Russia's View of Ukraine after the Crisis

by Giovanna De Maio

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the crisis over Ukraine from the Russian point of view bearing in mind the deterioration of the relationship between Moscow and Kiev and the international retaliation against Russia's aggression. What does Ukraine represent for Russia? Did the events in Maidan affect how Russia perceives Ukraine? These questions are addressed by analysing the discourse on Ukraine by the main stakeholders of Russian society: the political and economic elites, civil society, the mass media and academia, the general public and the Orthodox Church.

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Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine is one of the worse crises on the European continent since the end of the Cold War. Its main actors, Ukraine and Russia, have been confronting each other since the end of 2013, when protests broke out in Kiev following former president Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Moscow's opposition was met by the overthrow of Yanukovych and the composition of a new government headed by Petro Poroshenko, triggering its very harsh reaction.

The annexation of Crimea and the support for the so-called pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine are the clearest ways the Russian Federation actually demonstrated to what extent Ukraine "matters" to Moscow, and the "price" Russia is prepared to pay for it. The huge number of victims and the harsh prolonging of the conflict have significantly damaged relations between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West. Did the events of Maidan affect the way Russia sees Ukraine? The aim of this analysis is to explore if and how the Russian perception of its neighbour has changed after the crisis. Bearing in mind that the Russian view of Ukraine cannot be detached from a more global consideration of the post-Soviet space in general, this paper will start by providing a brief overview of Russian policymakers' perceptions of the "near abroad" from the end of the Cold War up to Putin's years. Afterwards, this discussion will try to answer the aforementioned question by retracing the discourse surrounding Ukraine from the points of view of the main stakeholders composing Russian society: the political and economic elites, civil society, the mass media and academia, the general public and the Orthodox Church.

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1. The "near abroad" after the Cold War

The Russian imperial tradition played a significant role in determining Russian relations with the newly-independent states soon after the USSR's collapse. Reciprocally, the relations with those states have deeply influenced Russia's foreign and domestic policy, national identity and strategic orientation. Defining the approach towards the near abroad[1] and its importance for Russian national interests and security has been on the top of the political agenda since 1991. However, there was no general consensus over the approach to adopt towards this space, especially at the beginning.

Economic interests and geopolitical reasons were basically the main arguments of those who wanted Russia to keep closer ties with its neighbourhood. After the break-up of the USSR, the whole economic system based on a centralised economy crashed, while many enterprises depended on monopolistic producers and other vital suppliers of raw materials. Thus, preserving a common economic space that would have substantially softened the impact of the economic collapse was of crucial importance.

From a geopolitical point of view, there were many members of the Yeltsin coalition insisting on the importance of the Russian role in the "near abroad." Evgeniy Ambartsumov was one of the main supporters of "enlightened imperialism."[2] Arising from a mix of tradition and prestige, his theory considered the former borders of the USSR as the Russian sphere of influence, so that any attempt of the newly-independent states to weaken their ties with Russia would have justified a violation of their sovereignty. He expressed great concern over the southern border of the Russian Federation due to the geopolitical vacuum in Transcaucasia and the danger of Turkish historical revisionism. On the same wave length, the political analyst Andranik Migranyan referred to the Russian need for geopolitical stability in the "near abroad" and for an assertive challenge to the hegemony of the US. He maintained that Russia had to play the role of an "Eurasian gendarme," granting subsidies and ensuring security and human rights in the region.[3] A slightly different and possibly sharper vision was that of Galina Starovoytova, the former advisor to Yeltsin on interethnic issues: she argued that Russia was morally justified to intervene in its "near abroad" in order to protect the rights of Russian citizens living there.[4]

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[1] The idea of the double citizenship was quietly dropped. See George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[2] Eugene B. Rumer, *Russian National Security and Foreign Policy in Transition*, Santa Monica, RAND, 1995, p. 21, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR512.html.

[3] Ibid., p. 24.

[4] Ibid., p. 24-25.

In opposition to these political views, there were those who questioned the importance of the CIS space as well as its economic and human costs. They maintained that the CIS states were the reason why the Soviet Union collapsed and thus called on Russia to stop being the "milk cow" and get rid of the burden. Even Mr. Putin said at that time that the outlook for integration with the CIS was not realistic. In fact, due to the role the turmoil and popular fronts of the Soviet Republics played since the end of the 1990s in the final break-up of the Soviet Union, Putin referred to the CIS as a framework for a "civilised divorce."[5] Even the aforementioned Mygranian was very doubtful about the economic benefits of integration with Ukraine and Belarus, maintaining that Russia should have granted those states a series of economic concessions in return for their political loyalty.[6]

Nevertheless, despite a certain amount of criticism, those supporting a more assertive role in the region did make their voice heard more than the others. In 1993, Russia declared its intentions and conducted negotiations aimed at building a military alliance called the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), an alternative to NATO of which the members are currently Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan. In March 1996, a parallel project for economic integration – the Eurasian Economic Community – made its first steps binding Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan through a number of economic policies and the freedom of circulation of goods, capital, services and people. Recently renamed the Custom Union, it has now evolved into a Eurasian economic union that seeks to integrate 179.4 million people into a single market and reach a GDP of more than 2.17 trillion dollars.[7]

