

## Russian Approaches to State- and Nation-Building in Russia's Ukraine Policy

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A characteristic picture of Western media evaluations of Russian foreign policy toward Ukraine (and the post-Soviet space more generally) can be discerned in the questions of French journalists to Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 4, 2014, in Sochi on the eve of a visit to France. Such questions included: What is your vision of Russian strategy—dialogue or expansionism and conquest? Do you want to reestablish an empire or develop Russia within its current borders? Russian troops annexed Crimea; do you plan to return it to Ukraine? Do you want to integrate Ukraine into Russia and have you tried to destabilize the situation there? Who convinced you that you have a special mission for Russia?

Besides the opinion widely shared in the West that Russian foreign policy is based on neo-imperialism, what other explanatory frameworks could exist for Russia's recent behavior? In contrast with the value-based foreign policy of the United States, Russian foreign policy is usually analyzed as interest-based and devoid of values. I claim that Russian foreign policy is widely based on attempts to export Russian state- and nation-building models. Mainstream official discourse and political research on the post-Soviet states in the West are framed around democracy and human rights, while for post-Soviet states, nation-building and state-building are more vital issues than regime type.

Experts most often explain the Russian role in the Ukraine crisis as a result of the non-democratic nature of Russia's political regime. Another interpretation, however, is that during the recent events in Ukraine, Russian elites have tried to demonstrate that Russian state-building and nation-building models are more successful than those of Ukraine. The annexation/reunification/reintegration of Crimea (the choice of term depends on the source of discourse, and so I will use the latter term in this memo) is the result of this type of foreign policy thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of MGIMO.

## Respect for State Institutions

The Russian reaction to the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 is very similar to its reaction to all revolutions in the post-Soviet region. Igor Ivanov, former Russian minister of foreign affairs and Security Council secretary in 2005 described Georgian, Ukrainian and Kyrgyz revolutions as non-democratic, non-constitutional changes of power.<sup>2</sup> According to Sergey Lavrov, Russian minister of foreign affairs, by their essence the Rose Revolution in Georgia and Orange Revolution in Ukraine were *coups d'etat* similar to the 1917 October Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The most recent Ukrainian revolution was characterized by Putin as a *coup d'etat* with the use of force.<sup>4</sup> Such characterizations of color revolutions are usually followed by expressions of regret that the change of power was not constitutional and the desire for a new government to return political life to legal foundations.

Terms like “regime type” or “democracy” do not feature in the Russian official discourse as explanations for the Ukraine crisis. Putin insists that the main problem in the case of Ukraine is a lack of respect for institutions: “There should be an extremely careful attitude toward state institutions, institutions of nascent states, because otherwise there will be chaos, which we are now witnessing in Ukraine.”<sup>5</sup> Putin’s position is that there were legal ways for the current Ukrainian political elites to come to power without non-constitutional actions as Viktor Yanukovich had agreed to a gradual transition of power to the opposition. In the Kremlin’s narrative, the problem is not that Russia does not like the current Ukrainian authorities because of their pro-Western stance but that their accession to power was not completely legal or legitimate from Russia’s point of view. According to Putin, it would have been easy for the Ukrainian opposition to come to power legitimately, which would probably have allowed for the avoidance of civil conflict in the southeastern regions of Ukraine.

Russian confidence in state institutions and constitutions as their legal basis is based on Russia’s own experience with power transition. While many post-Soviet states changed their constitutions to assure a legal basis for heads of state to be reelected for more than two consecutive presidential terms or to transform presidential systems into parliamentary ones, Russian elites found a more sophisticated way to assure a smooth power transition in accordance with Western standards of democracy without constitutional change. Respect for the Russian constitution remained important during

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<sup>2</sup> Interview of the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia I.S. Ivanov to the journal “Strategiya Rossii,” N 4(16) (May 5, 2005),

[http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/258F32B8F33C9BF2C3256FF80021BDD0?OpenDocument](http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/258F32B8F33C9BF2C3256FF80021BDD0?OpenDocument)

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of answers of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to the questions at the meeting with members of the International Affairs Council, New York (September 24, 2008),

[http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/22D0E42DE56D4830C32574DA003217E2?OpenDocument](http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/22D0E42DE56D4830C32574DA003217E2?OpenDocument)

<sup>4</sup> Transcript of Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum (May 23, 2014),

<http://kremlin.ru/news/21080>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the Ukraine crisis: after the Crimean referendum, Vladimir Putin requested that the Constitutional Court review the treaty of incorporation of Crimea into Russia to clarify whether it corresponded to the Russian constitution.

During his visit to Central and South America in mid-July 2014, Putin once again stressed the necessity of respecting international and national law, especially constitutions and state institutions in recently emerged states where political systems had not yet consolidated and economies were still developing. In his speech at a meeting of the Russian Security Council on July 22, 2014, Putin referred to sovereignty and territorial integrity as “fundamental values.”

From its own recent history, Russia has learned that the only viable model of solving major state crises consists of elite-level deals without Western interference. The main precedents include: 1) the process of Soviet dissolution, which proceeded rather peacefully as a result of a deal among republican elites; 2) the constitutional crisis of 1993, which was solved due to strong presidential power (an interesting parallel with the events in Ukraine in February 2014 is that the 1993 crisis resulted from inconsistencies in the legal basis of power); and 3) the Chechen conflict, which ended with an elite-level deal and considerable economic support from federal authorities. From these cases, Russia learned that sovereignty and non-interference are supreme values. Thus, Russia believes that other states also have a right to solve their internal political problems without international interference. That is the basis for Russia’s disapproval of the West’s support for the Euromaidan movement and the Ukrainian opposition. Russia’s position is that Ukrainian elites could have solved their disputes legally, assuring a continuity in gas deals and other issues such as the stationing of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol.

