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INCOMMENSURATE RUSSIA

IT WILL SOON BE a quarter of a century since Russia left communism behind. Its present ruler has been in power for fifteen years, and by the end of his current term in office will have all but equalled the tenure of Brezhnev. From early on, Western opinion of his regime divided sharply. That under Putin—after a period of widespread misery and dislocation, culminating in near state bankruptcy—the country had returned to economic growth and political stability, was evident by the end of his first term; so too the popularity he enjoyed because of these. But beyond such bare data, there was no consensus. For one camp, increasingly vocal as time went on, the pivots of Putin’s system of power were corruption and repression: a neo-authoritarian state fundamentally inimical to the West, with a wrapping of legal proprieties around a ramshackle pyramid of kleptocracy and thuggery.

This view prevailed principally among reporters, though it was not confined to them: a representative sample could be found in *Economist* editor Edward Lucas’s *The New Cold War* (2009), *Guardian* journalist Luke Harding’s *Mafia State* (2012), *Standpoint* contributor Ben Judah’s *Fragile Empire* (2013), but expressed no less pungently by a jurist like Stephen Holmes. For Lucas, Putin, having seized power with a ‘cynical putsch’, and maintained it with the ‘methods of terrorists and gangsters’, had ‘cast a dark shadow over the eastern half of the continent’. For Harding, under Putin’s tutelage, ‘Russia has become bullying, violent, cruel and—above all—inhuman’. For Judah, Russia was ‘an anguished, broken society’ that is one of ‘history’s great failures’, in the grip of an apocalyptic system in which, since ‘Putin cannot leave power without fear of arrest’, the West ‘should ask itself whether it will offer him exile to avert blood’. For Holmes, ‘behind the mask of an authoritarian restoration’ there was no more than the ‘lawless feeding frenzy’ of ‘an internally

warring, socially detached and rapacious oligarchy’, whose ‘various groups fight to grab their portion of massive cash flows’.¹

The opposite camp had greater weight in the academy, where works by the two leading authorities on the politics of post-communist Russia delivered—without failing to note its darker sides—substantially favourable verdicts on Putin’s record in office. Daniel Treisman’s study of the country in the first two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, *The Return* (2011), expanded on his earlier claim that Russia had become a normal middle-income country, with all the typical shortcomings of these—crony capitalism, corruption, income inequality, media bias, electoral manipulation—but one that was incomparably freer than the petro-states of the Gulf with which it was often compared; less violent than such a respectable member of the OECD as Mexico; less statist in its control of energy than Brazil. Most Russians felt their freedom had increased since 1997, and their happiness too. ‘Does it really serve the West’s long-run interests’, he asked, ‘to assume some unproven imperial agenda, to exaggerate the authoritarian features of the current regime, to demonize those in the Kremlin and romanticize its liberal opponents?’²

For his part, Richard Sakwa—the most prolific scholar writing on Russia in the new century: four major works, and a plethora of articles—argued that while Putin had taken advantage of the powers afforded him by the constitution he inherited, he has always acted within its framework, whose liberal norms have never been repudiated. What had emerged under his rule was neither a modern autocracy—there was no state of emergency, no mass imprisonment, no literary or visual censorship—nor a softer version of the Soviet regime, but a ‘dual state’, composed of a legal-constitutional order and a discretionary-administrative system, held in tension with each other by Putin’s centrism. ‘The essence of the Putin system’, Sakwa wrote in *The Crisis of Russian Democracy* (2011), ‘was to keep the two pillars in parity’. The rough balance between them

¹ Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin’s Russia and the Threat to the West*, New York 2009, p. 17 ff; Harding, *Mafia State: How One Reporter Became an Enemy of the Brutal New Russia*, London 2011, p. 292; Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love With Vladimir Putin*, New Haven 2013, pp. 2, 328–9; Holmes, ‘Fragments of a Defunct State’, *London Review of Books*, 5 January 2012.

² Treisman, *The Return: Russia’s Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev*, New York 2011, pp. 340–50 ff, 389.

allowed for a hopeful evolution towards full arrival at what he called ‘the “standard package” of constitutionalism, liberal democracy and free markets’ in the West, as ‘the powerful latent potential in the formal institutions of post-communist Russian democracy’ was activated: ‘At that point, the mimetic institutions of the standard package will gradually gain an autonomous life of their own, and the constitutional state will overcome the arbitrariness of the administrative regime.’³

Dualities

Such antithetical judgements were not, as typically in the thirties or during the Cold War, a product of differing ideological outlooks. All shared the same political standpoint, commitment to the ‘standard package’ of Western values as defined by Sakwa, whose mimesis is the gauge of Russian progress. What in their fashion the contrasts between them reflect are rather objective ambiguities of the system they depict. These run through the whole gamut of its economic, political and ideological forms. For the better part of the period since Yeltsin, of greatest concern to Western commentary at large have been the litmus-tests of any self-respecting capitalism—freedom of markets and security of property rights. How have these essential attributes of a liberal economy fared under Putin? By many a conventional indicator, this has been a business-friendly regime. Flat corporation and income taxes of 13 per cent would be the envy of Western CEOs. After entry into the WTO, the tariff ceiling on manufactured goods was under 8 per cent. Public debt, even after the global financial crisis of 2008, hovered around 10 per cent of GDP, with reserves of \$500 billion—a position of which the US or EU states could only dream. The current account has been in virtually continuous surplus since the turn of the century. Since Putin came to power the private sector has increased from 45 to 60 per cent of the economy; as he has repeatedly assured investors: ‘We are not building state capitalism.’

In the energy sector, however, which in 2011 accounted for 52 per cent of the value of Russian exports and 49 per cent of federal revenues, gas remains a state monopoly and the share of the oil industry in the hands

³ Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*, Cambridge 2011, pp. xi–xiv; ‘Transition as a Political Institution: Toward 2020’, in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov, eds, *Russia in 2020: Scenarios for the Future*, Washington 2011, pp. 233–5, 250–1. Elsewhere Sakwa observes that the dualism of the Russian system is not unique—Iran offers another example.

of the state has increased from close to zero to some 45 per cent under Putin. That private capital still controls a majority of the petroleum resources of the country makes Russia an outlier in the contemporary world, along with such bastions of free-market principles as the US, Canada and the UK—virtually everywhere else, from Brazil to Norway, Arabia to Angola, Indonesia to Venezuela, public ownership is the rule. But the distribution of titles matters less than the change in them. Putin, though well aware of the overwhelming popularity with which any general reversal of the booty-privatizations—*prikhvatizatsiya*—of the nineties would have been greeted, rejected any such notion. Nonetheless, in breaking the power of the single most ambitious and ruthless oligarch of the Yeltsin era with the expropriation of the Yukos empire, he altered the landscape of wealth and privilege in one fell blow. The fate of Khodorkovsky, glamorized in local and overseas media as a titan of New Russian entrepreneurship, sent an unequivocal message to his fellow plunderers. They could keep their billions, but on sufferance. Henceforward, no oligarch should think of challenging the power of the state, and when required, all should be ready to do its bidding. Where it mattered, at the heights of the economy, private property was not unconditional. It was concessionary—or, as some would have it, in a vocabulary deriving not so much from nineteenth-century colonialism as sixteenth-century absolutism—not unlike a modern version of the *pomestie*, the revocable lands granted his servitors by Ivan IV.⁴

The origins of this hallmark of Putin's system lay in his formative experience in the landscape of post-Soviet society. After making the October Revolution in the capital city of imperial Russia, the Bolsheviks moved the seat of power from Petrograd to Moscow, as more defensible during the Civil War. Thereafter, across the lifespan of the USSR, what became Leningrad was gradually reduced to a political dead-end, the career of local leaders all but invariably cut short by death or disgrace. With the opening of the Russian economy in the nineties, making a renamed St Petersburg once again the city most oriented geographically and culturally to the West, as its founder had intended it to be, its possibilities altered. Arriving back from service with the KGB in Dresden, Putin

⁴ Compare Gerald Easter, 'Revenue Imperatives: State over Market in Post-Communist Russia', in Neil Robinson, ed., *The Political Economy of Russia*, Lanham 2013, pp. 62–6, with William Tompson, 'Putin and the "Oligarchs": a Two-Sided Commitment Problem', in Alex Pravda, ed., *Leading Russia: Putin in Perspective: Essays in Honour of Archie Brown*, New York 2005, pp. 200–1.

became in no time assistant to its new mayor Sobchak, a liberal hero of the hour in 1991, who put him in charge of the city's foreign economic relations. There he was at the centre of criss-crossing networks of political influence and business manoeuvre, bonding neo-entrepreneurs and veteran security personnel with legal and financial fixers of every sort, who in due course would supply the core of his regime. Towards the end of the decade Sobchak himself, under investigation for massive corruption, fled to Paris with the help of Putin, by then working in the Kremlin. Otherwise, most of the leading ornaments of the system that emerged after 2000 came from the web of *pitertsy*: among others, the neo-liberal hawks Chubais, Kudrin and Gref, the intelligence operatives Sechin, Ivanov and Yakunin, the security chiefs Patrushev and Bortnikov, the legal guns Medvedev and Kozak, and the billionaire personal cronies of the President, Timchenko and the Rotenberg brothers.⁵

Within this constellation, where personal fortunes have been made by all, no clear line of demarcation has ever separated economic liberals from statist *siloviki*: private accumulation of assets is politically constituted on every side. But forming a congeries rather than a clan, personal conflicts and shifting alignments are endemic to it, allowing Putin to shuffle positions and balance interests at will, as arbiter of the interflexion of state and capital at large. The most intelligent of his 'political technicians'—advisers in the management of opinion—has offered a vivid account of the outlook behind such statecraft. In early 2012 Gleb Pavlovsky explained: 'Putin is a Soviet figure who understood the coming of capitalism in a Soviet way. We were all taught that capitalism is a kingdom of demagogues, behind whom stands big money, and a military machine which aspires to control the world. It's a very clear, simple picture and I think that Putin had this in his head, not as an official ideology but as a form of common sense. That is, of course, we were idiots; we tried to build a fair society when we should have been making money. For if we had made more money than the western capitalists then we could have bought them up. Or we could have created a weapon which they didn't possess. So that's it. It was a game we lost because we didn't

⁵ For a generally acute and documented analysis of the St Petersburg nexus, based also on personal contacts, see Thane Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia*, Cambridge, MA, pp. 231–71, which nevertheless glides politely past the misfortunes of Sobchak, whose figure and fate are trenchantly depicted by Masha Gessen in *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, New York 2012, pp. 91–3, 124–5, 127, 134–44.

do several simple things: we didn't create our own class of capitalists, we didn't give the kind of predators described to us a chance to appear and devour their predators. These were Putin's thoughts and I don't think they've changed significantly since.⁶

The oligarchs created under Yeltsin had not understood their *ultima ratio*, and with Yukos had to be taught it. But there was no question of the need for their species. Vladislav Surkov, a flashier *consigliere*, told a reporter in 2011 that Putin realized any general dispossession of the oligarchs was impossible because there were not enough capable entrepreneurs to replace them. The pool of businessmen was 'very thin and very precious . . . they are the bearers of capital, of intellect, of technologies'. So it followed that 'the oil men are no less important than the oil; the state has to make the most of both'.⁷ In this economic syntax, the higher subject is the last.