Nevertheless, the moment in which Russia concretely started claiming its role as a pivotal actor in a multipolar world coincides with Vladimir Putin's presidency. When he rose to power, Russia had just started recovering from the troubled 1990s and was eager to regain what it seemed to have lost along with the Cold War. Under his presidency, Russian political thinkers on the "near abroad" started developing the idea of the "Russian world" and "a divided Russian people" (first used in political discourse in 2007), highly supported by politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Gennady Zyuganov, Yuri Luzhkov, and Sergei Baburin.[8] However, during Mr. Putin's first years as president, those issues were marginalised and a certain pragmatism in foreign policy prevailed. But as the events of 2014 have shown, the idea of Russians as a divided people has been pulled out of a top hat and used as justification for Russia's annexation of Crimea.

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[5] Russian Presidency, *Press Conference Following Russian-Armenian Talks*, Yerevan, 25 March 2005, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22883.

[6] Eugene B. Rumer, *Russian National Security and Foreign Policy in Transition*, cit., p. 29.

[7] Source: Worl Bank data, 2014 (http://data.worldbank.org). For more information, see the website of the Eurasian Economic Union: http://eaeunion.org.

[8] Igor Zevelev, "The Russian World Boundaries", in *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2 (April-June 2014), http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Russian-World-Boundaries-16707.

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With Vladimir Putin, all the previous ways of interpreting the near abroad, mainly regarding the security and unity of the Russian world, found both their synthesis and evolution. In the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000,[9] the first one signed by Vladimir Putin, the main priorities listed concerned the international projection and prestige of the Russian Federation, accompanied by key relations with CIS states and by a substantial concern over NATO expansion. This was supported by a theoretical basis provided by two key ideologues, Vladislav Surkov and Alexander Dugin, who played a significant role in shaping Russian perceptions of its "near abroad."[10] Surkov theorised the "sovereign democracy," stressing on the one hand Russian autonomy in determining its own democratic model, necessarily different from the Western one, while, on the other hand, calling for a foreign policy oriented towards guaranteeing Russia's sovereignty from external threats in a globalised world. Alexander Dugin, in contrast, elaborated a complex political theory known as Neo-Eurasianism, aimed at providing Eurasia with a great space (*Grossraum*) analogous in scope to the Atlanticist world represented by the West. In this space, Russia was called on to perform a hegemonic role through restoring its influence on the "Russian world" (*russkiy mir*), more or less coinciding with Russian imperial boundaries. Instead of recalling Soviet memories, this expression was charged with a more culturally-centred and identity approach. Departing from these theoretical bases, Putin's political doctrine towards the "near abroad" can be categorised as a new version of Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of "limited sovereignty," entitling the USSR to intervene in the case of threats of regime change in its satellite states.[11] This way, Putin puts into question the post-Cold War world order. The idea that Russia has now recovered from the terrible 1990s implies the claim for a more "equal" role in international relations, meaning that Moscow wants to have a say in setting the rules and geopolitical veto rights in what it considers as its sphere of influence: the post-Soviet space. To this aim, the rhetoric on the commitment to protect the "rights and legitimate interests of [its] citizens and compatriots living abroad on the basis of international law and effective bilateral agreements"[12] represented a valuable tool to gain public support.

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[9] Russian Presidency, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, approved by Putin on 28 June 2000, http://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm. See also the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, approved by Putin on 12 February 2013, http://archive.mid.ru//bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/869c9d2b87ad8014c32575d9002b1c38!OpenDocument.

[10] See, for example, Ray Silvius, *Russian State Visions of World Order and the Limits to Universal Liberalism*, PhD thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 2012, https://curve.carleton.ca/412bf126-3cf0-4cdb-93d8-3f4377cd65ba.

[11] "Barroso tells Putin to abandon Brezhnev doctrine on limited sovereignty", in *EurActiv*, 14 May 2014, http://www.euractiv.com/?p=846215.

[12] Russian Presidency, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, approved by Medvedev on 12 July 2008, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml.

2. Perceptions of Ukraine in the establishment discourse

There are at least three main issues of concern for the Russian government that involve Ukraine: 1) its importance as a buffer state to contain Western expansion eastwards, 2) Russia's responsibility to protect the Russian-speaking population living in Ukraine, and 3) as a danger in terms of spill-over effects in the "near abroad".

