

APPLES OF DISCORD

In 2014, analysts and policymakers alike were largely caught by surprise by Russia's actions in Ukraine. Some of these moves, such as the application of economic and political pressure on Kiev to dissuade it from signing a free-trade agreement with the European Union, hardly constitute new features in Russia's policies towards the post-soviet space. The annexation of a piece of territory, Crimea, and the conduct of hybrid warfare in the east of the country, do, however. The key issue then is whether these actions are isolated convulsions specific to the context of the Ukraine crisis or, more profoundly, the symptoms of a new direction in Russia's foreign policy?

This question has been ranking high on the agenda of policy-planning units and executive secretariats of national diplomacies and international organisations, all of which have been striving to anticipate Russia's next move. NATO has been exploring ways to provide strategic reassurance to its eastern member states and to develop tactical responses against new modes of hybrid warfare. Sweden and Finland are contemplating relinquishing their neutral status to join NATO. The EU is likely to see a heated debate between its member states on the prioritisation of the southern or eastern neighbourhoods – both mired in crisis – in allocating the bloc's limited resource. Finally, the White House will need to decide whether the upcoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford Jr, is right to designate Russia as the greatest threat to US national security.

Taking stock of the changes at the heart of Russia's foreign policy is crucial, in that it allows us to investigate what prompted them and to reflect on the drivers of Russia's behaviour in regional and international politics. A recent volume, *Russia's Foreign Policy: ideas, domestic politics and external relations*, edited by me and LSE Professor Margot Light, set itself the

analytical task of opening the black box of Russia's foreign policy. Our collective analysis shows that recent changes in that country's foreign policy are above all driven by domestic policy objectives and linked political regime consolidation at home.

But what are these foreign policy changes? A first, salient change has to do with Vladimir Putin's foreign policy discourse. Since the beginning of his third term, the Russian president has embraced a more ideological and more conservative tone, departing from the mainly managerial and largely pragmatic stance that had characterised him until then. His speech of 18 March 2014 on Crimea is, obviously, a paradigm in this regard but the trend goes beyond official speeches. Several Russia-based contributors to the book note a growing ideologisation of the ruling regime around conservative and traditional values.

Second, the domestic representation of Europe has changed. Many specific apples of discord had been complicating EU–Russia relations over the last decade but now Europe is increasingly characterised as a cultural foe in itself, whose practices are antithetic to the Russian ethos. Beyond values, EU economic and trade policies towards the post-soviet space are presented as a geopolitical threat, with Moscow taking counter-measures to oppose them. All in all, Russia's foreign policy discourse is now marked by a level of animosity towards the EU that was, until a couple of years ago, reserved for NATO.

“RUSSIA'S POLITICAL ORDER INTRINSICALLY GENERATES INSECURITY, INDETERMINACY AND SHORT-TERMISM IN THE CONDUCT OF POLICY”

Last year, Russia breached the rule of European security with its annexation of Crimea, leading to the most acute crisis in Russian–Western relations since the end of the Cold War. But what prompted this change in policy? **David Cadier** sets out why Putin's drive to consolidate his domestic political regime has spilled over into foreign policy.

Third, Russia has been more systematic and less compromising in attempting to build a bloc around its interests in the post-soviet space. Regardless of its actual chance of success, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – a trade-integration regime which came into force in January 2015 and which reunited Russia and four other post-soviet states, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan – represents a new instrument as it puts the emphasis on sectorial economic integration and on the harmonisation of regulations rather than on historical legacy or shared political ideology. The EEU is undeniably the most distinctive and most ambitious project of Putin's third term.

These changes in Russia's foreign policy can be linked to evolutions of the domestic political context in which it is formulated. Already inherent to the very nature of Russia's political system, regime insecurity and Putin's personal political insecurity have been augmented by certain external and internal developments. Measures taken in response by the Kremlin to consolidate the domestic political regime have spilled over into foreign policy.

This is partly due to Russia's political order, which intrinsically generates insecurity, indeterminacy and short-termism in the conduct of policy. As in any (semi-)autocratic system, losing power can entail more than losing office: for example, personal wealth and personal freedom can also be at stake. Furthermore, the duality characterising the Russian political system

– between a constitutional order based on legal norms and an administrative regime based on discretionary measures (what Richard Sakwa, one contributor to the book, calls the “dual state”) – entices policymakers to seek constantly to maximise their independence in navigating between the two and makes them particularly wary of outside influence.

Three developments have exacerbated this systemic regime insecurity over the last decade. First, the “colour revolutions” movement of the early 2000s, which led to the ousting of several post-soviet leaders favourable to Russia's positions, were seen in Moscow as crafted by the West and therefore as a threat not only to Russia's interests in the region but also, potentially and in the longer term, to its own political regime. Second, the economic crisis of 2008/09 and the decrease of energy prices weakened the social contract underpinning the Putin regime, where economic development based on sustained growth partly compensated for the encroachment on political liberties. Finally, the public protests in Russia that followed the 2011 parliamentary elections directly and explicitly threatened Putin's rule.

In this context, the Kremlin has adopted a set of measures that have affected foreign policymaking. The first set has been aimed at insulating the regime from external influences, which entails both an offensive and a defensive component. Externally, Moscow has invested in soft-power strategies and trade-integration mechanisms (through the EEU) to constitute the post-soviet space as a buffer against Western influence – the objective has been to maximise Moscow's influence in the region but also to counter the EU's transformative power. Internally, however, Putin has sought to limit external involvements in Russian civil society and to foster a nationalisation of the elites, both through a series of legal measures (eg laws on the NGOs, on personal assets abroad, etc) and through a more vehement discourse against the West.

The second set of measures has aimed at reinforcing internal cohesion – what some contributors to the volume call “nation building at home” (Dmitri Trenin) or “national community making” (Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk). It has consisted in attempting to find new sources of legitimacy for the regime at a time when economic growth and material redistribution were not available in the context of general economic slowdown and budget cuts. The EEU was initially conceived as a regional trade bloc built around Russia that would allow it to be more competitive globally. More profoundly, new resources have been mobilised to consolidate the regime's basis.

The denunciation and confrontation of external threats and the increased ideologisation of the ruling system both serve Putin's objective of regime consolidation. The conservative texture of his (new) foreign policy narrative has its roots in this domestic



political context: while previously he had occupied a middle ground on the Russian political spectrum, between liberals and nationalists, after the 2011 public protests, in an attempt to reinforce his support base, he came to include more elements from the conservative agenda. In this context, international politics is represented as a battle for values, and Europe as an “ontological other”, in opposition to which the Russian political community can be strengthened.

These considerations allow us to shed light on Russia's action in Ukraine: events there have both reinforced the aversion for regime-change dynamics and provided opportunities for strengthening the internal cohesion of the regime and the domestic support base. It should be noted, however, that the magnitude of these actions (ie annexation of a piece of territory and direct military support for separatists) has been greatly influenced by the specificity of the Ukraine context, which is the single most important state for Russia in the region and where the toppling of the government created uncertainties and incentives to act. Stressing the influence of domestic political

factors does not, indeed, amount to disregarding the role of external dynamics – NATO enlargement, the Orange revolution in Ukraine, the Arab Spring and the Maidan movement have all had major impacts on Russia's foreign policy. Yet the interpretations of these events and the choice of policy responses have been mediated by the domestic political context. This internal context ought to be taken into account in trying to make sense of Russia's foreign policy today and tomorrow. ■



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Russia's Foreign Policy: ideas, domestic politics and external relations, co-edited by David Cadier and Margot Light, is published by Palgrave.