Order's guarantor

What of the political ingredients of the standard package? Putin has always insisted that the society over which he rules is a democracy. Few dispute that it is not a police or military dictatorship. Freedom of expression as such, in print or online, is not much less than in the West. Opportunities to exercise it in television or the press are far fewer, but little trammelled on the web, where Russia now boasts the largest internet public in Europe. Freedom of travel is well established. There is more electronic surveillance of citizens in the United States. Opposition parties, however nominal, are regularly elected to parliament. A constitution whose passage was hailed by the West remains untouched. International jurisdiction by the European Court of Human Rights is accepted. In domestic law, most civil jurisprudence proceeds without interference. Lineaments of a *Rechtsstaat* are not all imaginary.

Enclosing them, however, is another, supervenient order. The constitution itself is the fruit of fraud—the faking of votes in a referendum

⁶ Gleb Pavlovsky, interviewed by Tom Parfitt, published for the first time in NLR 88, July–August 2014, p. 56.

⁷ See Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Washington 2013, p. 209; Yelena Tregubova, *Baiki kremlyovskogo diggera*, Moscow 2003, pp. 349–50.

that Yeltsin's own control commission exposed, around which Western scholars and reporters have taken care to cast a mantle of silence. No election free of forgery or coercion has ever taken place since the fall of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's victory in 1996, greeted with special applause in the White House and Downing Street, was the most notorious confiscation of the popular will: sixteen years later Medvedev, a President elected under the same system, openly admitted that it was the sub-communist Zyuganov who had actually won the 1996 contest.⁸ Putin, unlike Yeltsin, would have achieved his presidential victories, if not the scale of them, even without distortion of the results; but the votes for his parliamentary décor, United Russia, have never corresponded to any real support for it.⁹ Under the constitution, substantive division of powers scarcely exists. At higher levels, the judiciary enacts the will of the Kremlin. Since Yeltsin shelled the Duma, the legislature has been a largely token body. Even the government is less than a genuine executive, since not only is the Prime Minister appointed by the President (save where Putin appointed himself) and can be dismissed by him, but the presidency enjoys sweeping powers above the government as such. The nub of the political system is a 'super-presidentialism' without constitutional equivalent in any major state of the contemporary world.

Buttressing the machinery of stretched or fictive representation is an updated and expanded machinery of coercion. Since Yeltsin the size of the federal and local bureaucracy has more than doubled, to some 1.7 million. Under Putin the security apparatus has kept in step, expenditure on it increasing over twelve-fold. The FSB has grown to a corps of 350,000, forming a denser grid across society than the KGB of old, and supplying much of the top layer of regional administration.¹⁰ The war zones of the North Caucasus aside, direct repression is handled by OMON squads of the MVD, riot police deployed against unauthorized protests or demonstrations. Contract killings, persisting from the time of Yeltsin and the oligarchs, are rarely clarified. Binding administrative, representative and repressive institutions into a common system is the glue of corruption, ubiquitous at all levels of government. Bribes and back-handers are

⁸ For a full report, see *Time*, 24 February 2012.

⁹ The best detailed analysis of the fabrication of electoral results under Yeltsin and early Putin can be found in M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*, New York 2005, pp. 30–81.

¹⁰ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, p. 391; Judah, *Fragile Empire*, pp. 100–1.

reckoned by one authority to run into twelve figures a year:¹¹ cash sealing and subsuming force and consent in the stabilization of power.

So much for the internal bases of the regime. The standard package, however, by progress towards which it stood to be measured by the West, includes one further element that scarcely needed to be spelt out, since it was written into its definition as such: ideological commitment to the international community that embodies it, as a certificate of the requisite mimesis. For Washington and Brussels, construction of a modern democracy is inseparable from alignment with the Euro-American ecumene. How far did Russia meet this condition? At the outset of his rule, Putin insisted not only that the country belonged historically to Europe, but that it shared an identity with its most advanced region—‘We are West Europeans’. He even suggested it might join NATO. If subsequent declarations were more tempered, the regime and its media never ceased to invoke the common values of Western civilization, defended by Russia alongside the US and EU, in its battle against contemporary terrorism. Diplomatically, Putin was the first to express solidarity with Bush after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon; closed down Soviet bases in Cuba and Vietnam; opened Russian airspace for American supply-lines to Afghanistan; made little case of NATO expansion to the Baltics; ran down, rather than building up, his country’s military establishment—so many pointed demonstrations that Russia was a reliable partner of the West, and staunch member of the international community.

But from the start there was always a caveat. Moscow had abandoned any pretension to offer an alternative to the civilization of capital and its political forms. But it had not relinquished its right to autonomy within it. Russia would continue to uphold traditions of its own, stretching far back in its history. In his ‘Millennium Message’ on the threshold of his presidency, Putin explained the central theme of these:

For us, the state and its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and the people. For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly to fight against. Quite the

¹¹ Richard Sakwa, ‘Systemic Stalemate: *Reiderstvo* and the Dual State’, in Robinson, ed., *The Political Economy of Russia*, p. 74, cites a figure of \$240 billion—surely an exaggeration, but that such an estimate is even possible speaks for itself.

contrary, it is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and the main driving force of any change.¹²

Abroad, that meant fulfilling the duties of *derzhavnost'*: Russia would continue to act as one of the Great Powers it had been since the eighteenth century.¹³ The contradiction between this vocabulary of the past and the normative discourse of an 'international community' in which any mention of hierarchy is banished, the better to enforce the hegemony of its overlord in reality, could hardly escape notice. In due course, as the United States appeared little moved by Putin's overtures towards it, a doctrine designed to bridge the gap between the two was developed. What Russia stood for was a 'sovereign democracy', the noun reiterating adherence to the standard package, the adjective its index of deviation from it. The country would not be merely mimetic, either at home or abroad. The West would have to get used to that.

I. SHOCKS

So matters stood as Putin's second presidency came to an end in the spring of 2008, after an unbroken run of rapid economic growth, rising living standards, political stability and nation-wide popularity. As an apotheosis, it was short-lived. Since then four successive crises have shaken the regime, affecting one after another of its bases. The first struck within a few months, when the shock-waves of the Western financial crisis reached Russia. With its consistently high export surplus, the state had paid down the foreign debt accumulated under Yeltsin and built up ample reserves. But private firms and public banks had borrowed recklessly abroad, against security of state guarantees, in a credit bubble that nearly tripled their overseas liabilities in 2006–07.¹⁴ When short-term loans were called in by Western creditors caught by the Wall Street crash, and oil prices plummeted from \$147 to \$34 a barrel, the Russian stock market lost a third of its value virtually overnight. Massive

¹² 29 December 2012: see Hill and Gaddy, *Mr Putin*, p. 36.

¹³ Pavlovsky: 'Putin was one of the people who until the end of the 1990s were passively waiting for the moment of *revanche*. By *revanche* I mean the resurrection of a great state, in which we had lived, which we became used to. Not a totalitarian one, of course, but a state that could be respected': NLR 88, p. 56.

¹⁴ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, p. 362.

injection of reserve funds into the banking system prevented a general collapse, but the ensuing recession was the deepest of any major economy in the world—GDP dropping by 7.9 per cent in 2008.

By 2010 the economy had pulled out of the crisis, but the time of budgets in the black was over. To preserve its popular support, the regime had to sustain consumption with increased public expenditure of the kind that its neo-liberal hawks had always resisted: oil surpluses traditionally parked by the Finance Ministry in sovereign funds and deposits abroad now had to be spent on increasing pensions and other social benefits. Deficits would henceforward be the norm. But the boom was gone, growth slowing towards stalling speed in its aftermath. Concessionary capitalism had failed to renew the country's physical stock or expand its technological frontier. The windfall profits of the energy sector had been put to little productive use, its plutocrats continuing to acquire real estate and financial assets abroad rather than modernize the industry at home. By 2007, investment had fallen 40 per cent below the last year of the Soviet Union, and at a current average of 20 per cent of GDP remains less than half that of China and two-thirds that of India—both countries possessing more globally competitive firms than Russia.¹⁵ In the oil industry that remains decisive for the future of the country, yields have been steadily falling, as readily exploitable fields start to run out—a four-fold increase of investment between 2006–10 generating only an extra 5 per cent of output. Across the economy, where manufactures account for less than a fifth of production, performance was little better: labour productivity is stuck at just over two-fifths of the levels of Western Europe or the US.¹⁶ The revenue horizon of the regime was narrowing.

Reduced economic circumstances were followed by political troubles. Careful to preserve the constitutional legitimacy that acted in part as a shield of his standing abroad, Putin passed the presidency to his aide Medvedev, picked as the figure in his entourage best calculated to reassure the West and liberal opinion of the progressive trajectory of the regime. But rather than withdrawing from the stage, even for an interim, he moved to the White House as Prime Minister. The effect was

¹⁵ Paul Christensen, 'Russia as Semiperiphery: Political Economy, the State, and Society in the Contemporary World System', in Robinson, ed., *The Political Economy of Russia*, p. 184.