2.1 Ukraine as a buffer state to contain the West

To be able to defend a territory and the people within it is certainly one of the characteristics defining a state. For the Russian Federation, however, the concepts of people and territory have not always coincided with its borders but rather are extended to its near abroad. In this regard, Ukraine plays a very important role: its geographic position makes it a buffer state, able to contain NATO and EU expansion eastwards. In addition, the naval base of Sevastopol in Ukraine, which had been hosting the Russian Sea Fleet since the 18th century, was of crucial importance for two reasons: first, from there Moscow could shape its projection over the Mediterranean Sea and the Southern Caucasus; second, it was a deterrent to NATO expansion because the NATO charter explicitly forbids member states to host foreign military bases on their territory. Usually referred to as a brother country[13] or sometimes as an artificial entity,[14] Moscow did fear Ukraine turning westward, militarily and economically, especially in 2010, when Yulia Tymoshenko ran for president. Russian attempts to make Kiev join the CSTO alliance and the Eurasian Union must be interpreted in this light.

In addition, what happened after Euromaidan was clear evidence supporting this perception of Ukraine as a buffer state: both the annexation of Crimea and the attempts of the Russian federation to ensure a "Finlandisation" of Ukraine[15] illustrate Russia's attempts to forge Ukraine as a buffer zone between itself and the West.

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[13] Nuray Aridici, "How Vladimir Putin has changed the meaning of 'Russian'", in *The Conversation UK*, 9 April 2014, http://theconversation.com/how-vladimir-putin-has-changed-the-meaning-of-russian-24928.

[14] Putin called Ukraine an artificial entity during his speech at NATO-Russia Council in April 2008. See Taras Kuzio, "Russia's Ideological Crusade Against Ukraine", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 113 (12 June 2009), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35123&tx_ttnews[backPid]=485.

[15] Henry A. Kissinger, "To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End", in *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2014, http://wpo.st/w_cG1.

2.2 Responsibility to protect: securitisation of the Russian world

When speaking about the responsibility to protect (currently referred to as R2P), I am borrowing the title of a report issued by the International Commission on International State Sovereignty in 2001,[16] which reformulated the meaning of state sovereignty. It was no longer conceived as the absolute power of the state over its citizens, but as a state's responsibility to protect its people from major violations of human rights. When applied to Russian politics, this concept intertwines with the previously exposed idea of the Russian world as a single cultural space. Already in 1995 the idea of a responsibility to ensure security for the CIS members was voiced by president Boris Yeltsin.[17] However, a more specific reference to the responsibility to protect was made in 2008 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov: he directly appealed to R2P in order to justify the war in Georgia, maintaining that what was going on in the break-away Republic of Ossetia was genocide, and thus Russia had the right to intervene.[18] Even though these claims are farfetched and far-removed from the manner in which R2P was conceived,[19] what is worth deducing from this interpretation of R2P is that Russia considers this space as its own: it feels entitled to intervene in case of perceived danger to Russian citizens abroad and to use this tool to reinforce its political and strategic goals.

In a slightly different way, the idea of R2P was picked up again during the Ukraine crisis, but was more focused on the protection of the rights of Russian citizens abroad. Taking into account the fate of people in Crimea, the Russian president actually compared what transpired after the Ukrainian choice to turn westwards to what happened to Soviet citizens after the collapse of the USSR: "It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realised that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered. [...] Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones [after the USSR's collapse], overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders."[20] Consequently, what Putin stressed in his speech was Russia's responsibility to protect[21] Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from alleged threats and repression: "the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in

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[16] The text is available in the website of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP): http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/publications/core-rtop-documents.

[17] Kathleen Mihalisko, "Yeltsin's CIS Decree: An Instrument for Regaining Russia's Superpower Status", in *Prism*, Vol. 1, No. 21 (6 October 1995), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5283&tx_ttnews[backPid]=217.

[18] Gareth Evans, "Russia and the 'Responsibility to Protect'", in *The Los Angels Times*, 31 August 2008, http://fw.to/E2wS9qN.

[19] James P. Rudolph, *How Putin distorts R2P in Ukraine*, 7 March 2014, https://www.opencanada.org/features/how-putin-distorts-r2p-in-ukraine.

[20] Russian Presidency, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 18 March 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603.

[21] Meg Sullivan, "Justifying Crimea: President Putin Invokes R2P", in *Brown Political Review*, 11 April 2014, http://www.brownpoliticalreview.org/?p=13945.

defending their rights and lives, in preventing the events that were unfolding and are still underway in Kiev, Donetsk, Kharkov and other Ukrainian cities. Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part."[22] In this regard, it is worth mentioning the documentary film on Vladimir Putin issued in 2015.[23] It provides a description of the president as the defender of Russia's identity and culture because he managed to bring Crimea "back home" and to secure the Russian world. According to Igor Zevelev, the constant referral made to the Russian world is the signal of a new concept of security: the securitisation of the Russian world, which reflects a fundamental shift in the official idea of the Kremlin's zone of responsibility from the nation-state level to the level of a community larger than a nation-state.[24]

2.3 Fear of spill-over effects

A study from Akos Lada uses a new dataset on cultural similarity, coupled with the Correlates of War Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset (1816-2008), to show that shared identity and cultural similarities can lead to war when there are differences in domestic political institutions; a repressive regime is terribly threatened by a culturally-similar country that has empowered democratic institutions. In that case undemocratic regimes typically either use force against the culturally-similar democracy in order to avoid its citizens seeing their brothers empowered and simultaneously call for more democratisation, or provide negative propaganda about the other country's atmosphere or environment.[25]

One of the examples the author makes is that of the two Koreas: North Korean citizens are more prone to push for change when inspired by a culturally-similar democracy such as South Korea. Thus, North Korean dictators try to prevent their citizens from acquiring information on South Korean democracy and describe it as an enemy rather than a model.

