

Putin's Second Two Terms, 2012-2020

Session #5

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- **Domestically, relentless movement toward a highly repressive authoritarian regime and a consolidated autocracy;**
- **Internationally, from post-imperial disorientation to revanchism (retaliation to recover lost territory).**

Putin's Internal Policies, 2012-present, re:

INTERNAL SECURITY

POLITICAL ORDER

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

NATIONAL IDEA

LEADERSHIP IMAGE

INTERNAL SECURITY (ANTI-TERRORISM)

- **Remarkable that the nightmare of terrorism, with one exception during the Medvedev Interregnum, was not sustained (until 2024)**
- **Product of victory in Chechen war? Product of Kadyrov regime in Chechnya?**
- **2024: Moscow. Tajik ISIS recruits**

POLITICAL ORDER: INCREASINGLY REPRESSIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

- **2011 = Turning point; Putin hubris in public**
- **Protests by ~80,000 educated, urban professionals**
- **Putin jeered in public; galling and frightening to him.**
- **Incipient “color revolution” in Russia? Centered on elections, as elsewhere; looks to become a mass movement.**

POLITICAL PROTEST AND OPPOSITION

- **Protests led by Alexei Navalny (b. 1976; lawyer by training)**

2011: Dubs “United Russia” the “Party of Crooks and Thieves”

Contests rigged parliamentary elections

Uses social media to build national following, especially among youth and educated professionals

2020: Poisoned by security services; survives; returns to Russia; imprisoned.

CONSEQUENCES OF NAVALNY POISONING: FALL/WINTER 2020-2021

- **Nationwide protests in ~100 locales; total = ~200,000-300,000**
- **Putin's national popularity at ~65%; Navalny's rating at ~24%**
- **Navalny could not bring down Putin, but seized moral initiative.**
 - by miraculously surviving the poisoning**
 - by coming to Ru despite knowing jail awaited**
 - Trial: belittles Putin; willing to die in prison. "Virtuous martyr"**
 - publicizes "Palace" built for Putin (116 million YouTube visits)**
 - interview with assassin**

Putin response

- **Arrests; busting of Navalny's organization; declares them "extremists" and agents of foreign enemies**
- **Navalny dies (killed?) in prison (February 2024)**
- **Navalny gets the final word: memoir to follow**

- **Putin decision to turn to provincial, less-educated, more “traditional” and conservative constituencies**
- **Gives up on ungrateful “new middle class” and appeals to rural and small-town Russia**

But some protests not driven by educated professionals

- **Protests by: pensioners; truck drivers; environmentalists; electorate in Far East against firing of their governor.**
- **Many of these = Putin's preferred constituency**
- **Socio-economic accommodation > repression**

Consolidating control over society:

Since 2012, slow squeeze (Orth) on independent civil society:

---Crackdown on independent NGOs and media: “foreign agents”

---“Praetorian guard” of armed contingents: protects Putin

---Youth movement: conservative values: intimidates liberals

---Disqualify opponents in 2012 and 2018 presidential elections: ensures non-competitive leadership.

Oligarchs grow increasingly rich and “cuts” to officials grow as well. Get rich; stay loyal; vulnerable to exposure if “defect.” “Patronalism” intensified.

2020: PUTIN CHANGES THE CONSTITUTION: WHY?

- **To stay in office until 2036 (age 84)?**
- **To avoid being a lame duck? (Lame ducks invite challenge and instability...)**
- **To leave when he wished and on own terms? Make sure he can choose his successor? To avoid witnessing a “de-Putinization” campaign?**
- **To ensure lifetime immunity from prosecution?**
- **The strongman’s dilemmas → overinsurance**

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY CONTINUE, 2008-2021?

- **Continuing impact of Great Recession**
 - impact on Russian stock market
 - impact on capital flight
 - impact on foreign direct investment in Russia
 - impact on oil revenues
- **Continuing impact of US and European sanctions since Ukraine crisis of 2014**
- **Impact of COVID**
- **Cost of Olympics (~\$50B); Costs of corruption**

ECONOMY (CONT'D)

- **Squeeze on middle class and pensioners. Decline in standard of living since 2012.**
- **Russians' real disposable incomes contracted by 3.5 percent in 2020, while the cost of basic foodstuffs surged.**
- **2021: Imposition of price controls to protect the most vulnerable. Had been reserving funds for national infrastructure “projects” > welfare.**

ECONOMY (CONT'D) BUT MUSN'T OVERSTATE:

