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# How Putin challenges post-cold war European order and fear of dissent in Russia

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Tartu  
2015

The downfall of the Berlin wall was succeeded by the enraptured manifestation of people dancing, singing and toasting one another - they were celebrating the demolition of communism and the birth of a new epoch of freedom. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, Western leaders hoped that Russia would become an integral part of post-cold war European system. However, Kremlin's new assertive foreign policy made this assumption unfeasible. Furthermore, Putin has significantly threatened security of Europe by its recent brazen incursion into Ukraine. Consequently, Russia turned into an ultimate challenge for the intrinsic principles, on which the European Union was initially established. A feeble European response on crisis in Ukraine seems to suggest that the mainstream political mindset in Europe is reluctant to recognize Russia's blatant assault on Ukraine as an indirect attack on the EU and its post-cold war principles. It prompted certain authors to assert that just as the break-up of Yugoslavia ended the Cold War European order, the crisis in Crimea marked the end of the post-Cold War European order.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, Putin's Ukrainian adventure exposed Putin's acute anxieties concerning political spillover of dissent from Ukraine into Russia. Taking into consideration revolutionary upheavals in the region during the previous decade, "color revolutions" have been recognized as one of the most devastating hazards to Russia's national interests. The underlying paper discusses in depth these three main suppositions.

### ***New wall in Europe***

Last November, Europe celebrated the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall. In 1989, the Cold War ended, the Iron Curtain crumbled and Europe experienced a continent-wide euphoria. However, not everyone was happy with this upshot. Mr. Putin eminently referred to the end of the Soviet Union, the last domino in the chain reaction started by the fall of the Wall, as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Putin, the collapse of the wall was a calamity, because it marked an end of Russia's great power status at the center of Soviet empire, after which the Kremlin lost the control over half of Europe.

According to immature belief, the West's victory would not have zero-sum game effect for Russia and an era of dividing lines in Europe would be finished. However, today the phantom from the 20th century is back, unexpectedly for many people in Europe. Maidan protests

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<sup>1</sup> Krastev I, Leonard M. 2014. The new European disorder. European council of foreign relations. November 2014. Available from: [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117\\_TheNewEuropeanDisorder\\_ESSAY.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117_TheNewEuropeanDisorder_ESSAY.pdf) Accessed: 15.05.2015.

embodied a belated episode of the Velvet Revolutions, which took place in Eastern Europe 25 years ago: citizens standing up for the goal to return into the European family. It obviously displayed that the struggle for liberty that launched in 1989 has not been over yet. As Kim notes, Ukrainian's punishment by Putin was late retaliation for the world he lost in 1989. "Putin exposed to the world the scars from psychological wounds he sustained in 1989".<sup>2</sup>

Russia's uncompromising denial to comprehend the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics means that the Berlin Wall still exists, but has shifted to the east. Today, Georgia and Ukraine, along with other Eastern Partnership countries are united by the common desire and goal – to live in a country, free from external control and able to choose their own destinies, disregarding of being threatened by their location in sphere of "Big Brother's" influence. However, Kremlin's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and recent annexation of Crimea render 'free choice' of these countries even less 'free'. Georgia and Ukraine, like Germany a generation ago, are countries with a deep wound running through their heart. Today, Europe is divided by new wall, built by an outside force and this wall once again splits Europe from itself, creating new lines of fear.

### ***The post-cold war European order – paramount target of Russia.***

The current debate revolves around the statement that annexation of Crimea has concluded the post-Cold War European order. The demise of Soviet Union kicked off emergence of the new European order. The key elements of this post-modern European order were highly developed system of mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs and security based on openness and transparency in the context of the EU.<sup>3</sup> Prior to Ukrainian crisis, Russia decided to confront institutional, ethical and intellectual basis of this order. It withdrew from the Treaty of Conventional Forces in Europe and Moscow refused to ratify the reform of the European Court of Human Rights. Subsequently, it violated Helsinki final act, which represented a guarantee of invariability of borders in Europe and the Kremlin used its military forces for the purpose of expansion its influence in neighborhood that made obvious Russia's belligerent attitude toward post cold war European order as it tried to undermine it powerfully.

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<sup>2</sup> Kim, L. 2014. 25 years after its fall, Vladimir Putin puts Berlin Wall's lessons front and center. Reuters. November 2014. Available from: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/07/25-years-after-it-fell-vladimir-putin-puts-berlin-walls-lessons-front-and-center/> Accessed: 20.05.2015

<sup>3</sup> Krastev, I. 2015. Dancing with the Bear. How the West should handle its relations with Russia. IAI research papers. Edizioni Nuova Cultura-Roma. Available from [http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp\\_18.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp_18.pdf) Accessed: 15.05.2015.