It is not so difficult to extend these conclusions to the case of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. One of the main concerns of the Russian government is the reasonable fear that the events of Maidan could produce spill-over effects not only on the near abroad, but also within the Russian Federation itself. This country encompasses twelve time zones, accounts for eighty-three (with Crimea eighty-four) federal subjects, and hosts an ethnically- and religiously-diverse community. The spread of a democratic model on its borders is interpreted as a threat to the regime's

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[22] Russian Presidency, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 18 March 2014, cit.

[23] Andrey Kondrashov, *Crimea: The Way Back Home, March 2015*, https://vimeo.com/123194285.

[24] Igor Zevelev, "The Russian World Boundaries", cit.

[25] Akos Lada, *The Clash of Brothers*, paper presented at the APSA 2014 Annual Meeting, Washington, 28-31 August 2014, http://ssrn.com/abstract=2452776.

stability and security.[26]

3. The economic perspective: Ukraine as the oligarchs see it

Russian oligarchs' point of view towards Ukraine is not free of ambivalence. If on the one hand Ukraine is an important market for Russian gas and goods – in 2014, Ukraine still was the sixth country of destination for Russian goods and accounted for 16.8 billion dollars of Russian exports[27] – they also tend to give about Ukraine is one of a country benefiting from Russian aid and benevolence on the other hand.

In promoting Russian economic expansion, the Russian business elite refers to what seems to be a typical colonial discourse calling on moral and material investment in dependent territories, like a civilising mission of feeding and protecting them. Taking into account the opinion of Russian economist and politician Sergey Glazyev, Ukraine is considered key to the realisation of Eurasian integration.[28] However, he depicts Ukraine more like an object rather than a subject of international relations when speaking about Ukraine benefitting from very special prices for Russian gas and oil and Russia's favourable export regime for its agricultural production. In fact, when Ukraine decided to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, the economic elite's reaction was mainly a feeling of ingratitude for their work and investment in the country. Of a similar mind is Alexander Lebedev, who is part owner of Aeroflot and Novaya Gazeta and who harshly criticises corruption in Ukraine.[29]

Two other oligarchs, Oleg Deripaska and Konstantin Malofeev, provide further examples of the oligarchy's convergence with the regime on this issue. The first minimised the effects of the Ukrainian crisis, enhancing Russian patriotism and aspirations of power; the latter, who is openly pro-Putin, is believed to have advised him to profit from Ukrainian centrifugal forces and to go ahead with the annexation of Crimea.[30] In other words, despite Russian oligarchs' business having been damaged by EU sanctions over Ukraine, Russian counter-sanctions, the rouble crisis, and the de-offshorisation law,[31] this elite remains loyal to the regime,

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[26] This is the reason behind the approval of a law defining Russian as a special subject so that the preservation of the other ethnic languages, essential for keeping unity and harmony, would not entail a reduction of the hours dedicated to the Russian language.

[27] Russian Federal State Statistics Service, "External trade of the Russian Federation" and "Exports and Imports of the Russian Federation with Selected Foreign Countries", in *Russia in Figures 2015*, http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/en/figures/activities.

[28] Sergey Glazyev, "Posledniy god nezavisimosti?", in *Sergey Glazyev blog*, 3 September 2013, http://www.glazev.ru/sodr_ssn/319/.

[29] See the Alexander Lebedev's blog: http://www.alebedev.org/tags/44.html.

[30] Joshua Keating, "Did This Russian Oligarch Come Up With Putin's Ukraine Strategy?", in *Slate Magazine*, 26 February 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/02/26/did_this_russian_oligarch_come_up_with_putin_s_ukraine_strategy.html.

[31] See Alexander Anichkin, Dmitry Tolkachev and Julia Pyaskorskaya, "Russian 'deoffshorisation law': bring the boys back home!", in *Clifford Change Briefing Notes*, November 2014, http://www.

or at least understands Russian involvement in Ukraine. In particular, it remains loyal to the social contract they made with the Russian establishment, and thus to Vladimir Putin's political project.

4. Ukraine according to the media and civil society

The image of Ukraine as portrayed by the media slightly changes if we take into account the media as a governmental tool to promote campaigns and political choices, or as a channel through which civil society expresses its views.