The reunification of Crimea with Russia will be used by Moscow to prove the effectiveness of Russian state institutions by comparison with Ukrainian ones. The intent is to show the West that Ukraine is not developed enough to become part of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities. On April 10, 2014, Putin promised to make Crimea, which was a subsidized territory in Ukraine, into a donor region in Russia in a few years. He made a rather emotional comparison between the economic development of Crimea and Russia: “...practically everything is in desolation [in Crimea].... Some things are astonishingly desolate. We have a lot of problems [in Russia], but here there are many more problems.”<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, according to official discourse, the reasons for the crisis between Kyiv and Ukraine’s southeastern regions are internal and stem from the unstable unitary system of government that Kyiv has chosen and the lack of a balanced constitution representing

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<sup>6</sup> Meeting with representatives of the All-Russian People’s Front, April 10, 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20753>

the interests of all regions, as Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov stated in April 2014. Lavrov characterized constitutional changes after each presidential election in Ukraine as abnormal and “made according to the will of those political forces which won the elections.”<sup>7</sup> In a way, this position about the internal reasons for the crisis is supported by opinion polls. According to a March 2014 Gallup poll, the majority of the population in Ukraine has not had confidence in their government since the Orange Revolution of 2004.<sup>8</sup>

The suggested Russian solution to the Ukraine crisis has been constitutional reform and the transformation of Ukraine into a federal state, which is the Russian model for securing territorial integrity.

### **Nation-Building Model: Implications for Russia from Crimea’s Reintegration**

In Russia’s official discourse on the reintegration of Crimea, there are three elements that have implications for nation-building efforts within Russia itself: respect for history, a fear of ethnic nationalism, and the Russian language as a source of identity.

The official Russian interpretation of events involving Crimea invokes the reestablishment of historic justice and a correction of Nikita Khrushchev’s erroneous 1954 decision to integrate the Crimean peninsula into Ukraine. The discourse on the correction of Soviet-era mistakes is based on the assumption that Russia has a right to take responsibility for the Soviet Union’s faults and to fix errors. Hence, Russia is the real successor of the Soviet Union and not just one of the fifteen newly independent states that emerged after its collapse.

References to World War II are perceived differently by Russia and, generally, the West. Western interpretations hold that the Kremlin is using the memory of World War II by referring to some right-wing Ukrainian movements as neo-Nazi or fascist to justify Russian intrusion in Ukraine as a kind of continuation of the Soviet Union’s 1940s anti-fascist struggle. These terms have somewhat different implications for Russian audiences. Russian political elites use Soviet victory in World War II (the Great Patriotic War) as a unifying factor for creating a distinct Russian national identity. On the one hand, the use of the term “fascist” is rhetorical, tremendously simplifying the task by depicting events in black and white. At the same time, Ukrainian right-wing nationalist parties personify the fears of Russia’s federal elites, who fear the development of regional ethnic nationalism and separatism in Russia.

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<sup>7</sup> Answer by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to the question by *Argumenty I Fakty* newspaper, published on April 16, 2014,

[http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/42E9FBBD2602226E44257CBC001AECC2?OpenDocument](http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/42E9FBBD2602226E44257CBC001AECC2?OpenDocument)

<sup>8</sup> “Ukraine’s Next Leader Will Need to Restore Trust,” March 11, 2014,

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/167825/ukraine-next-leader-need-restore-trust.aspx>

This brings us to the question of the model of nation-building in Russia. References to history, language, and traditions are usually considered to be part of the model of ethnic nationalism, while a desire to be part of the nation, sharing a common territory, and believing in common principles (usually democratic ones) are ascribed to the model of civic nationalism. Russia's reliance on constitutionalism and equal representation of different ethnic groups, on the one hand, and its rhetoric on Crimean reintegration, on the other, seem to belong to different models of nationalism. Has the Crimean case made Russia shift its model of nation-building from a more civic to a more ethnic form of nationalism?

This is not really the case. In Ukraine, Russia has supported the Russian language not as a majority language (and, thus, a pillar of Russian nationalism) but as a minority language. Russia interfered only when Ukraine changed its approach to nation-building in a more ethnic direction. At this point, Russia decided it had the right to interfere in the name of ethnic equality and in the name of civic nation-building in general. As Russian leaders see it, the failure of post-revolutionary Ukraine to assure civic nation-building allowed Russia the ability to step in with its own model of nation-building, the advantages of which were immediately demonstrated to the Crimean population, by, inter alia, the rehabilitation of Crimean Tatars and the promise of three state languages (Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar) in Crimea. Of course, it is premature to state that proclamation of a civic nation-building model immediately led to its implementation in Crimea.

The Ukraine crisis made Russian authorities more cautious about possible interethnic clashes in Russia itself, prompting a decision in early July 2014 to launch a unified system for monitoring interethnic relations and preventing possible ethnic conflicts. The federal monitoring system is planned for the start of 2015.

In sum, the ongoing Ukraine crisis and process of Crimean reintegration have given Russia a chance to test its state- and nation-building models. The major principles on which Russia seems to base its foreign policy are a reliance on constitutional procedure and civic nationalism. While attempts to export its national models to Ukraine in the form of federalization and constitutional reform have failed, Russia will continue to use Crimea as a testing ground for proving to the West (as well as to Russia itself) that the Russian models of state-building and nation-building are more viable than those suggested for Ukraine by the European Union and the United States.