As Robert Cooper says, what came to an end in 1989, was not just the Cold War, but the political systems of three centuries: the balance of power and the imperial urge.<sup>4</sup> The post-modern system renounces the use of force as a mean of conflicts resolution in Europe. Additionally, the Brussels-based institutions of modern Europe were built in order to prevent authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism from ever again taking root in the continent and leading it to war.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the post-modern European order contravenes revision of borders in Europe or establishing new states, as it happened after the First World War.

On these grounds, Mr. Putin's assault on the principles of post cold war European order is many-fold. *First*, Russia still thinks as a 19<sup>th</sup> century great power, which perceives the world through the prism of balance of power and spheres of influence. *Second*, to vindicate annexation of Crimea, Putin alleged that he had defended the interests of millions of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people - evidently, his aggressive campaign encompasses ethnic nationalism. Interestingly, Hitler in 1938 justified his incursion into Austria with the need to guard fellow ethnics. *Third*, Mr. Putin resuscitates ferocious imperialism and abets secessionism with his affirmed yearning to control any lands, where Russian language is spoken. *Fourth*, after he succeeded in turning Russia into authoritarian state, Putin's attack on Ukraine aimed at obstructing of implementation of Maidan's democratic principles into real political life of Ukraine. Russia's state authoritarianism coupled with orthodox conservatism and imperialist urge epitomizes an alternative model to western liberal values and principles.

Having regarded these clashes, what can be the sources of the conflict? Igor Krastev argues that at the heart of the current crisis is not the clash between democracy and authoritarianism, but conflict is rooted into the different types of actors they represent. Russia is "setting itself up as an ideological alternative to the EU, with a different approach to sovereignty, power and world order. In the Kremlin's vocabulary, sovereign power is a synonym for great power".<sup>6</sup> To interpret this assumption, while the EU sticks to postmodern path, Russian leadership endorses a Westphalian understanding of sovereignty. For the sake of better comprehension of postmodern-modern binary, I would like to reference two authors here. As Klinke notes, "while Russia is seen as caught up in spatial framework of fixed territory, national

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Saunder D. 2014. Putin's war of ideas cuts to the heart of Europe. The Globe and Mail. July 25. Available from: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/the-putin-challenge/article19768103/> Accessed: 16.05.2015.

<sup>6</sup> Krastev I. 2008. Russia and the Post-cold war European order. Diplomaatia. special edition. March 2008. Available from <http://www.diplomaatia.ee/en/article/russia-and-the-post-cold-war-european-order/> Accessed: 30.05.2015.

identity and traditional geopolitics, the European Union embodies a postmodern spatial mindset that simultaneously reflects and drives the dissolution of sovereign territory, the formation of multi-layered identities and the disappearance of geopolitics”.<sup>7</sup> He also suggests that beneath of the postmodern-modern binary are sub-binaries, which exemplify the EU superiority to Russia: post-sovereignty versus sovereignty; free trade versus autarky; soft power versus hard power; normative foreign policy versus realpolitik and decentralization versus centralization. Similarly, U.S. political scientist Robert Kagan suggests, “the modern is associated with the classical state system, sovereignty, the nation state and realpolitics, while postmodern is linked to supranational institutions, the unraveling of sovereign territory and ethical foreign policy”.<sup>8</sup>

Although Russia has never been the post-modern state, it certainly belonged to the post-modern European order. Europe sought to accommodate Russia into the post-modern system through the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, through Russia's membership of the Council of Europe and OSCE etc. However, Moscow failed to turn Russia into post-modern country and in the wake of new century, its leadership decided to build statehood based on 19th century European principles and ideas, rather than the European mindset of the 21st century. As Krastev brightly mentions, “for Moscow, the EU's post-modernism is what vegetarianism is for cannibals - an irritating irrelevance”.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, why Russia entrenches into its modern-state mindset and preserves outdated principles for interaction with other countries? Boris Mezhuev suggests, “Russia generally considers postmodern European values to be unfit for its status as a superpower with huge natural resources and a substantial military potential”.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, combination of these two strengths of Russia ensures its exceptional standing vis-à-vis Europe and the rest of the world. According to the logic of Russian political establishment, if Russia decides to integrate in European arrangements, it will have to give up a considerable portion of its superpower ambitions, as Germany did after the Second World War. Therefore, it would be irreconcilable with Russia’s constant search for self-determination in the international system as a great power.