Both in Soviet times and in the post-Cold War era, the role of the media was to maintain close relationships between Russia and Ukraine while contrasting centripetal trends. In this regard, the media developed a counter-discourse over Viktor Yushchenko's fuelling of "Ukrainian nationalism" after the Orange Revolution. A true "war of memories"[32] has been fought between Russian and Ukrainian media over historical ties. For example, one of the main myths of Ukrainian identity, that of Nikolai Gogol's Cossack leader Taras Bulba, served as a tool for increasing pro-Russian sympathies in 2009. As Taras Kuzio remarks, in the 2009 film (sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture) the new Taras Bulba is depicted while fighting the "Western enemies" and dying for "the Orthodox Russian land."[33] As the film director admitted, the purpose of the film was to disseminate the message and promote the myth that Ukrainians and Russians belong to the same *narod*, sharing the values of loyalty and brotherhood and the fight against Nazism.

Following the crisis over Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the Russian media has adopted an even more assertive role, whose intrusiveness is highlighted by the fact that Ukrainian President Poroshenko signed a bill prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian movies, TV series and programs which glorify the "aggressor state," like Novorossia TV, the TV channel of Russian-backed separatists broadcasting in Eastern Ukraine.[34] Nevertheless, the image of Ukraine diffused by the Russian media after Maidan has a new goal, fairly different from that of the past. Through depicting the Ukrainian government as a Nazi regime, comparable to a puppet in the hands of the West and a betrayer of the historical friendship, the mass media aims to discredit Ukrainian political choices, namely its turn westward.

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cliffordchance.com/briefings/2014/11/russian_deoffshorisationlawbringtheboy.html.

[32] G. Kasyanov and A. Miller, *Rossiya-Ukraina. Kak pishetsya istoriya* (Russia Ukraine. As history is written), Moscow, Russian State University for the Humanities, 2011

[33] Taras Kuzio, "The Ukrainian-Russian Cultural Conflict", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 87 (6 May 2009), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34955&tx_ttnews[backPid]=485.

[34] At the same time Russia is providing state funding for movies showcasing Ukraine and Crimea as Russia's military glory together with movies promoting family values and state support. See Nigel Wilson, "Russia offers state funds for movies about Ukraine and Crimea", in *International Business Times*, 2 March 2015, http://ibt.uk/A006FeZ.

Vladimir Golstein from *Russia Insider* provides an interesting example of such discrediting. In February 2015, he outlines the similarities between the Spanish civil war as described in Orwell's essay "Looking Back on the Spanish War" and the war in Ukraine, mainly referring to the opposition between the ruling classes (the Ukrainian government) who subjugated the working ones (people from Eastern Ukraine).[35] Moreover, he maintains that the fascists used the Russians as an enemy scapegoat in order to deviate citizens' attention from the real problems of the country. Similarly, Oleg Bondarenko from *Izvestia* labels Kiev's authorities as Nazi and compares the Ukrainians to naive children because they believed in Western "milk, honey and freedom of circulation," though they did not receive the necessary credit to avoid default.[36]

Some representatives of civil society share the same discrediting rhetoric used in the majority of newspapers. Sergey Markov's analysis in *The Moscow Times* accuses Kiev's regime of being illegitimate and non-representative of the majority of the population.[37] One of the main economists, Sergey Glazyev (who is also Putin's advisor on Eurasian issues), summarises the Ukrainian situation on his blog, envisaging terrible outlooks for its economic development. Among the other posts, what catches attention is the one entitled "Eurofascism," which portrays the EU and the US cheating Kiev and forcing it to accept and follow EU economic and defence policy for their own interest and against Russia.[38] Another is entitled "The Last Day of Independence" and refers to 2013. In this article, Glazyev highlights the main risks for Ukraine adhering to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA): cuts to the welfare state, an increased rate of unemployment, the worsening of the state budget and the negative effects of competition on Ukrainian agricultural products and manufacturers.[39]

However, the great majority of people from academia and think tanks seem to adopt a more moderate approach, refraining from giving such a discrediting image of Ukraine but trying to discuss Ukraine as a tool for Russian interests and security. As Vladimir Bruter from *Russia in Global Affairs* argued, now the "brothers" rhetoric is over and soon Russia will forget about the loss of this "phantom."[40] Natalia Antonova from *The Moscow Times* maintains that, besides the Russian public's criticism of Ukraine, which is the neighbourhood enemy and is easy to demonise, what Russia is actually doing is using Ukraine as a way to hurt US interests and as

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[35] Vladimir Golstein, "Orwell on Fighting Fascists: From the Spanish Civil War to Ukraine", in *Russia Insider*, 27 February 2015, http://russia-insider.com/en/2015/02/27/3945.

[36] Oleg Bondarenko, "Ukraina - ne Evropa", in *Izvestia*, 22 January 2015, http://izvestia.ru/news/582122.

[37] Sergey Markov, "Russia Must Stop U.S. Expansion in Ukraine", in *The Moscow Times*, 19 March 2014, http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/496137.html.

[38] Sergey Glazyev, "Eurofascism", in *Sergey Glazyev blog*, 19 May 2014, http://www.glazev.ru/sodr_ssn/361/.

[39] Sergey Glazyev, "Posledniy god nezavisimosti?", cit.

