borders between the two actors. Thus, the dominating perception of the EU as a relatively safe haven for financial assets and a huge shopping mall detaches Russia from the normative foundations of European-ness. This explains the lack of progress in the implementation of the Four Common Spaces and in the Partnership for Modernization, deeply grounded in the normative understanding of the very concepts of partnership and modernization, and the commitments it implies. The Europe-centric structure of the Russian hegemonic discourse often leads to Russia's nervous reactions to many manifestations of its neighbors' national identity-building, particularly those related to their own interpretations of the past, very much alternative to the overwhelmingly victorious Russian historical narrative.

Against this background one may assume that what hides behind the Euro-centricity of the Russian discourse is a political distance from Europe that to some extent is grounded in Russia's voluntary and conscious self-exclusion from the European normative order. The Kremlin seems to understand that Russia's integration with this order would seriously challenge the key premise of Russian foreign policy philosophy, namely the equal valorization of each subjectivity as such, regardless of its intrinsic normative content. Paradoxically, the Kremlin tries to compensate this disregard of normative issues with the alleged adherence to an international normativity of a different kind, one exemplified by the principles of sovereign equality and "democratic" multipolarity. Yet under a closer scrutiny both reveal their obvious *Realpolitik* / geopolitical backgrounds that do not seem to be appealing to most of European countries. Many of them, though, have chosen to quite realistically adjust to Russia's imperial policies rather than directly challenge them.

Against this backdrop one may argue that the political distancing from the EU is a key component of President Putin's conservative project aimed at mobilization of public opinion on the basis of anti-liberal values and the ideology of nationalism. More specifically, Russia's policy strategies in Europe can be divided in two broad categories - spheres-of-influence policy and normative offensive. *First*, unlike the EU, in recreating its zone of vital interests, Russia is largely void of politicizing appeals from post-Soviet elites, and does not feel obliged to politically respond to its neighbors' aspirations. Neither Moscow looks for transforming political regimes of neighboring states, nor its neighbors demand from Russia more certainty regarding the *finalite politique* in its strategy. Russia's policy in the "near abroad" is aimed at reintegrating – militarily, economically and politically - (most of) post-Soviet countries under its aegis. This strategy is discursively based upon repeated references to concepts that are presented as indisputable justifications for Moscow's policy (like "civilization-based unity", or "Soviet legacy of integration").

In fact, Russia's strategy in Eastern Europe is a combination of two key arguments. One is the denial of alternatives for post-Soviet countries in their allegedly ultimate comeback to their habitual inclusion into the Russian geopolitical orbit. To fortify the political border that detaches Eastern European states from the EU, the pro-Kremlin speakers suggest that Brussels is unable to offer membership prospects for Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, and can only produce "imitative projects" like the EaP. The second argument is the accentuation of economic benefits that Russia can offer to its neighbors. Both points refer to arguments presented as "evident", "natural", "uncontroversial", and thus deserving no polemic at all. The Kremlin rhetorically denies that East European countries face a political choice between Russia and the EU, thus trying to void its relations with neighboring partners of political tones.

A few years ago Putin assumed that Ukraine's closer ties with Russia are not only in line with Ukraine's European alignment, but may even be beneficial for common integration with Europe "from a stronger position". Yet Moscow's verbal consent to come along with East European countries' Europeanization appeared false. The closer Moldova and Ukraine approached the EU, the tougher the position of Moscow became. Russia's operation in Crimea in 2014 has to be understood as directly instigated by ousting the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and the coming to power of pro-European forces. The Kremlin's policy toward Moldova is grounded on the same premise: as a reaction

to Moldova's intention of "giving up its sovereignty" (i.e., opting for a closer association with the EU) Russia reserved the right to reconsider its current non-recognition position on Transniestria.

The conservative agenda described above further deteriorated the Kremlin's reputation in Europe, thus demonstrating the growing normative distance between Russia and most of its European partners. However, the contrast with Europe intentionally constructed by the ruling regime can't be complete: the Kremlin has to admit and refer to the European roots of its cherished notions of conservatism and nationalism. Paradoxically, the Kremlin's U-turn from Europe only vindicated the irreducible centrality of Europe for the whole structure of Russian mainstream discourse. It is with the EU that Russia symbolically competes and counter-distinguishes itself from, with the issue of either accepting or refuting European values of diversity and democracy that has advanced to the very center of Russian domestic political debate, including the 'Pussy Riot' and LGBT controversies. The emotional detour away from Europe is basically staged for Europe itself, with its overt sensitivity to Russia's future policy orientations.

normative gap is underpinned by the Orthodox Church that lambastes feminism as a dangerous ideology unrelated to the "real" women's emancipation. In particular, Russian anti-gay legislation can be viewed as a response to normalization of homosexuality in many European counties. Hence, normative disconnections with Europe - that include radically different interpretations of the relationship between the state and human beings - are at the core of the Russian identity-making narrative grounded in counter-distinguishing a positively "conservative Russia" from a supposedly malign "liberal Europe". This can explain the dominance of the Kremlin's negative version of Europe in the Russian society as a major factor consolidating Putin's grip on power.

Another important factor is what might be dubbed a double denial of Russia's European identity, which is not only invalidated in the dominating discourse of power, but also refuted in many counter-discourses of opposition. Of course, the Kremlin that tends to celebrate its own negation of Russia's belongingness to Europe, and the opposition that deplores the value gap between the two, stand on sharply dissimilar ideological platforms. However, the major - and very much unfortunate - result of the concerted double denial is the marginalization of voices insisting on Russia's European prospects and the inclusion of their country in the European normative order.

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In the meantime, there are some constituencies in Europe that are attentive to Putin's conservatism, mostly far right groups and nationalist parties. Against this backdrop one may argue that the newly discovered conservative ideology constitutes the essence of Russia's soft power as manifest in a set of instruments aimed at boosting its international attraction through articulating policy platforms based in a conservative content.

Conclusion

As we have found out, Kremlin's negative portrayal of Europe is strongly marked by the ideology of conservatism that appears the most instrumental tool for recreating a pro-Putin majority solidified by the denial of the European norms of tolerance and diversity of cultural lifestyles. The key operational condition for the efficacy of the conservative discourse is the voluntary alienation from Europe as an alleged source of perversions and deviations from what Russia claims as normal practices of family, marriage and child-raising.

Political community-building often necessitates portraying certain outsiders as threatening the normative coherence of the in-group. In the case of Russia, the function of external Other is ascribed to Europe (or the West in a broader sense) as representing the liberal emancipatory agenda, with feminism, moral relativism, sexual freedom, and the alleged erosion of the institution of marriage as its key elements. The