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<sup>7</sup> Klinke I. 2012. Postmodern Geopolitics? The European Union eyes Russia. *Europe-Asia studies*, Vol. 64. July 2012. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/429128/2012\\_Postmodern\\_geopolitics\\_The\\_European\\_Union\\_eyes\\_Russia\\_Europe-Asia\\_Studies\\_64\\_5\\_929-947](https://www.academia.edu/429128/2012_Postmodern_geopolitics_The_European_Union_eyes_Russia_Europe-Asia_Studies_64_5_929-947) Accessed: 25.05.2015.

<sup>8</sup> Kagan R. 2003. *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York. Available from: [http://commonweb.unifr.ch/artsdean/pub/gestens/f/as/files/4760/33518\\_121406.pdf](http://commonweb.unifr.ch/artsdean/pub/gestens/f/as/files/4760/33518_121406.pdf) Accessed: 25.05.2015.

<sup>9</sup> Krastev I, Leonard M. 2014. *The new European disorder*. European council of foreign relations. November 2014. Available from: [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117\\_TheNewEuropeanDisorder\\_ESSAY.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117_TheNewEuropeanDisorder_ESSAY.pdf) Accessed: 15.05.2015.

<sup>10</sup> Mezhuev B. 2008. *Modern Russia and post-modern Europe*. Russia in global affairs. March 2008. Available from: [http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n\\_10362](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_10362) Accessed: 05.06.2015

Consequently, European elites express their irritation in respect of Russia's reluctance to streamline its set of values through undergoing ultimate moral and political transformation.

### ***Fear of dissent***

In the last section, fear of dissent and “infection” of Russian society with anti-regime uprisings is suggested as an explanatory factor of Putin's assertiveness. There are at least two reasons, why Kremlin perceives the West's democracy promotion strategy as directed against the regime's security in Russia. First, Moscow is frightened with revolution in Russia. Maidan revolution last year revived Moscow's acute fear of spilling over uprisings in Russia, compelled Putin to react on newly unpacked circumstances. Second, Russia feels surrounded by pro-western states in the post Soviet space. The “colored revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan during the previous decade could not significantly enhance stability in the region, but it terribly politicized the geostrategic environment. In addition, Georgia and Ukraine's declared aspiration toward NATO and the EU aggravates Russia's feeling of strategic insecurity. Referring Krastev again, color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia during the previous decade, was Putin's 9/11.<sup>11</sup> As Putin mentioned himself, “centralized power is in Russia's DNA”. He is afraid of dissent in Russia more than Western planes, tanks, or even sanctions.

After Putin came in power, he tried to solidify his legitimacy with various ideological constructs: in the beginning, it was the concept of *managed democracy* followed by *sovereign democracy*. Albeit many people consider them as Russian alternative models of Western democracy, these two concepts are western by their essence that clearly illustrates Russia's normative dependence on the West. According to Petrov, “managed democracy” has three main pillars: state political institutions are controlled by forceful presidency. State controls mass media and elections that enable the center to ostracize legally any undesirable candidate from the regional elections.<sup>12</sup> Takeover of the Russia's main autonomous media corporations and the abolition of elections of regional governors are considered as an inception of “managed democracy”. In short, “managed democracy” was mainly served to the goal of debilitating institutions, previously equipped with foundation of legitimacy, independent of the authorities. It

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<sup>11</sup> Krastev I, Leonard M. 2014. The new European disorder. European council of foreign relations. November 2014. Available from: [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117\\_TheNewEuropeanDisorder\\_ESSAY.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117_TheNewEuropeanDisorder_ESSAY.pdf) Accessed: 15.05.2015.

<sup>12</sup> Petrov, N. 2005. From managed democracy to sovereign democracy. PONARS policy memo No. 396. Center for Political-Geographic Research. December 2005. Available from: [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm\\_0396.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm_0396.pdf) Accessed: 05.06.2015.

resulted in robust vertical integration of political system, with president at the top and without horizontal connections.