[40] Vladimir Bruter, "Forgetting about Ukraine?", in *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2 (April-June 2015), http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Forgetting-about-Ukraine-17530.

an effective great short-term tool for mobilising society against an outside threat.[41] Andrey Kokoshin, president of the Faculty of International Politics at Lomonosov State University Russia and director of the Institute of National Security (RAN), remarked in an interview that one must not be surprised by what happened in Crimea and Southern Ukraine because it is closely connected to concept of Russian "rights on post-Soviet space," a long-standing issue on Moscow's security agenda.[42] Nevertheless, the image that this part of civil society tries to depict is not that of an immediate danger for Russian interests. Instead, Ukraine is portrayed as a ground for political confrontation over systems of government and values.

5. Ukraine: Does it really exist? Public opinion and the Orthodox Church

This section provides a discussion of the perception of Ukraine in Russian public opinion and by the Orthodox Church. They are coupled together because both share the difficulties of conceiving of Ukraine as a separate reality due to its historical ties and common roots.

5.1 Public opinion

Before dealing with how the Ukraine crisis affected Russian public opinion, it is necessary to present an overview of how its perception of Ukraine evolved since the end of the Cold War. In Soviet times Ukraine hosted 21 percent of the Soviet population and was never conceived of as an autonomous reality separated from Russia. In fact, as Roman Szporluk argued in 1993, while few Russians would deny that Georgians are Georgian, Estonians are Estonian, and Chechens Chechen, many Russians questioned the very existence of Ukranians.[43]

After the collapse of the USSR and the creation of an independent Ukraine, the majority of Russians did not recognise Ukraine as an equal partner. Instead, they looked at it as something artificial that would be reunited with Russia one day, the language of which was considered a Russian dialect.[44] In fact, "Little Russia" was the historical term used to refer to the geographical territory of the Cossack Hetmanate after its annexation by the Tsardom of Moscovy in 1764 and corresponds to the territory of modern Ukraine. Interestingly, what was also common between Russians was the use of the term "little Russians" to designate Ukrainians. Until

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[41] Natalia Antonova, "Russia Must Focus Less on Ukraine, More on IS", in *The Moscow Times*, 5 July 2015, http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/525061.html.

[42] Andrey Kokoshin interviewed at Pozner show, 29 June 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T0FHohsQao.

[43] Roman Szporluk, "Belarus', Ukraine and the Russian Question: A Comment", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1993), p. 366-374.

[44] Andreas Kappeler, "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial Past and Competing Memories", in *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (July 2014), p. 107-115.

the 19th century the term "little Russians" was used in a pejorative sense, because it indicated people that were mainly peasants, who spoke a strange Russian dialect and whose culture was not considered as sophisticated as the Russian one. This claim is particularly popular in Russian nationalist blogs, especially in the form of quotes from imperial times, attributed to Tsar Nicholas II: "There is no Ukrainian language, just illiterate peasant speaking Little Russians."[45]

Despite this attitude of superiority, Russians did not perceive Ukraine as a hostile country: Levada Centre's opinion polls highlight that from December 1998 to March 2014 Russian perception of Ukraine was very positive (with the exception of a few months between 2008 and 2009).[46] Even during the Orange Revolution, the aforementioned opinion polls show that Russian attitudes towards Ukraine did not change significantly. On the contrary, what was particularly condemned in that time was the Western countries' negative influence over Ukraine, as confirmed by the harsh rhetoric used in the declarations of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov in late 2004.[47]

Has the crisis changed Russian public opinion regarding Ukraine? Looking at the Levada Centre's polls, while in 2008 the negative attitude reached 62 percent and then dropped below 20 percent in 2013, it peaked again in 2014-2015, reaching 64 percent. In addition, data collected by the Public Opinion Fundation (FOM) shows that Ukraine is now considered an unfriendly country (62 percent) just after the United States (77 percent) and is no longer considered a valuable partner for the Russian economy.[48]

However, worth considering is the influence of two factors: 1) the Russian information war,[49] which has seriously prompted a very negative image of Ukraine; and 2) that the negative attitude mainly refer to the Ukrainian government and not to the Ukrainians as a people. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that the Maidan events could eventually remove a centenary history of mixed marriages and families between Russians and Ukrainians.

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[45] Britt Peterson, "The Long War over the Ukrainian Language", in *The Boston Globe*, 16 March 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/03/15/the-long-war-over-ukrainian-language/HXlLbK9wVnhwGShNVPKIUP/story.html.

[46] Levada Center, *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya: druz'ya i "vragi" Rossii* (International Relations: Russia's Friends and "Enemies"), 8 June 2015, http://www.levada.ru/?p=10197.

[47] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Alexander Yakovenko, the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Answers a Russian Media Question Regarding International Observers' Conclusions on Election Results in Ukraine and Uzbekistan*, 28 December 2004, http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/030111D3B474A94CC3256F790042F6F9.

[48] Larissa Pautova, "Geopolitics and Life", in *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 1 (January-March 2015), http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Geopolitics-and-Life-17406.