¹⁶ Vladimir Popov, 'Russia Redux?', NLR 44, March–April 2007, pp. 42–3; *Financial Times*, 26 September 2013; World Bank, *Russian Economic Report*, Spring 2012, p. 9.

to suggest a personalized embodiment of the dual state as theorized by Sakwa. Mocked by its critics as a ‘tandemocracy’, the arrangement back-fired. Medvedev, wishing to create a constituency of his own for a second term in the Kremlin, spoke out against fraud, corruption, lawlessness—‘legal nihilism’—and technological stagnation, wooed the independent media, and declared there could be no trade-off between welfare and freedom. But to these pronouncements corresponded no significant changes in the political system: rather, in one pointed respect intensification of its cast, with an extension of future presidencies from four to six years. The result was to raise hopes of reform in liberal circles, only to stoke their frustration when these were disappointed.

Meanwhile, Putin for his part became increasingly edgy at the pretensions of his place-holder, frictions coming to the surface over Russian support for NATO bombardment of Libya, justified as a salutary blow against barbarism by Medvedev, but a misuse of a Security Council resolution for Putin. By the autumn of 2011, leading political technicians—both Pavlovsky and Surkov—had defected to the camp of those more or less openly calling for a second term for Medvedev, and expectations were high in Moscow that with it, emancipated from his mentor, he would introduce an overdue liberalization of the regime. Dispelling the illusion, Putin announced in September, a crestfallen Medvedev at his side, that by ‘long-standing agreement’—manifestly untrue—the two would now swap jobs, and he would return to the presidency. This casting of positions, making too tactlessly clear who was grandmaster, was a miscalculation, provoking indignation rather than indifference or resignation in *le tout Moscou*. Worse followed, when in December more blatant fraud than ever was employed to cover a sharp drop in support for United Russia. This time reaction in the capital was explosive, up to 100,000 demonstrating against the regime—more than democrats could ever muster in the days of *perestroika* and its end. For the first time, Putin faced widespread opposition in the centre of the country, with weaker ripple effects in quite a number of outlying towns.

But in society at large, some way off a critical mass. Drawn from the professional middle class of a metropolis set apart from the rest of Russia’s cities by an exceptional concentration of rents and services, most of the protesters in Moscow came from a privileged minority of the population, in which the old-style intelligentsia is being overtaken by a younger stratum of ‘creatives’, in the admiring Western term, from the worlds

of advertising, fashion, public relations, programming, consultancy and the like. Though predominantly liberal in outlook, the range of demonstrators extended to nationalist groups on one side and leftist currents on the other—an ideological heterogeneity reflected in the unstable public symbol of the opposition, the xenophobe blogger Alexei Navalny, hammer not only of millionaire crooks but penniless migrants. Beyond calls for clean elections and honest officials, the gamut of dissent lacked any unifying programme capable of broadening its appeal to the majority of the population that does not enjoy its advantages, for whom material hardship—inequality, insecurity, poverty, inefficiency—matters more than juridical rectitude. As things stand, rejection of the formal structure of the regime without criticism of its social substance is unlikely to produce a popular awakening.¹⁷ Navalny's recipe for liberation—ten brave businessmen and the government will fall—speaks for itself.

To counter the challenge in the centre of Moscow, Putin bussed in public employees, workers and young toughs from the suburbs for noisy demonstrations of support, and mustered the full weight of the administration and state media for his re-election as President in March. Victory came without difficulty—the best the liberal opposition could put up against him was the billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, an oligarch famously arrested by the French police for pimping at an Alpine ski-resort—if with a reduced margin, on figures as usual inflated for effect, and an altered appeal. With the disintegration of the consensus which his first two presidencies had enjoyed, retention of power now required polarization—rallying the less well-off and well-educated against a pampered *beau monde* and its offshoots. In this strategy, the same constraints held as for the opposition. Public expenditure could help numb the plight of the lower depths, but the socio-economic substance of the regime was off-limits. Ideologically, support could not be mobilized on a class-political, only on a culture-war basis, pitting patriotic morals against deracinate license, the icons of an upright land and its faith against the viruses of a foreign-infected decadence.

At national level, where it is explicitly pitched, the rhetoric of a clash of values could be of some political effect. At provincial level, necessarily

¹⁷ This is the trenchant verdict of Tony Wood, 'Collapse as Crucible: The Reforging of Russian Society', NLR 74, March–April 2012, p. 37. For a fine analysis of the nature and prospects of the Moscow opposition, see Judah, *Fragile Empire*, pp. 195–256 ff.

much less so. There the gap between Putin's personal standing as President and the credibility of his local stewards, already plain in the elections to the Duma, has only widened. In 2013, after a good deal of indecision by the regime, tacking between repression and concessions, Navalny was allowed to run for mayor of Moscow, and with 27 per cent of the vote—less than a tenth of the electorate, on a dismal turn-out of 33 per cent—declared moral victory, amid expectations of foregone victory for the Kremlin's incumbent. Outside the capital, regional identities have always been relatively weak on Russia's vast, undifferentiated plains, while in post-communist conditions social fragmentation has become exceptionally strong, splitting communities by the accident of resource endowments and their rents, or lack of them. If both features work to the advantage of central power, local issues also give national bluster little leverage. After earlier establishment upsets in Kaliningrad and Yaroslavl, by 2014 mavericks had won mayoralties in Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg, the third and fourth largest cities in the country. The cohesion of the regime was visibly fraying.

Yet the loosening that permitted such electoral upsets could also be represented as the sign of a course correction. Surveying the scene, Sakwa could end on a hopeful note. Since 'the essence of Putinism is the constant absorption by the centre of policy, personnel and power', he opined, so now 'Putin sought to incorporate elements of the insurgency into a rebalanced power system' with a 'potential for change and development'. Russia needed the rule of law, fair elections and firm property rights, but it is 'far from clear that a Russia without Putin could resolve these tasks better than one with a chastened Putin constrained by the revived institutions of the constitutional state and the pressure of a mature and mobilized political nation'.¹⁸ It was too early to write off the logic of mimesis.

Borderlands

But a more critical test lay just ahead. After economic and political, arrived diplomatic crisis. Across his first two presidencies, the tone of Putin's foreign policy changed, but its direction scarcely altered. Partnership with the West remained the over-riding objective. That meant recognition and respect for Russia as the largest state in Europe, fellow bulwark

¹⁸ Richard Sakwa, *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia*, London and New York 2014, pp. 230–1.

against Islamic terrorism, ally of ISAF in Afghanistan, member and host of the G8, participant in the Quartet on the Middle East, on cordial terms with Israel, and—last but not least—a thriving economy integrated into global capital markets. Points of friction with the US and EU there were: scrapping of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, forward basing of radar systems in Central Europe, retention of the Jackson–Vanik amendment. But a glance at Security Council resolutions of the period is enough to see that Russia fell in with the wishes of the West virtually across the board, with the solitary exception of the Annan Plan to dismantle the Republic of Cyprus for a deal with Turkey, which it vetoed on an appeal for help from the government in Nicosia.¹⁹ All told, Russia was more than a reliable and collegial force within the international community. It was the bearer of ‘a civilizing mission on the Eurasian continent’.²⁰ Under Medvedev, Russian foreign policy bent even further to the West. In compliance with Washington, Moscow cancelled delivery of S-300 missile systems to Tehran that would have complicated Israeli or US airstrikes against the country; voted time and again in the UN for sanctions against Iran required by the US; gave a green light to Western bombardment of Libya; and even supplied a transport hub on Russian soil at Ulyanovsk for NATO operations in Afghanistan.

There was one cloud, however, that from early on drifted across the pursuit of good relations with the West. Russia had special interests in the belt of former Soviet states to the south of it, which in the eyes of Moscow its Euro-American partners should recognize. These were neighbours that belonged, in the local formula, to the country’s ‘Near Abroad’, territories which had once been part of the Tsarist empire. Politically speaking, the Baltic states had been absorbed by NATO and the EU, and ceased to come under this heading. For practical purposes, if for different reasons, the Central Asian republics too were of lesser concern, under regimes sufficiently similar to the Russian for comfortable relations, even if dotted with American bases for the common needs of the War on Terror. The sensitive zone lay between these two detachments from the USSR, in the region stretching from the western shores of the Caspian to the lower Danube, comprising the three republics of the Trans-Caucasus, Ukraine and Moldova.

¹⁹ The event was so rare it was met with incredulity from the British architect of the plan, former UK ambassador to the UN Richard Hannay, who fulminated that it was ‘disgraceful’: Anderson, *The New Old World*, London and New York 2009, p. 383.

²⁰ Putin: Address to the Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25 April 2005.

There, trouble began in Georgia, whose frontier with Russia covers about three-quarters of its borderlands in the Caucasus. In 1992 the Shevardnadze regime had attacked Abkhazia, originally a constituent republic of the USSR at a time when its core population was Sunni Circassian, subsequently annexed to Georgia by Stalin and Beria in 1935, which had finally broken away from it when the Soviet Union dissolved. Rallying volunteer Muslim fighters from across the North Caucasus—including Shamil Basayev, the later Chechen insurgent—Abkhaz resistance routed the Georgian invasion force, Shevardnadze narrowly escaping with his life.²¹ This first outbreak of fighting was followed by Yeltsin's attack on Chechnya, routed by 1996. Three years later a second Russian onslaught under Putin crushed Chechen resistance, installing the Kadyrov regime in Grozny.

A decade further on, far from being pacified, virtually the whole of the North Caucasus below Stavropol *krai* is effectively a war zone: rebellion—now under the banner of a radicalized Islam—against Russian power and its local surrogates extending from Dagestan to Karachay-Cherkessia. Amid mass unemployment, poverty and inequality, emptied by flight of its Russian population, with dwindling use even of the Russian language, Chechnya under its brutal warlord has achieved a kind of de facto independence without secession, while elsewhere Moscow's troops and money prop up local rulers with whom it otherwise scarcely interferes.²² In Russia itself, so disabused with the region is public opinion that polls show half the population is willing to let it go. But whatever the savagery of Russian actions, the West has never uttered a word of reproof for them, from the time of Clinton and Blair to that of Obama and Merkel. The sanctity of borders affirmed by Yeltsin protects them.