- **The 4% drop in Russia's GDP in 2020 compared with eight to nine percent in much of Europe, and over 10 percent in the UK.**
- **The Russian state ended the year with budget surplus and nearly \$200 billion tucked away in its reserve fund. Vast savings since 2008**
- **Russian GDP grew around three percent in 2021 (before the 2022 invasion of Ukr), meaning that Russians began the year relatively confident that things were about to get better.**
- **Why is this notable? Economic conditions unlikely to have motivated the re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (distraction effect)**

REDEFINING THE TERMS OF NATIONAL UNITY

- **Sensed that national pride was insufficient to mobilize support. From 2011 onward:**
- **Stresses Russia's uniqueness ("exceptionalism") among nations → Orthodox Church + family values + patriotic education + anti-liberalism. By 2016, "suppressing 'non-traditional' culture had become the norm" (625)**
- **Anti-same-sex marriage legislation; anti-LGBT; anti-women's rights**
- **Accuse Western nations of abandoning core Christian values.**
- **Accuse West of trying destroy Russia's spiritual purity**
- **Rossiiskii → Russkii**

Eurasianism: A Seductive Idea

- **Russia as both European and Asian**
- **Russia as the key link between West and East**
- **Russia as the centripetal force within that Eurasian space**
- **Russia as the “core”**
- **Imagery in Putin’s mind goes back to the early 1990s**
- **Solzhenitsyn influence**

- **Net result is a highly repressive autocratic regime**
- **Autocracy + Orthodoxy + Nationality (as under Tsar Nicholas I)**
- **Connotes nostalgia for formula that informed the Russian empire**

Leadership Image, 2017: nothing new here



How situate this regime?

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AUTHORITARIAN PATRONAL RUSSITE FASCISM
CONSTITUTIONALISM AUTHORITAR'ISM

Patronal Authoritarianism (The Policy Spectrum)

Modernizers-----Traditionalists

V. Putin (2000-08).....V. Putin (2012-22)

Putin after 2022: Russite Fascism?

Foreign policies, 2012-2021

Is he this?



Or is he that?



Putin Looks Out Upon the World, 2011-

Backdrop of “color revolutions” in post-communist world:

---Indigenous or orchestrated by US and EU? When will they ever end?

---How far can revolutionary “contagion” go? Can it be stopped?

---Protests in Russia from late 2011 through 2012 = failed “color revolution”?

---Will there be a “next time”?

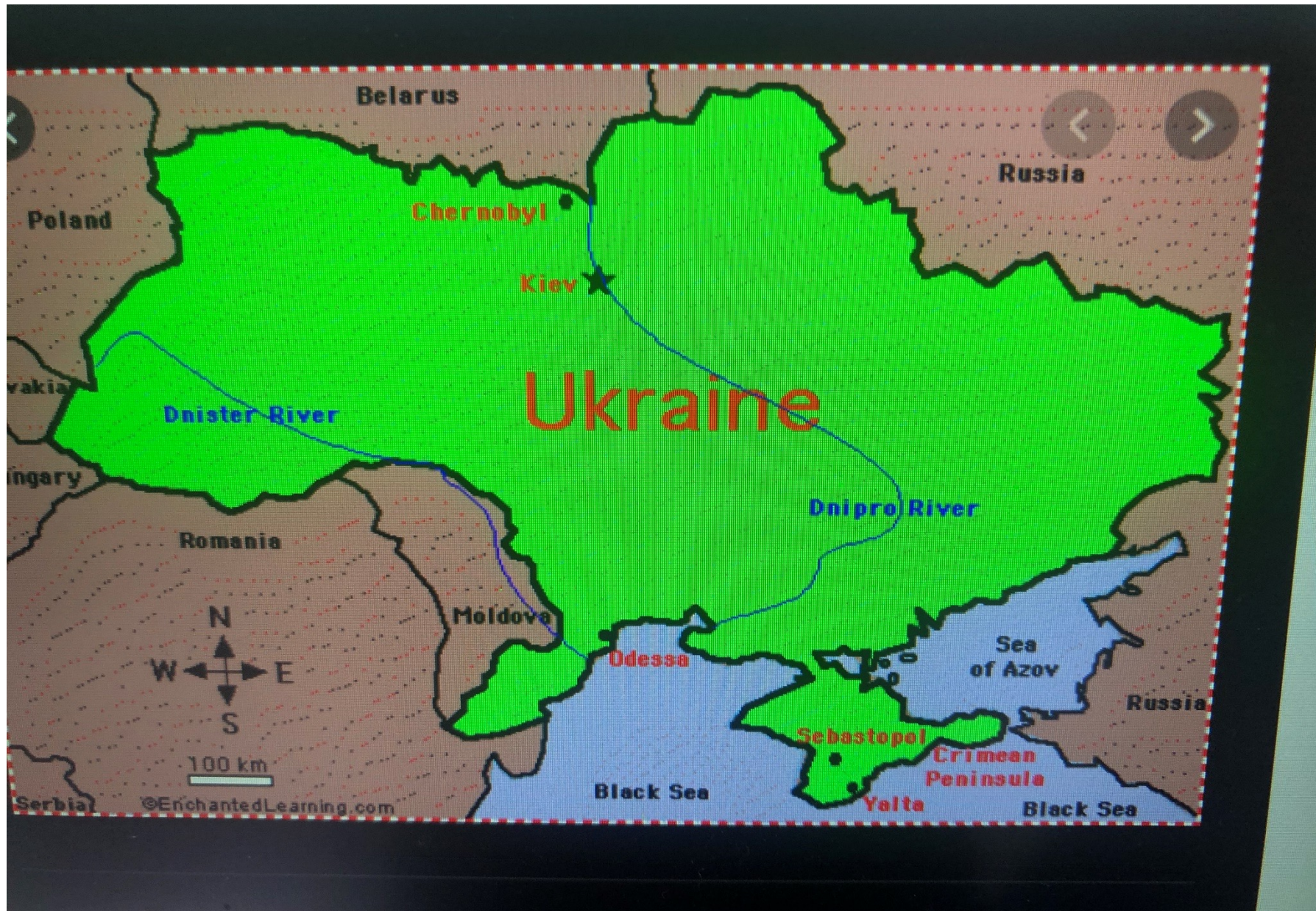
“Color Revolutions” in Middle East: Arab Spring, 2011 (Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, others): Putin lesson drawn: mob rule is a growing threat (recall Dresden, Nov. 1989).