[49] Julien Nocetti, "Guerre de l'information: le web russe dans le conflit en Ukraine", in *Focus Stratégique*, No. 62 (September 2015), https://www.ifri.org/fr/node/10613.

5.2 The Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is a very important stakeholder because its influence on the post-Soviet space actually remained significant even after the collapse of the USSR. On the one hand, it is a fundamental instrument of power for Moscow's government; on the other, it aims to continue exerting its hegemony over the Orthodox world in the post-Soviet space. Before discussing the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the ROC's perception of Ukraine, it seems appropriate to retrace the links between the ROC and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the ROC's influence over Ukrainian politics.

In the ROC system, Ukraine and the UOC were considered one of the main pillars for practical and cultural reasons. Firstly, the number of UOC religious organisations in Ukraine per capita is three times as much as in Russia.[50] Secondly, Ukraine and Crimea are considered the mythological cradle of the ROC: there Prince Vladimir the Great, ruler of Kievan Rus, accepted Christianity through baptism, which is a milestone in Russian and Ukrainian identity. Also, Sebastopol is the place where Cyril and Methodius, the founders of the Orthodox Church, are believed to have been born.

Despite these ties, relations between the ROC and the UOC have been strained since 1990, mainly because of the UOC's aspirations to attain an autocephaly as well as the unification of Ukrainian churches under its authority. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s the ROC granted the UOC autonomous status, which consisted of the right to appoint bishops and manage its own financial and economic affairs while remaining in the ROC's structure. Nevertheless, the role of the ROC was not reshaped. Instead, it kept on influencing the UOC and being one of the main instruments through which the Russian government tried to exert soft power in Ukraine.[51] For instance, the ROC's support for Viktor Yanukovych during and after the Orange Revolution is undeniable, especially in terms of public support for his campaign. Both the Patriarch of Moscow and Kiev gave Yanukovych their blessing, while in the ROC's cathedrals leaflets calling for Slavic brotherhood were distributed: they described him as an "Orthodox president," able to strengthen the intra-Orthodox links and avoid the split in Ukraine.[52]

Behind the public support expressed by the ROC, there was actually a double commitment: on the one hand, it was a tool in Moscow's hands to promote a pro-Russian candidate in Ukraine; on the other, the ROC aimed at preventing the

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[50] Igor Gretskiy, *The Orange Revolution: A Challenge for the Russian Orthodox Church*, Paper presented for the 6th Pan-European Conference on International Relations, Turin, 12-15 September 2007, http://www.eisa-net.org/be-bruga/eisa/files/events/turin/igor-turin2007final.pdf.

[51] Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, "A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine", in *Chatham House Briefing Papers*, No. REP RSP BP 2012/01 (January 2012), https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/6430.

[52] Igor Gretskiy, *The Orange Revolution: A Challenge for the Russian Orthodox Church*, cit., p. 10.

Ukrainian Church from splitting from the ROC and then gaining more power through reuniting the other existing Churches in Ukraine.[53] This was considered very dangerous by both Moscow and the ROC because they saw a split as a threat to their respective influences on the country and its Church. In fact, from 2009, the ROC adopted a more assertive approach on this issue, mainly due to the strong personality of Patriarch Kirill. One of the leitmotivs in his speech was the call for spiritual unity of the Eastern Slavic peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: the most common terms were "nation" and "group" as well as a call for durable cooperation between the elites of the Russian World countries. However, one of the main challenges Kirill tried to envisage was more political rather than spiritual. His diplomatic missions, aimed at gaining the support of the Ukrainian government, were led with the purpose of pressing the bishops of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which was granted administrative autonomy in 1990) to return under its jurisdiction.

After the referendum in Crimea and following the escalation of the crisis, the ROC's perception and attitude towards Ukraine and the UOC did not change significantly: both the importance of control and the idea of a single religious reality have remained the same or even been further stressed in these times of crisis. What the ROC tried to do while dealing with the UOC and the Ukrainian people was to encourage dialogue and the spirit of brotherhood. In this regard, Patriarch Kirill remarked that "brothers of one faith and one blood never bring destruction to one another;"[54] moreover, he abstained from entering St. George's Hall, where Putin had given his historical speech about Crimea, as well as from exhibiting explicit approval for the annexation. Kirill tried to promote the idea of the "Russian world," conceived of as a great Russian civilisation coming from the Kievan baptismal font and spreading across Eurasia, thus enhancing the common roots of brother countries. In this respect, the July celebration of the baptismal of the *Rus* after the conversion of Prince Vladimir was celebrated both in Moscow and Kiev. The ROC presented the celebration as a core moment, as the Kiev Metropolitan Onofriy asked the assembly to pray in order to stop the animosity between the two peoples.[55]

However, he could not avoid expressing support for Ukraine's self-determination, because he needed to keep closer ties and not lose the trust of the representatives of the UOC. According to Reverend Cyril Hovorun, the former chair of the UOC's department of External Church Relations, the majority of the churches in Ukraine supported the demands of protesters in Maidan.[56] This is a crucial factor if we think about the fact that even the former Kiev Metropolitan Volodymyr, who was

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[53] They are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), headed by Patriarch Filaret, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), headed by Primate Macarius. Both churches splintered from the ROS at different times and are not officially recognised by the Orthodox world.