Beyond these, matters were otherwise. In 2003 Shevardnadze, once a toast of the West for his part in bringing down the Soviet Union, by then a decrepit fossil of corruption, was overthrown after rigging yet another election in Georgia. The succeeding regime, led by Saakashvili, a former member of his entourage, radicalized the pro-Western posture of Tbilisi

²¹ See Patrick Armstrong, 'Enter the Memes', in Robert Bruce Ware, ed., *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, London 2013, pp. 15–23.

²² Domitila Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization', and Anna Matveeva, 'The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia', in Ware, ed., *The Fire Below*, pp. 67–9, 256–78.

still further. Himself a New York-educated lawyer, his chief adviser an American on the payroll of USAID, his lobbyist an aide to McCain, Saakashvili forged strong ties with Bush, welcoming military trainers and equipment from Washington, and dispatching Georgian troops to help with the occupation of Iraq. At home, he proceeded to suppress opposition and rig elections as his predecessor had done. Abroad, his leading objective, as it had been of Shevardnadze, was the extension of NATO to Georgia. In 2008, rendered over-confident by his backing in the West, he launched an attack on South Ossetia, another alien territory allocated to Georgia in the wake of the First World War, which had declared its independence when the USSR came to an end. At this, Russia riposted with a counter-attack through the tunnel connecting South with North Ossetia, one of its Caucasian possessions on the other side of the mountains, shattering the Georgian army in short order, with an open road to Tbilisi. After securing South Ossetia, however, Moscow withdrew its troops. Western capitals and media at first vehemently denounced Russian aggression, then without retraction, as the origin of the conflict became plain, cooled down. Four years later Saakashvili was ousted at the polls, exiting back to the US with criminal charges following him.

On the Russian side, priming the conflict were two preoccupations: resolve that NATO should not encircle Russia from the south by making Georgia a trampoline of the West, as successive regimes in Tbilisi had wished, and concern to seal off its security system in North Caucasus, in the face of continuing armed insurgency, from trouble further south. In the West, on the other hand, counsels were divided on the wisdom of expanding NATO to Georgia, but united in condemnation of Russian pressure on it, and insistence that its borders, no matter how they were arrived at or corresponded to realities on the ground, were and must remain inviolate. For both sides, however, if asymmetrically—much more so for the West than for Russia—the area in contention was secondary, the stakes in it not all that high. When the same collision of outlooks moved to Ukraine, the upshot was bound to be much more explosive.

Ukraine's unravelling

There, no stark cultural or historical differences of the kind that separated Georgia—with its Ibero-Caucasian language, *mkhedruli* script and mediaeval kingdoms—from Russia, divided two Slav populations across

the frontiers of their respective republics in Soviet times. With ten times the population of Georgia, and a territory nearly as much larger, Ukraine is incomparably more important as an adjacent state. Not only are its economic and cultural ties with Russia far closer, but in political memory this was a central battlefield of what Russians continue to call the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, the front where the Red Army launched its first major counter-offensives against the Wehrmacht. When Yeltsin took power in Russia, bringing down the USSR, the local communist leadership in Ukraine, as elsewhere, followed suit, abandoning the party to seize the opportunity to become masters of an independent state. Ukrainian nationalism had always been strong in the Galician west of the country, annexed by Stalin from Poland only in 1945. But in a referendum of late 1991 a pan-regional majority of over 90 per cent voted for independence.

In the event the landslide, influenced by the belief that with a superior climate and soil Ukraine would be more prosperous than Russia if it split away from it, proved out of scale with the degree of national identity behind it. Independence brought the opposite, a collapse of the economy more dire than that of Russia under Yeltsin.²³ Per capita income dropped from \$1,570 in 1990 to \$635 in 2000. In these conditions, buyer remorse in the worst-affected industrial regions soon set in. By 1994, 47 per cent of the population in the South-East of the country said they would now vote against independence, only 24 per cent for it.²⁴ Over time, such feelings subsided, as adaptation to the status quo set in, even as painful economic realities remained. At independence, Russian living standards were double that of Ukrainian. Today they are around three times higher. Even Belarus is twice as well-off.

Compounding such strains, it became ever clearer, were the deep cultural divisions of the country, in which Ukrainian was the official language while a majority of the population still spoke Russian, a Polonized west looked back to the far-right Ukrainian nationalism of Dontsov and Bandera, the rust-belt east harboured nostalgia for a Soviet past, and the sympathies of the plains between them divided down the Dnieper. From

²³ Andrew Wilson, *Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1990s: A Minority Faith*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 128, 168–70.

²⁴ See Anatol Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*, Washington 1999, p. 46.

the start the political system was more open than in Russia, not only because of these divisions, but also because no super-presidentialism took hold, parliament retaining real legislative and executive-controlling powers. Looting of public assets, massive corruption and contract killings matched anything in Russia. But since the central state was so much weaker, with no deep roots or historical traditions from Tsarist or Soviet times, it fell prey to direct appropriation by rival oligarchic clans, where Berezovsky or Khodorkovsky could never themselves take over the Kremlin. To competing billionaires, contrasting regions and conflicting cultures were added geopolitical tensions, the lure of the EU stronger west of the Dnieper, of Russia east of it: Brussels and Washington manoeuvring to pull the country in one direction, Moscow in the other. Along the riverine division of the country, electorates were more or less evenly balanced, power in Kiev swinging this way and that in the first decade after independence.

Defeat and retrenchment

In 2004, as the corrupt and brutal rule of Leonid Kuchma—purulent even by local standards—drew to an end, competition for the presidency lay between his current Prime Minister from the east, Yanukovych, in his youth convicted of criminal assault, whom he had picked as his successor, and one of his former Prime Ministers, central banker Yushchenko, operating in alliance with Yulia Tymoshenko, the most flamboyant of the country's oligarchs, on a platform calling among other demands for Ukrainian entry into NATO. Alarmed at the prospect of Yushchenko winning, Putin dispatched his political technicians to help his opponent, and descended on Kiev for a barrage of talks and interviews. Yanukovych was declared victor in the second round of voting only after blatant fraud by the Kuchma regime, triggering a civic uprising in Kiev—the 'Orange Revolution'—that forced a re-vote in which Yushchenko won by a wide margin. For Putin, this was the most severe setback of the decade: an episode not only blotting his copybook to no good end with the West, which had poured in support for the demonstrators, but setting a dangerous example of successful urban protest for home consumption. But the blow passed. A brief suspension of gas supplies, to bring home Ukrainian dependence on Russian energy, was resolved with an opaque inter-oligarchic pact, and the Orange leaders soon fell out with each other, their popularity plummeting amid continuing scandals. In

another swing of the regional pendulum, five years later Yanukovych took the presidency without much need for fraud.

Like every Ukrainian politician since Kuchma, once in office Yanukovych tacked between Brussels and Moscow, seeking the best deal from each without ruffling the other. In 2009, when GDP dropped no less than 15 per cent under the impact of the global financial crisis, a life-line for the economy became urgent. In 2012 the EU drew up an Association Agreement for a free-trade area with Ukraine, the IMF a \$15 billion loan with austerity conditions. To block signature of these Putin made a better short-term offer in November 2013, which at the last minute Yanukovych accepted. Indignant, if still quite small, protests at rejection of the hand proffered by Europe broke out in Kiev. Deaths from sniper fire by riot police transformed them into a siege of the regime in the centre of the city, while insurgents dismantled it in the west of the country. Panicking, Yanukovych fled into oblivion. On hand to supervise the construction of a replacement regime of his foes in parliament and in the streets, was the United States. In Washington, the country had never been far out of sight: under Clinton, Ukraine was the third largest recipient of American aid in the world, after Israel and Egypt; under Bush, it furnished the fourth largest contingent of troops for the American occupation of Iraq.²⁵

For Putin, the upshot was a stinging double defeat. Not only was—loud and clear—the motivation of the upheaval in Kiev rejection of a Russian design, but still worse, Ukraine was now for the first time under the direct outreach of American diplomacy and intelligence—what one of its recent Ambassadors to the UN famously called ‘adult supervision’ by the US, flanked by the EU: just what Russia had always sought to avert. To recoup what he could from the humiliation, Putin retaliated by annexing the Crimea. The peninsula was two-thirds Russian-speaking, and had been transferred to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954, naturally without any popular consultation, but also little material alteration within the common jurisdiction of the Soviet Union. Under Gorbachev, a referendum voted for the creation of an autonomous republic of Crimea,

²⁵ For these rankings, see respectively Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, New Haven 2002, p. 291; and *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*, New Haven 2005, p. 95.

conceded by Kiev a year later, whose first President was then elected on a platform of union with Russia and called for a second referendum on it, whereupon Kuchma put the peninsula under direct presidential rule until safe locums were in place.

In the nineties, economic decline was steeper in the Crimea than elsewhere in Ukraine, with little investment. But by the end of the century there was no longer any active mobilization for reunion with Russia, of which there seemed little prospect, if also no sentimental attachment to Ukraine, other than among the Ukrainian minority. Acceptance of rule by Kiev did not mean embrace of it. Too much prevented that. Historically, the Crimea had not only been Russian territory since the mid-eighteenth century, but formed a *lieu de mémoire* of particular intensity, scene not only of many an episode in its high literature, from Pushkin to Tolstoy, Chekhov to Nabokov, but of the two epic sieges of Sevastopol in the Crimean and Second World Wars, which together claimed 1.2 million lives: more than all US losses in both World Wars combined.²⁶ Its allocation to Ukraine, arbitrary but little more than symbolic in 1954 under Khrushchev, became a material separation from its past in 1992—essentially because Yeltsin was determined to dismantle the USSR at top speed to gain power for himself in the RSFSR, and wanted no complications with Kravchuk, the former party boss at the head of Ukraine, as an ally in this project. Politically, the assignment of the peninsula to Kiev had no more legitimacy than that.