Other lessons drawn : US willing to take down dictators, as if will lead to democracy

---Iraq (2003); Libya (2011); Egypt (Mubarak, 2011), Syria, 2011-

---Putin: US delusional about there being “moderates” of any consequence in the anti-Assad, Syrian opposition.

- **In the wake of all this, there was indeed a next time:**
 - **Ukraine’s “Revolution of Dignity” (2013-2014)**
 - **→ (2014) Putin’s military seizure and annexation of Crimea**
- + Putin’s stoking of insurrection and separatism in Eastern Ukraine**
- “The Russo-Ukrainian War” (Plokhii book) begins**



WHY IS UKRAINE IMPORTANT TO RUSSIA?

- **Historical and cultural origins of Russia (Kievan Rus')**
- **Russian and Russian-speaking diaspora in independent Ukr.**
- **Geo-strategic importance to Russia**
 - HQ of Ru Black Sea Fleet (Sevastopol, on Crimean peninsula)**
 - Large country (second to Ru in Eur) with long common border**
 - buffer between Ru and NATO : note borders**
- **Economic importance: many factories producing high-tech goods for Russian industry**

The fusion of Russian and Ukrainian “Eastern Orthodoxy”

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- **Comes apart in the 2010’s: incipient schism**
- **Ugly FSB tactics (blackmail + bribery) to prevent schism and to enforce continued subordination to the Kremlin**
- **Cf: Robert F. Worth, “Clash of the Patriarchs,” *The Atlantic*, May 2024, pp. 42-51.**

But also:

Russia having a “sphere of influence” in its “neighborhood” is meaningless if it does not include Ukraine.

All variants of “Eurasianism” are meaningless without Ukraine (see next slide)

Eurasianism: Maximalist to Minimalist

- **4. Maximalist view: Restore entirety of Tsarist Empire**
- **3. Re-create a single-state union of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. (“The Pan-Russian Utopia”---Plokhii)**
- **2. Annex ethnic-Russian enclaves in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova**
- **1. Minimalist view: Ensure Russia’s suzerainty over its sphere of influence: independent FSU states, but deferential to Russian interests**

Recall the “Orange Revolution” of 2004

- One Russian official had called it “our 911”
- Revealed the limits of Moscow’s ability to steer Ukrainian internal politics through elite-to-elite ties: Kravchuk (1991-1994) → Kuchma (1994-2005) → Yanukovich? → Orange Rev’n → Yushchenko (poisoned, but survived; 2005-2010) → Yanukovich (2010-2014) → Orange Revolution → Poroshenko (2014-2019) → Zelensky (2019-present)

Timeline of Ukraine crisis of 2013-2014

- **Yanukovich wins presidency in 2010: tilt to Russia + conscious diminishment of Ukrainian military**
- **But needs Europe, economically → offer of EU Association Agreement; Putin counter: \$15B to join EEU (Eurasian Econ Union) + military threat if accept EU.**
- **EU: no add'l membership (end of Eurasianism)**
- **Nov 2013: riots in West Ukr; occupy gov't bldgs; govt shoots**

- **February 2014: spreads to Kiev; more than 500,000 protesters in streets; shots now from both sides. Negotiated deal for new elections in December.**
- **Protestors reject**
- **President flees to Russia. Parliament appoints interim president**
- **New laws restrict Russian-language use.**

Was this a US-led plot? No, but:

“Democracy-promotion” had been on US post-Cold War agenda

Were many NGOs in Ukraine funded by Western orgs

Some US politicians (Senator McCain; Asst Secy of State Victoria Nuland) were on the ground in Kiev, urging the protesters on.