[54] Sophia Kishkovsky, "Ukrainian crisis may split Russian Orthodox Church", in *National Catholic Reporter*, 27 March 2014, http://ncronline.org/node/73316.

[55] See the video in Channel One Russia, 28 July 2015, http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/288782.

[56] Ibid.

considered pro-Russian, expressed his support for Ukrainian independence and self-determination.

However, despite these attempts to reaffirm brotherhood and ties, according to Andrey Zubov, the Moscow Patriarchate is rapidly losing its influence on the UOC, as many priests and bishops are already shifting to the Ukrainian Church.[57] If the tensions between Russia and Ukraine continue rising, a scenario in which the Patriarchate of Constantinople would eventually recognise the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church could be foreseeable. If reunited with the other churches in Ukraine, this would redraw the map of Orthodoxy.

Conclusions

The events that occurred in Ukraine between 2013-2015 have seriously damaged relations between Russia and Ukraine. Moscow's harsh reaction to the protests in Maidan Square and to the overthrow of the Yanukovych presidency has demonstrated to what extent Russia is willing to act to protect its interests, providing room for reflection over what Ukraine means for Russia. This analysis aimed to explore the Russian vision of Ukraine in order to understand whether and how it affected Russian politics, as well as whether the events that occurred in Ukraine between 2013-2015 have changed this perception.

• The analysis of the government's perception of Ukraine has shown that, first, it cannot be detached from a broader perception of the near abroad. The reason for this lies in the fact that the government considers Ukraine from three perspectives: 1) Ukraine as a buffer state to contain the West; 2) responsibility to protect Ukraine's Russian and Russian speaking population; and 3) Ukraine as a threat for spill-over effects on the Russian world in general.

• The oligarchy shares the idea of Ukraine as a country Russia is responsible for, but it is mainly expressed through colonial discourse calling for moral and material investment in the dependent territories, akin to a civilising mission to feed and protect them.

• The media have always been a tool for Russia to exert its soft power in Ukraine; thus the discourse they promoted highlighted the cultural ties and common traditions of Russia and Ukraine.

• Civil society is divided between those supporting the views of the government, and those who instead try to understand Ukraine in terms of its geopolitical function.

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[57] Paul Goble, "Moscow Patriarchate Rapidly Losing Out in Ukraine–and Beyond", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 94 (20 May 2015), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43933&tx_ttnews[backPid]=485.

• Public opinion has always had trouble in considering Ukraine as a different reality from Russia, as suggested by its historical name of Little Russia. Moreover, Ukrainians were once called "little Russians," demonstrating Russia's perception of Ukrainians as part of the Russian world, despite a sense of superiority towards their culture, considered less sophisticated than the Russian culture.

• The Russian Orthodox Church, which was constantly active in strengthening relations with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, stressed the historical link of the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Crimea – both in the name of the Slavic brotherhood, and for the sake of avoiding schism in the Orthodox World.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the idea of Ukraine as part of the Russian world, which is shared by the majority of the stakeholders, has been used to justify Russian intervention for the sake of "protecting" Russian citizens abroad, while the Russian Orthodox Church has repeatedly spent many words calling for Orthodox unity and for the softening of the hostilities between the two countries. The framework of Putin's challenge to the post-Cold war order and the concept of Ukraine as part of the Russian sphere of influence have played a significant role in the annexation of Crimea and in the instigation of separatist violence.

Nevertheless, the damage the Ukrainian crisis made to Russian-Ukrainian relations to some extent produced a slight change in the Russian vision of Ukraine. According to the polls, Russians currently view Ukraine as an enemy of Russia: mass media provides a discrediting image of Ukraine, depicting the country as governed by fascists, and a puppet in Western hands; and the oligarchs have abandoned the colonial rhetoric and describe Ukraine's gloomy economic outlook and its corruption. However, the perception of Ukraine from the point of view of the ROC and the government did not actually change. The ROC continued throughout the crisis to reaffirm the unity of the Orthodox World and to call on the restoration of relations between the two countries. The government, rather than changing its perception, seems to have definitely put it into practice: a concrete application of Putin's doctrine, restoring Russian influence in the "near abroad" in opposition to NATO's and the EU's eastward expansion. Its main shift deals with a broadening of the concept of security, once perceived at the nation-state level but now elevated to a higher level: the "Russian world."

In conclusion, even if it is not possible to speak about a substantial change in the Russian perception of Ukraine, it is still worth outlining that this crisis has demonstrated to what extent this perception can affect government decisions, to the point of incurring heavy international retaliation: besides security and strategic reasons, the fact that Russia sees Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence and thus of the Russian world has driven Moscow to war and to incur significant economic costs. In addition, the narrative surrounding Ukraine has been highly effective in providing a negative example of what can befall on those who deviate from Russia's path.

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