If agitation in the Crimea for reunification with Russia petered out after Yeltsin signed it away, this was not only because Moscow discouraged any such movement as an embarrassment to the ruler who had so cavalierly disposed of it, but in particular because the movement for reunion peaked just as Yeltsin was preparing his assault on Chechnya, in the name of the territorial integrity of Russia—not a moment for inconvenient questioning of the same prerogatives by Ukraine. As Solzhenitsyn bitterly complained at the time: ‘Without the bloody scheme of the war in Chechnya, Moscow could (perhaps . . .?) have found the courage and weight to support the lawful demands of the Crimeans, in the years of acute crisis in the peninsula (when 80 per cent of its population voted for independence). Instead because of Chechnya, the hopes of Crimea were

²⁶ Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 127.

struck dumb and betrayed.²⁷ Twenty years later, as the crisis of late 2013 approached, no great popular pressure was building up for reunification: rather, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the principal mood of the population in the peninsula appeared a depoliticized passivity, if tinged with resentment at its neglect by the warring oligarchs in Kiev, none of whose clans had either roots or major interests in the Crimea.

Once Yanukovych—who three years earlier had taken 78 per cent of the vote in Crimea—was toppled, however, turbulence quickly followed. In March, under semi-siege from irredentist bands, the Crimean Parliament rushed through a resolution on reunion, and within days Russian troops, many already stationed locally, had taken control. Ukrainian garrisons put up no resistance. A referendum duly delivered a trumped-up 95 per cent vote for reunification, on an 83 per cent turn-out, transforming the undoubted support of the Russian two-thirds of the population into an imaginary landslide. Two months later, Putin descended from Moscow to celebrate the return of the peninsula to its motherland. In Western capitals, the outcry was unanimous: such an annexation was an unprecedented violation of international law, tearing up the map of Europe as if the world was still living in the nineteenth century, or the time of modern dictators. It would never be condoned. In Russia, enthusiasm was equally unanimous: what patriot could not applaud the restitution of such a symbol of the nation to its rightful home? Putin's popularity, which had dropped to a nadir—still a substantial 61 per cent—by December 2013, rebounded to 83 per cent in the spring.

Strategically, the Crimean operation was a clean severance without a fight, to local acclaim. But ideologically it could not be contained. In the Russian-speaking eastern belt of Ukraine, incorporated only since Soviet times, its effect was to fan secessionist agitation neither plainly controlled nor publicly disavowed by Moscow, but inflamed by the lurid diatribes of Russian television against the new authorities in Kiev, caricatured as a fascist junta. In April most of the region from Donetsk to Lugansk was taken over by armed, typically camouflaged militia, local police standing by. In May scratch referendums—repudiated by Moscow—were staged for unification with Russia, while in the rest of Ukraine campaigning for the presidency vacated by Yanukovych was under way, resulting

²⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *Rossiya v obvale*, Moscow 1998, p. 81.

in the easy victory of another oligarch, the billionaire confectionery magnate Poroshenko, a former ornament of both the Yushchenko and Yanukovich regimes.²⁸

Once Poroshenko was installed in Kiev, a military offensive was launched against the Donbas rebels, labelled terrorists for purposes of Western support. Under the guidance of US military and intelligence emissaries, the Ukrainian army and paramilitaries, backed by heavy artillery, advanced against ragtag irregulars, buffed up by weapons and warriors dispatched across the border from Russia, until stand-off ensued. But before this low-level civil war ground to a halt, a Russian-supplied missile in the hands of the irregulars had shot down a civilian airliner flying over the conflict zone. Denouncing this ‘unspeakable outrage’, Obama called the West to joint action against Russia. Economic sanctions targeting its financial and defence sectors were intensified. That the United States had itself shot down a civilian airliner, with a virtually identical toll of deaths, without ever so much as apologizing for a virtually identical blunder, was naturally in a different sense unspeakable—the airline was Iranian, the captain of the *Vincennes* acted in good faith, so why should anyone in the ‘international community’ remember, let alone mention it? So too was the annexation of the Crimea unheard of: why should anyone have heard of the seizures of East Jerusalem, North Cyprus, Western Sahara, or East Timor, conducted without reproof by friendly governments fêted in Washington?²⁹ What matter if in all these cases, annexation crushed the self-determination of the inhabitants in blood, rather than reflecting it without loss of life? Such considerations are beside the point, as if the power that administers international law could be subject to it.

Miscalculations

In Ukraine, a weak and divided state covering a large expanse of territory offered a classic example of a power vacuum, where contending outside forces of superior strength are drawn into a struggle for mastery. For

²⁸ Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council and Foreign Minister under Yushchenko, and Minister of the Economy under Yanukovich: see, for his political record and business empire, Slawomir Matuszak, *The Oligarchic Democracy: The Influence of Business Groups on Ukrainian Politics*, Warsaw 2012, pp. 28, 57, 108–10.

²⁹ See Susan Watkins, ‘Annexations’, NLR 86, March–April 2014, pp. 5–11.

Russia, Ukraine mattered much more, for both historical and strategic reasons. It was less significant for the West. But of the two rivals for predominance, the West was much stronger. The expansion of the EU and NATO to incorporate it, extending the post-Cold War encirclement of Russia to the south, was bound to provoke a defensive reflex in Moscow. But the clumsiness and inconsequence of Putin's line of march were not preordained: they sprang from two fundamental miscalculations, one local and the other global. The first of these was underestimation of Ukrainian national feeling. Observing with contempt the squabbling oligarchs in Kiev, and the regional antagonisms within the country, Russian elites failed to register the familiar fact that statehood—as any former African colony testifies—crystallizes national identity, no matter how weak or unpropitious its initial materials may be. Inevitably, grandstanding and browbeating from Moscow tended to reinforce rather than undermine it—thereafter, in at once stoking and disowning irredentism in the Donbas, propelling the country into the embrace of what Russia most feared.

The local miscalculation was cynical, the global naïve. Putin's belief that he could build a Russian capitalism structurally interconnected with that of the West, but operationally independent of it—a predator among predators, yet a predator capable of defying them—was always an ingenuous delusion. By throwing Russia open to Western capital markets, as his neo-liberal economic team wished, in the hope of benefiting from and ultimately competing with them, he could not escape making it a prisoner of a system vastly more powerful than his own, at whose mercy it would be if it ever came to a conflict. In 2008–09 the Wall Street crash had already shown Russian vulnerability to fluctuations of Western credit, and the political implications. Once deprived of its current account surplus, a local banker commented with satisfaction, 'foreign investors will get a vote on how Russia is run. That is an encouraging sign'—putting pressure on Putin for privatization.³⁰ Such was the objective logic of economic imbrication even before the Maidan. Once a geopolitical collision occurred over Ukraine, the levers in the hands of the West could potentially wreak havoc in Russia. Sanctions, initially targeting only individuals, soon escalated, hitting the entire Russian financial sector by the summer of 2014.

³⁰ See Charles Clover, 'Russia's Economy: Unsustainable Support', *Financial Times*, 21 March 2012.

On their heels came the fourth and potentially most serious crisis of all for the regime, with the collapse of oil prices in the autumn. Still coasting at \$109 a barrel in the first half of the year, they had plunged to \$50 by its end, setting off a currency panic and capital flight, and sending interest rates sky-high. Though Russia still posts a current account surplus, corporate debt now exceeds reserves, in the face of a full-blown recession: GDP is set to contract up to 5 per cent in 2015. Since the state depends on the energy sector for over half its revenues, Putin's ability to distribute material benefits to prolong popular support for the regime is going to be drastically curtailed. Whether, or how far, the Saudi decision to slash the price of oil was coordinated with Washington, as it was in Reagan's time, in part to exert pressure on Moscow, remains unclear: perhaps not at all. But it was a godsend to the purpose—in objective effect a super-sanction. Nor has the arsenal of potential further weapons at the disposal of the West been exhausted. Expulsion from the Swift system of international banking payments, observed one commentator, had been used to devastating effect on Iran. So too 'cutting Russia out of Swift would cause chaos in Moscow in the short term'. Even without proceeding that far, existing sanctions were already locking its state banks out of world capital markets: 'With the dollar and the euro as the two largest transaction currencies, the West can produce potential financial instability in Russia at the flick of a switch.'³¹

2. RESOURCES?

Ideologically speaking, the outbreak of conflict over Ukraine has released a reversion to the atmospherics of the Cold War. At home, delivery of the standard package by Russia might be halting or held up for a time, but still be moving in the right direction, and the West could take a long view and wait. Failure to comply with its instructions abroad was another matter. There, the international community brooked no license. Once Russia took over the Crimea, the tolerance of even the most sanguine students of Putin's rule snapped. In setting off the 'most dangerous

³¹ Respectively: Gideon Rachman, 'The Swift way to get Putin to scale back his ambitions', and Wolfgang Münchau, 'Europe needs to play the long game on sanctions', *Financial Times*, 12 May and 23 May 2014.

crisis Europe has seen this century', Treisman decided, 'Putin has abandoned the strategy that has underwritten his political dominance for the last fourteen years'.³² That had rested on rising living standards for the population, benefiting from windfall energy prices, but involving 'cordial relations with Western business circles', entry into the WTO and OECD too. Falling growth rates since 2009 had required deficit financing to protect consumers from the effects of economic crisis. In these conditions, to affront the international community with a reckless foreign adventure risked a debacle—'he has bet the throne on an approach that is likely to fail'. Losing the web-savvy middle class was a danger signal, but so long as the masses below them were looked after, the regime could persist. Losing the country's bankers and big businessmen, on whom its economic cohesion depended, was another matter: their support was a pivot of the political system. There was no way elites such as these could regard sanctions with equanimity: their fortunes were at risk from any disruption of ties with the West. Could Putin seriously afford to alienate them?

To all appearances, here he is caught in a fork. For with the recovery of Crimea and the civil war in the Donbas, the ideological engine behind his return to the presidency has gone into overdrive, beyond his control of it. Having mobilized popular emotions of Russian nationalism for his re-election, and intensified them with his defiance of the West over Ukraine, can Putin afford to mortify them by climbing down in the face of sanctions? For the regime to weather even a milder version of an Iranian-style blockade, it would have to move in an autarkic direction, closer to a command economy of Soviet stamp. For it to accept the tutelage of the US and EU in Ukraine, and give up the Crimea, it would have to underwrite a modern Brest-Litovsk. Regression or humiliation: such, in terms of the system Putin has built, appear to be the alternatives. The regime will no doubt seek to evade them by combining *sub rosa* conciliation of the West—minimizing reprisals for the sanctions against it; continuing to cooperate with the quarantine of Iran; helping counter-insurgency in Afghanistan—with rhetorical bluster of national valiance for domestic consumption. How likely such a course is to maintain its

³² Treisman, 'Watching Putin in Moscow', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March 2014.

credibility at home remains to be seen. Bluff can work in politics, as in war; rarely, however, for long.