Shortly after colored revolutions, new concept – “sovereign democracy” has emerged in Russia, precipitated with alarming populist pressure from inside and ultimate threat of revolution/regime change, orchestrated by the West. Thus, concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ served to eliminate the Kremlin’s two adversaries: it sought to keep away the surge of “color revolution” from Russia and responded to Russia’s need for Western-type modernization to calm down populists inside country. As Okara mentions, ‘sovereign’ and ‘democracy’ are notions standing for two different phenomena, with ‘sovereign’ denoting a country’s position in the outside world and ‘democracy’ being a method of organizing society and the state.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, it was an attempt to break Russia’s ideological dependence on Western theories.<sup>14</sup> It is worth to mention that even though “sovereign democracy” displays the Kremlin’s revolt against the Anglo-Saxon theory of liberal democracy, it does not disapprove democracy as a form of government. Moreover, “sovereign democracy” conveys an idea that Russia moves toward democracy, but it has its own pace and given its own conditions.<sup>15</sup> For the external audience, the term “sovereign” conveys that Russian democracy must be delineated exclusively on Russian terms, while it condemns all international allegations, what democracy should denote in Russia, as an attempt meddling in Russia’s domestic affairs. Thus, Russia follows a form of democracy, which is in harmony with its distinctive values and history. Therefore, after “color revolutions” happened in Georgia and Ukraine, Putin warned the West to abandon the strategy, which was destabilizing political systems by illegitimate means of struggle.

Similarly, recent uprisings in Ukraine have been perceived in Russia as constituent of Western plot of regime change. For Kremlin, “color revolutions” are not really driven by people’s democratic willpower. In contrast, it represents a new type of warfare, designed by Western powers, aiming to overthrow independently minded national governments and Russia

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<sup>13</sup> Okara A. 2007. Sovereign democracy: A new Russian idea or a PR project? Russia in global affairs. August 2007. Available from: [http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n\\_9123](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_9123) Accessed 06.06.2015

<sup>14</sup> Krastev I. 2007. Russia as the “other Europe”. Russia in global affairs. November 2007. Available from: [http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n\\_9123](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_9123) Accessed: 25.05.2015

<sup>15</sup> Tsygankov A. 2010. Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity. New York: Rowman and Littlefield publisher.



can become a target of this strategy.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Putin decided to reinforce its regime domestically by delegitimizing well-liked revolution in Kiev, thus prevented increasing anti-regime sentiments in Russian society.

As Gorenburg argues, Moscow has its political counter-strategy against the West. First, Russia actively creates alliances with other authoritarian regimes that are similarly concerned about the possibility of a popular uprising that could lead to their loss of power. The second part of Russia's political strategy is to damage the unity of the Western alliance. This effort has been pursued for several years through the development of political alliances with right-wing parties throughout Europe and in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

In short, promotion of democracy and human rights by the EU bullies the Kremlin's sovereign democracy. Insecurity caused by fear of penetration Western-funded NGOs in Russia incites Kremlin to reconstruct a police state to inhibit foreign interference in its internal affairs. In the meantime, whereas the European Union deems the shortfall of democracy as a key reason for instability in Eurasia, Russia considers the Western policy of exporting democracy as the causal factor of uncertainty in post-Soviet space.

## ***Conclusion***

When I introduced this paper on the EUCA Symposium, I tried to emphasize the most emotional highlights from the main text. The available evidence seems to suggest that contemporary Western mind has a hard time properly estimating the threats coming from Russia. On the one hand, this paper strives to substantiate that Russia is wedging a new dividing wall in the Eastern part of Europe. On the other hand, my paper argues that attack on Ukraine is a tortuous onslaught on the preeminent principles of the European Union. Apparently, post-cold war European order turned out to be extremely exposed to Russia's attack. My suggestion is to search the roots of the conflict into postmodern-modern binary system, which disconnects these two actors from each other. Considering Putin's deep-set fright of revolutions, which might infect Russia, Putin tried to devise its own ideological constructs that would prevent Western powers from pursuing their "dangerous plans" in Russia. To achieve this, Putin acts with a

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<sup>16</sup> Gorenburg D. 2014. Countering color revolutions. PONARS Eurasia policy memo No. 342. September 2014. Available from: [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos/pdf/Pepm342\\_Gorenburg\\_Sept2014.pdf](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos/pdf/Pepm342_Gorenburg_Sept2014.pdf) Accessed: 07.05.2015.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*



strategy “the best defense is a good offence”. In doing so, he intends to weaken Western institutions by seeding the elements of division between the EU countries, especially between Western European countries. Finally, what Europe need today is standing together of all European states, which will stick firmly to the principles of the post-cold war European order and compel Russia to do so. Until Europe remains divided that leads into their weakness, Russia will not respect their weakness.