Neo-pietism

In this case, how long depends in good part on the breadth and depth of nationalist sentiment in post-communist Russia. The cultural scene, high and low, is certainly saturated with assorted brands of nostalgia for the imperial and clerical past. In these the cult of the Orthodox Church holds pride of place, as the only institution in the country to have survived with a continuous existence, however politically dubious, from Tsarist times. Yeltsin handed over vast amounts of its pre-revolutionary property to the Church, making it once again an opulent institution with some eight hundred monasteries, six radio stations, two TV channels, and invariable prominence at all state occasions of importance. Putin, fond of displaying an aluminium crucifix on his chest, professes himself a devout Christian, who has personally seen to the reunification of Orthodox churches in the diaspora and homeland that were estranged during the Cold War, and will often take the Patriarch along with him on trips to foreign lands. Officially, just as the Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic, though emphatically not multi-cultural state, so too church and state are separated in Russia, where every faith—enumerated as: Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism—is equal before the law, which favours none. The reality is that local authorities in Moscow could ban as a provocation a placard which simply reproduced this clause of the constitution. The ideological nexus between country, state and religion is one-faith only. For Putin, Orthodoxy is Russia's 'state-moulding tradition'. For the Patriarch Alexei II, 'it is only on the basis of the Orthodox religion that the Motherland can regain her magnificence'. The national anthem, rewritten in 2000, lifts a formula from the Orthodox liturgy to proclaim Russia a 'Native Land Protected by God'.³³

What the impact of this revival of the Church has been on the culture at large is another question, but it is clearly not marginal. The author of

³³ For all this, see the penetrating study by Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism*, London and New York 2013, pp. 34–5, 195–200, 24–5, who comments: 'In the shifting world of post-Soviet politics, where legitimacy (or the semblance of it) is all, the Church is thus able to perform an essential sacralizing function for the ruling elite' (p. 33).

the best-selling title of 2012 was the Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, an intimate of Putin, and producer of a popular television documentary chronicling the decline of Byzantium under the corrosive moral influences of the West. His *Everyday Saints*—‘simple, luminous tales of ordinary Christians’—sold over a million copies in a year. Not everyone was spellbound: to the indignation of its admirers, it did not quite win the country’s Booker Prize. But within the intelligentsia itself, in one—usually, though not invariably, somewhat higher—register or another, religion is in vogue. Russian cinema offers some of the most striking examples of the cross-breeding of retro-nationalism with neo-pietism in the service of the regime. At the box-office end of the market, blending commercial spectacle and middle-brow pretension, is Nikita Mikhalkov, the country’s Steven Spielberg. Once a caryatid of the Soviet cultural establishment, after the fall of the USSR he swiftly announced his conversion to Christianity; secured official funding for his patriotic blockbuster *The Barber of Siberia*, in which he himself plays an imposing Alexander III; moved on to maudlin narratives of White Generals of the Civil War era; and in 2005 produced a fawning film-portrait of Putin in honour of his 55th birthday, depicting him as a latter-day—but by no means everyday—political saint.³⁴

At the more austere end of the spectrum, where few concessions are made to popular taste or understanding, the cinema of Alexander Sokurov—widely regarded as Russia’s greatest director—mingles necrophilia and mysticism with homages to political correctness of the day. After reverent icons of Yeltsin and eldritch bestiaries of Hitler and Lenin came a glowing portrait of Hirohito as a quiet embodiment of imperial dignity emerging from his palace to the fatherly respect of MacArthur (Sokurov has explained that Japan, after all, had to expand into China). There followed a celebrity tour of the Tsarist past, hinting that if European culture was to be saved, it would be in the Noah’s ark of the Motherland, topped off with a sentimental apologia for the war in Chechnya, *Alexandra*, starring former diva Galina Vishnevskaya—‘Tsarina’ for the director—as a grandmother telling a Chechen lad to ‘ask God for intelligence’,

³⁴ For 55, see Stephen Norris, ‘Family, Fatherland, and Faith: The Power of Nikita Mikhalkov’s Celebrity’, flanked by coverage of the more bric-a-brac iconography of Putin in Helena Goscilo, ‘The Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP *objet d’art*’, both in Goscilo and Vlad Strukov, eds, *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*, London and New York, pp. 120–1, 29–55.

instead of muttering about independence. This chauvinist parable won Sokurov an audience with Putin, and lavish state backing for his next venture, a phantasmagoric version of Goethe's *Faust*.³⁵

The better younger directors are less given to this kind of accommodation to power. But even an *auteur* of such independence as Andrei Zvyagintsev, no friend of the regime, has felt it necessary to avow the Christian faith behind his breakthrough, *The Return*, and garb his recent attack on official corruption of church and state alike, *Leviathan*, from a biblical wardrobe as a modern tale of Job. Lower down, there are few depths contemporary Russian cinema has not plumbed. Leading hits include *The Island*—tale of a repentant monk, who after committing lethal treason at German order during the war, has become so holy that nature itself departs from its laws in his presence; *The Admiral*, depicting the White supremo Kolchak in a *ne plus ultra* of schmaltz as a tender lover executed by the Bolsheviks, his corpse sinking cruciform into the Siberian ice; and *The Miracle*, scripted by Sokurov's screen-writer Yuri Arabov, the 'true story' of a young girl who casts away her mother's icons except for Saint Nicholas, whom she takes to a louche party—and there, as she dances clutching it, is frozen motionless for her impiety, until months later Khrushchev arrives and gives the grudging go-ahead for an exorcism to liberate her, murmuring as he flies back to Moscow, 'A miracle—such beauty: as if an angel has flown'. The cultural sump of this sort of Russian cinema makes even the worst films of the Soviet era look presentable.

Books cost and make less money than films, exposing writers to fewer temptations. Rallies of the opposition in Moscow feature leading writers of different kinds, all the way from pulp-fiction millionaire Boris Akunin—a refined specimen of Pelevin's portrait of an intelligentsia given over to self-marketing in *Generation P*—to poet Dmitrii Bykov, for whom everything that was loathsome in the Soviet system has endured, save closed borders, and all that was more or less decent—education, humanitarian and internationalist strains, anti- or non-clericalism—has faded.³⁶ The specific weight of literature within the culture at large has

³⁵ Jeremi Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox*, London and New York 2014, a homoerotic reading of the director that struggles bravely between admiration and dismay at this body of work.

³⁶ Maria Litovskaya, 'The Function of the Soviet Experience in Post-Soviet Discourse', in Birgit Beumers, ed., *Russia's New Fin de Siècle: Contemporary Culture Between Past and Present*, Bristol and Chicago 2013, pp. 26–7.

dropped sharply: a journal like *Novy Mir*, which once sold three million copies, is down to three thousand. But the scientific and technical wing of the intelligentsia has not fared much better. ‘They supported us in 1991 and most of them got nothing out of our reforms’, Chubais remarked in an unguarded moment.³⁷ Economic pressure and political disappointment has left a lingering demoralization, lending itself, not for the first time in the modern history of the country, to a search for spiritual compensation. How deep is the turn to religion, either at popular or educated level, may be doubted. As in America, so in Russia the altar is no match for the shopping mall. There, God is just another accessory. From 1990 to 1992, the number of Russians who decided they were believers suddenly jumped from 29 to 40 per cent—a timely miracle of mass conversion. Today, while 70 per cent declare themselves Orthodox, a mere 3 per cent attend Easter service, and faith in astrology leaves belief in the resurrection far behind. The religious cushion for the regime is thin.

Empire and nation

Other sources of national sentiment, however unconsummated, go deeper. Historically, its landlocked plains, backward economy and impoverished peasantry made Russia—without natural frontiers, protected only by size and climate—continually vulnerable to invasion from the West: Poles in the seventeenth, Swedes in the eighteenth, French in the nineteenth, German in the twentieth century. In response, each time at increasingly greater cost in mobilization and expenditure of material and human resources, attacks were thrown back and a progressively more powerful autocratic state, with its own expansionist dynamic, was created. To the east, steppe and tundra thinly inhabited by hunter-gatherer tribes were colonized as far as the Pacific, in a movement prefiguring the drive by American settlers to its other shore two centuries later. To the south, absorption of Ukraine and the Caucasus brought Russia to the Black Sea; to the north, gains from Sweden access to the Baltic littoral. Much of Poland and most of Central Asia followed. Over some three hundred years, there developed the only pre-modern empire outside Europe that never succumbed to the West, as its counterparts in the Near East, the Subcontinent and the Far East would do.³⁸ Where all

³⁷ See *Economist*, 13 March 2010.

³⁸ A central theme of Marshall Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History*, Princeton 2006, pp. 47–9 ff.

would eventually seek to adopt bureaucratic and military advances from the West the better to resist it, Tsarist Russia alone—because it had to start much earlier, being so much closer to the danger—succeeded, not only preserving its autonomy but becoming for a time the leading power in continental Europe itself.

The Industrial Revolution brought this story of triumph to an end. At the hands of Britain and France in the Crimea, of Japan in Manchuria, and terminally of Germany in the First World War, Imperial Russia was beaten on the battlefields of modern warfare, and the Romanov monarchy collapsed. But whereas the Habsburg and Ottoman empires dissolved in defeat soon afterwards, the October Revolution held nearly all of the territories ruled by the Tsars together, in giving birth to the Soviet Union. At top speed, the new state mastered the industrialization its predecessor had missed, and when the Nazi invasion came, broke the Wehrmacht with superior military force, taking Russian armies, as in the early nineteenth century, once again deep into Europe, this time achieving prolonged control of half the continent. Despite enormous war-time losses, further industrialization permitted a forced march to acquire the most advanced and destructive of all weapons, the USSR achieving nuclear parity with the USA within another three decades, to become the world's other superpower.

This concatenation of geopolitical success rested on two sharply contrasting social foundations. The Tsarist system comprised a dynastic autocracy, a service nobility, and—for most of its existence—a mass of peasant serfs, making up the majority of the population. The Soviet system destroyed monarchy, aristocracy and in time most of the peasantry, installing the rule of a dictatorial party over a newly urbanized, predominantly working-class population. Antithetical societies spelt opposite cultural configurations. Under Tsarism, elites and masses lived in separate worlds—an increasingly cultivated, even cosmopolitan, nobility superimposed on illiterate peasants, the one distant masters of the other, with little or no existential mediation between the two: the Orthodox Church a corrupt appendage of the state, a populist intelligentsia trying but failing to penetrate the villages. Under Stalinism, workers were educated and cadres proletarianized, producing a rough-cast cultural *Gleichschaltung* of the population, with a numerically larger, if mostly tamer intelligentsia alongside.

In one critical respect, however, there was a homology in the cultural horizons generated by the two systems. In both, empire had priority over nation. The imperial Russia that developed out of what in the late Middle Ages had been princely Muscovy was a state run by an elite whose composition was multi-ethnic and loyalty was dynastic. The very term 'Russia' was a late Petrine invention. In the seventeenth century only about a third of senior officials were Russian; in the following two centuries, two-fifths were still non-Russians, half of these Germans. By the end, Russians were no longer a majority even of the population. Yet, though chronologically preceding the emergence of the nation-state as a modal form in Europe, the empire ruled by the Tsars was never as *apatride* as the Habsburg or Ottoman. At popular level a proto-national sense of identity existed, capable of mobilizing 'Holy Rus' against Polish incursions during the Times of Troubles, fuelling sectarian rejection of theological innovation as foreign apostasy, and in due course furnishing mythographic material for Slavophile denunciations of the West and imitation of it by a bureaucratic Tsarism.³⁹ Eventually, by the late nineteenth century a strident Russian ethnic nationalism emerged, but in the absence of any mass literacy or substantial petty bourgeoisie, its take-up was limited. On occasion its agitations were put to tactical use by the imperial regime as a prophylactic against revolutionary subversion, but since they posed an obvious danger to the unity of the realm, they were never given a formal *placet* by its rulers. Russia was an empire, composed of many peoples, not a nation consisting of one.

Territorially continuous with the Tsarist state—minus Finland, the Kingdom of Poland, and Baltic provinces—at birth the Soviet state broke with it ideologically. Empire was denounced as synonymous with oppression, and Russian nationalism attacked root and branch. Before the October Revolution as after it, Lenin excoriated Great Russian chauvinism as the leading menace to the equality and solidarity of the peoples joined together in the USSR. Bolshevik internationalism did not emerge unscathed from the Civil War, when strategic considerations—the defence of the revolution—over-rode local options and susceptibilities to secure the Caucasus and Central Asia for the Red Army, if rarely without

³⁹ See especially Geoffrey Hosking, *Empire and Nation in Russian History*, Waco 1993, pp. 7–12; 'The Russian National Myth Repudiated', in Hosking and George Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, London 1997, pp. 198–210.

flanking support from committed minorities. On his death-bed, Lenin warned of the continuing dangers of Great Russian chauvinism, and Stalin as their carrier.

For thirty years Stalin's regime left the constitutional structure of the USSR as sketched in 1922 intact. But when necessity arose, during the Great Patriotic War, it appealed openly to popular icons and traditions of Russian national identity; and when opportunity arose, in its wake, did not hesitate to extend Moscow's rule to territories once possessed by the Tsars and relinquished by the Bolsheviks. Yet empire could never be formally valorized, nor self-assertion by the dominant nationality in the Union given free rein. Russification created a *lingua franca* in the outlying republics. But it was accompanied by a promotion of local cultures and cadres that eventually escaped control from the centre, in the unintended workings of an 'affirmative action empire';⁴⁰ while conversely at the centre, the RSFSR—tacitly identified with All-Union levels of power—was deprived of its own party, academy and other standard republican institutions.

For Russians, the upshot was a replication of the fissured identity of Romanov times. In both systems, Tsarist and Soviet, the nation was subsumed within a value-order transcending it. Under the ideological canopies, first of Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Popular Integrity (*Narodnost*: precisely not 'Nationality'), and then of Proletarian Internationalism, Russia existed as one ethno-cultural community among others, always the most salient, but never politically self-standing. In each, the wings of national consciousness were clipped. Among educated Russians of the late Tsarist period, moreover, definitions of the nation were not just constrained from above, but subject to another, sideways pressure too. Confronting the expansion of the industrialized powers of the West, every major extra-European society faced the dilemma of how best to avoid subjugation by them. Did the only hope of independent survival lie in swift emulation of them, or was that simply a road to self-destruction, from whose dangers rediscovery of the deepest sources of indigenous tradition, duly purified, could alone save the nation? For two reasons, however, the dilemma became especially acute in Russia. Western advance, as promise or threat, loomed geographically very close; and to

⁴⁰ Terry Martin's famous term. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca 2001.

meet it, inherited resources were historically shallow, compared with those potentially available in more distant lands—China, India or Japan.⁴¹ The outcome was a greater tension than elsewhere, constitutive ambivalence capsizing into a classic polarization. In Russia, the conflict between Slavophiles and Zapadniks set the pattern to come in other societies exposed to the impact of Western capitalist expansion, but—lasting half a century—in sharper and more sustained form than anywhere else.

Out of this tension came an astonishing high culture, the creation of the first intelligentsia in history to be aware of itself as such. Russian writers and thinkers, painters and musicians, wrought a national achievement that became the admiration of Europe. But the splendour of that culture could play no integrating role in a society where 80 per cent of the population was still illiterate at the turn of the twentieth century. The nation-state and its citizenship, with common rights and general schooling, were missing, along with the interconnexions of a modern division of labour. In their absence, ideas of Russia acquired an overpitched intensity, as if they could substitute for the normal institutional building-blocks of nationhood.⁴² The result was to give a messianic twist to definitions of the nation, drawing on monkish doctrines of the Third Rome, folk memories of Holy Rus and tropes of the Slav soul to proclaim Russia the bearer of a universal mission to redeem a fallen, materialist world with a higher spirit of truth and justice that was in its gift alone. Conceptions of this kind—Dostoevsky a famous exemplar of them—were never common coin in the intelligentsia. But they formed the most distinctive supply in its stock of national values, an ideological hypomania compensating for political frustration under the weight of an autocracy perceived as all too alien. The size of the country entitled it to such dreams.

When Tsarism fell, mystical reveries of Russia as the moral saviour of mankind met the fate of other bric-à-brac of the ancien régime. But once Stalin had consolidated his power, the formal schema of a special mission centred in Moscow lived on. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as founded by Lenin, was clean of reference to any land or any people. The USSR was a revolutionary waiting-room that any country could join, once

⁴¹ The point is well made by Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, London 2002, pp. 228–9.

⁴² For this, see Tim McDaniel's still perceptive study, *The Agony of the Russian Idea*, Princeton 1996, pp. 22 ff, 160–1.

it had overthrown capitalism; meanwhile it would serve as the citadel of proletarian internationalism. From the early thirties onwards, however, the domestic landscape underwent an ideological alteration. Another value became now increasingly mandatory, an oxymoron foreign to Lenin's time: Soviet patriotism. This was not Russian nationalism, and in the regime's hour of greatest danger, when the Wehrmacht was at the gates of Moscow, remained too abstract to furnish the needed rallying-cry against the enemy. But over time it became a reality for many, perhaps most, of the citizens of the Soviet Union. Nor could there be any contradiction between the two ideals, of 1921 and 1931. For the USSR was not just the homeland of its citizens, commanding their loyalty as naturally as any other modern state; it was also, in the official formula, 'the fatherland of the international proletariat and the toilers of all the world'. Once again, as in the 'Russian Idea' of old, an identity that was particular had a mission that was universal. At once guide and example, the Workers' Fatherland would lead the world to socialism.

Fallen state

With the collapse of the USSR, this construction too disintegrated. Now, to all appearances, with the supranational integuments of Tsarism and Communism gone, the Russian nationalism that had in different ways been cabined by both could unfold freely, as the natural expression of a long-inhibited collective identity, in a space unencumbered with alternative attachments. But, from the start, there was a shadow: release had not come from within. It was Western victory in the Cold War that had removed Communism. A real war, fought by the two superpowers for decades across a global battlefield with every weapon save direct exchange of fire between them, it had ended in complete American triumph and Soviet defeat—an outcome as categorical as the capitulation of Germany and Japan in 1945.

But its aftermath would not be the same, as Washington handled a success won without need for resort to arms. There was no occupation, as there had been of the Axis powers. Without a Clay or MacArthur on the spot, that meant less comprehensive control. On the other hand, whereas finding the personnel to man compliant post-fascist regimes in Germany and Japan had been a halting and complicated process, requiring direct military invigilation, in Russia an entire political class offered enthusiastic post-communist collaboration with the victor from

the outset. American will would rarely be grudged. The outlays needed to smooth or enforce it were therefore small. Not only was the US spared the costs of an occupation; Washington could dispense with the economic assistance furnished Germany and Japan to prime their industrial recovery for the battle against the USSR. Now that Communism was gone, there was no requirement for such insurance against it. All the more so, because not just Communism as a political and ideological order, but the opponent state itself, whose popular magnitude had once rivalled that of the USA, had vanished. After defeat, the frontiers of Germany were redrawn, and the country was for a time divided, before it re-emerged as once again the dominant power in Europe. Japan retained not only its territory, but most of its war-time elite, not to speak of its emperor of divine descent. The USSR was wiped off the map.

This was an uncovenanted gain for the US, not envisaged *ex ante* as one of the spoils of victory. Bush and Baker, at the helm in 1991, were more apprehensive than elated as disintegration of the Soviet Union loomed; Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had been congenial interlocutors. But once it was a *fait accompli*, the American security elite had every reason to be satisfied with the extinction of its old adversary. Capitalism had delivered its quietus to communism as a form of society, externally. Liquidation of the state to which communism had given birth was a bonus generated internally. Using command of the RSFSR as his base, and playing on Russian resentment at the anomaly of its lack of proportionate autonomy and weight within the All-Union structures of the USSR, Yeltsin dispatched Gorbachev by presiding—half-inciting, half-consenting—over the dissolution of the Soviet state of which his rival was still formally ruler.

In Yeltsin's ascent, the hour of Russian nationalism appeared to have struck. But while his popular support on the way up depended on an appeal to it, once he was entrenched in power, his political base lay in an intelligentsia that backed him for other reasons. It was moved not by attachment to nationalism, but—in a version of *zapadnichestvo* unlike earlier forms—admiration for capitalism. In its nineteenth-century variants, Russian intellectuals had looked to the West as inspiration for a liberal, industrial, parliamentary modernity against which Tsarism stood in the way. Few, however, were attracted to the cult of profit and the cash nexus. By the late twentieth century, the canonical liberty of postmoderns was democracy, and Yeltsin's entourage made much of it.

In the self-description they preferred, they were above all democrats. But as the finest Russian intellectual of the time, a genuine specimen, observed as they rode to power, these were democrats whose rule meant the humiliation of democracy. Yeltsin bombed the Duma, trumped up ratification of the Constitution, rigged auction of the country's wealth to a handful of oligarchs, and enriched himself and his favourites beyond measure.⁴³ For them what mattered were not such expedients, but the emancipation they served—the irreversible introduction of capitalism in Russia, from which all the other blessings, political and social, of the West would ultimately follow.

In such a prospectus, Russian nationalism had no place. The task of the country was to join the West, not to linger on what could only be retrograde differences from it. That meant doing its will, eagerly if possible, stoically if necessary. Yeltsin's Foreign Minister Kozyrev dumbfounded a visiting Nixon by telling him that Moscow had no interests that were not those of the West. With interlocutors like these, representing a government dependent for its continuation in power on economic and ideological support from the West, America could treat Russia with little more ceremony than if it were, after all, an occupied country. When even Kozyrev balked on being told that it was Moscow's duty to join Washington in threatening to attack Serbia, Victoria Nuland—currently Assistant Secretary of State for Europe—remarked: 'That's what happens when you try to get the Russians to eat their spinach. The more you tell them it's good for them, the more they gag.'⁴⁴ Her superior at the time, Clinton's friend and familiar Strobe Talbott, proudly records that 'administering the spinach treatment' to Russia was one of the principal activities of his time in office. In due course Obama would say, in public, that Putin reminded him of a 'sulky teenager in the back of the classroom'. In the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, Nuland could be heard conferring with the US Ambassador in Kiev on the composition of the country's government in a style compared by an American observer to a British resident issuing instructions to one of the princely

⁴³ Dmitri Furman, 'Perevernutyi istmat'? Ot ideologii perestroiki k ideologii "stroitel'stva kapitalizma" v Rossii', *Svobodnaya Mysl'*, no. 3, 1995, pp. 12–25; *Dvizhenie po spirali*, Moscow 2010.

⁴⁴ Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, New York 2002, p. 76.

states of colonial India.⁴⁵ In condescension or contempt, the underlying American attitude speaks for itself: *vae victis*.

By the time Yeltsin exited the Kremlin on the heels of the economic debacle of 1998, amid corruption, chaos and immiseration, his neo-liberal counsellors were discredited. As an ideology, capitalism had never enjoyed much popular respect or confidence; and as an experience, under the auspices of Chubais, Gaidar, Nemtsov and the rest, it had proved for most Russians more of an ordeal than a liberation. Putin brought restoration of order and economic recovery without ever repudiating it, but also without ever proclaiming it as a legitimization of the system he inherited. Markets were needed, of course, but it was a strong state that Russians had always valued. Abroad, that meant an end to the humiliations of the Yeltsin era. Russia would seek, as a leading American authority on its foreign policy has put it, 'respect, recognition and responsibility for upholding order around the world'.⁴⁶ It would make what accommodations were necessary to that end, but its interests did not automatically coincide with those of the West, and it was entitled to be treated on an equal footing with its partners in America and Europe.

Fifteen years later, that quest has come to grief. Cornered by economic crisis and Western boycott, the regime has now fallen back on Russian nationalism as its ideological mainstay. Historically, rulers could appeal to that in time of war—1812, 1914, 1941—but always episodically, capped by other orders of value. There is no such war today, nor any further value-system. This is the first time in conditions of peace that a government is banking everything on Russian nationalism pure and simple, to all appearances for the duration. How effective is that resort likely to be? As domestic recession deepens, welfare expenditure is cut, and popular living standards fall, it is bound to come under strain. While political protests in the capital have so far failed to make much dent on the regime, if social protests in the provinces—simmering here and there since 2011—were to spread across the country, it would be in danger: the current wave of Russian national feeling is plainly liable to the external

⁴⁵ David Rieff, 'Obama's Liberal Imperialism', *The National Interest*, 11 February 2014. For the transcript of their exchange, see NLR 86, March–April 2014, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Lanham 2009, p. 305.

check of material hardship. Another question, which will outlast the present crisis, is its internal strength.

What are the reserves on which Russian nationalism today can draw? If Orthodox religion is little more than a badge of respectability, an object of fashion rather than fervour, while the high culture honoured in Soviet times has been sidelined by a mass culture of globalized commercial stamp, and the 'imitation democracy' of the regime itself is scarcely food for patriotic pride, what remains? Essentially a paradox. Now that it is gone, the empire that once overcast and stunted the nation has become the bedrock of its contemporary identification: the greatness of the past, independent of its origins or its outcomes, offers the readiest common denominator of a collective subjectivity of the present. The memories are selective, as in any nostalgia. But they are not without objective correlates that keep them alive. For if Russia no longer forms the architrave of an empire, nor is it a conventional nation-state, or about to become one. Even amputated, it remains the largest country on earth. Its population is out of scale with that size, dwarfed by the powers with which it compares itself, but still a magnitude more numerous than that of any state in Europe. Colonial conquests continue to be embedded within the country; the culture of one out of every six of its citizens is Muslim; of those whose first language is Russian, one out of six live beyond its borders. In per capita income, it is the richest of the BRICs; in weaponry, its nuclear arsenal is second only to the United States. Too small to qualify as a Great Power on a level footing with America or China, or in a foreseeable future with India; too big to fit into Europe, or find its place among other denizens of the 'international community'. To its misfortune, Russia is geopolitically between sizes.

Fourteen years ago, in what continues to be the profoundest reckoning of the country's situation at the dawn of the new century, Georgi Derluguian wrote:

The Russian state faces perhaps uniquely acute dilemmas today, not simply because of its abrupt shrinkage in size, but because its major assets and traditional orientations have been devalued. Capitalism in its globalized mode is antithetical to the mercantilist bureaucratic empires that specialized in maximizing military might and geopolitical throw-weight—the very pursuits in which Russian and Soviet rulers have been enmeshed for centuries.

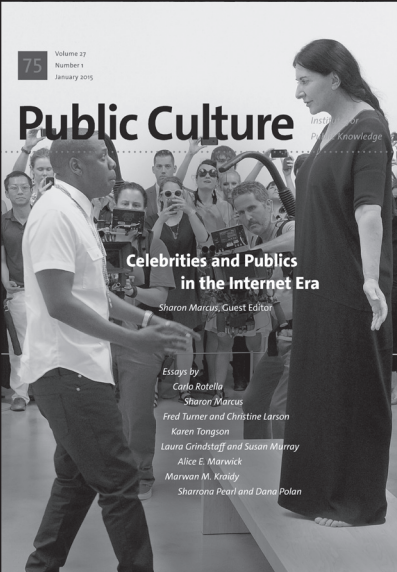
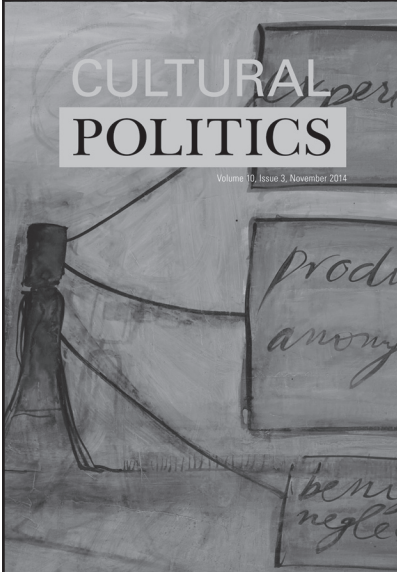
How long would that condition last?

The regime of market globalization will endure as long as three conditions are met: that the latest economic expansion continues; the US maintains its ideological, diplomatic and military hegemony; and the social disruptions provoked by the spread of market operations are kept in check by welfare or policing methods. *Rebus sic stantibus*, we can probably give the current form of globalization another ten years or so.⁴⁷

In the interim that persists, Putin's regime has attempted to straddle the difference between the old order and the new: seeking at once to refurbish assets and orientations that have depreciated but not lost all currency and, heedless of the hegemon, to embrace the markets that have downgraded them—running with the hare of a military cameralism and hunting with the hounds of a financial capitalism. The pursuit is a contradiction. But it is also a reflection of the strange, incommensurate position of Russia in the present international order, in which the regime is trapped with no exit in sight.

⁴⁷ 'Recasting Russia', *NLR* 12, November–December 2001, pp. 20–1.

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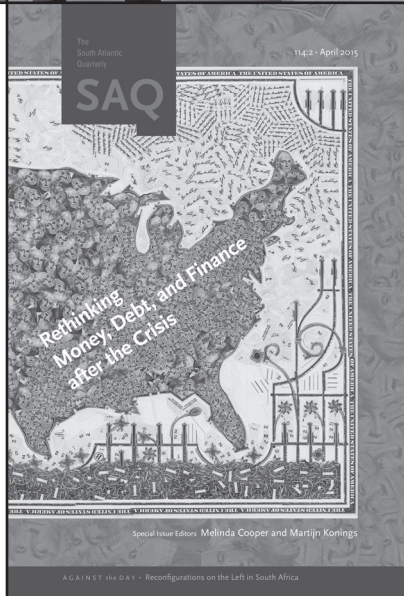
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