Nuland telephone call with US ambassador

But this revolution was home-grown. Not a product of US urging or plotting, though US urged it on, once it started.

How did the Kremlin Perceive/Define the Situation (correctly or not)?

- Product of US and EU instigation: want EU accession → NATO membership: seemingly affirmed by Nuland tel conversation
- Protesters dominated by neo-fascists, not democratizers
- Illegitimate *coup d'état* to overthrow those freely elected
- Anti-Russia in inspiration; and could spread to Russia
- Ukrainian-nationalist in emotion → will restrict rights of Russian diaspora within Ukraine + will rescind recent agreement to extend Ru Black Sea fleet base in Sevastopol
- Putin at the time in Sochi for Winter Olympics: from national glory (theme of Russian history) to challenges to both national-security and sphere-of-influence aspirations.

Russia's Military Response

- **Annexation of Crimea + Sevastopol + referendum: was it “legitimate”? (Invokes Kosovo precedent)**
- **Home-grown insurgents assisted to rise up in eastern Ukraine → armed and augmented by Russian military**
- **Putin justifies annexation and military assistance in ethno-nationalist terms (“Novorossiya”) : returning to Russia what is its right + protecting ethnic Russians in Ukraine from alleged persecution.**
- **Putin popularity in Russia shoots up to 89% approval**
- **Civil war within Ukraine (2014-2021) → >14,000 deaths.**

The Aborted Minsk II Accord, 2015

- **What would it have done to Ukraine?**
- **How would it have affected Russia?**
- **Was it dead on arrival? If so, why?**

Ukraine's Tragic Dilemma

- **Location: 1,500-mile border with Russia**
- **Concentration of Russian ethnics in east, southeast and Crimea**
- **History of imperial domination by Russia; Ru elite disorientation and alienation re Ukrn independence (1991)**
- **Fuel dependency on Russia**
- **Gave up its nuclear weapons in 1994, in exchange for tacit and explicit security assurances**
- **Could not easily join NATO for protection against Russia**
- **Joining EU viewed in Moscow as slippery slope to NATO membership; Minsk II would have precluded EU membership; EU membership precluded joining Eurasian Econ Union.**
- **Populace and parliament disinclined to accommodate Russia**
- **Disproportion of population size, militaries, and economies**

Putin: Russian imperialist or aggrieved statesman?

Answer:

Both, but the relative weights are shifting.

And the challenges to both imperial aspirations and national-security concerns are growing

Ru imperialist: exclusive sphere of influence

2012: Integration of Ru, Ukr, Belarus, Kazakhstan (and others) into a Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, alternative to EU, is “the core of our foreign policy and our strategic objective.” (569)

2012 onward: increasing rhetorical emphasis on “national idea” as Russian-historical exceptionalism (*samobytnost*’ or “originality”)

2012: Increasing emphasis on Orthodoxy as national moral-religious identity

2014 onward: Increasing emphasis on need to “protect” Ru diaspora

Aggrieved statesman (national-security threatened)

To Merkl in 2019: “When I look at the membership of the EU and I look at the membership of NATO, I see basically the same thing. So when I hear about an [EU] Association Agreement for Ukraine, I know that NATO will follow” (570)

Putin, 2014: “Our Western partners, led by the United States...have come to believe that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right....[w]e have every reason to believe that the infamous policy of containment, carried out in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, continues today.” (579-80)

Putin, October 2017, to a US scholar: “Our biggest mistake was to trust you too much. Your mistake was to take this trust as weakness and abuse it.” (609)

2019: “Western hegemony is ending.” (610)

Are these concerns/fears “realistic”? paranoid? self-serving propaganda?

- Try this thought experiment: were a leftist revolution, and a military alliance with Russia, happening in Mexico, would the United States give it the benefit of the doubt? Or would worst-case, slippery-slope thinking prevail?**
- Or recall US hysteria in 1961 re Cuban communism “90 miles from our shores.” (worst case...slippery slope)**
- Recall Monroe Doctrine + innumerable US interventions in Western hemisphere.**

My pointing this out is not a moral judgment

- **Slippery-slope thinking, in face of challenges to one's status in international relations, is widespread historically among both democratic and autocratic regimes.**

- **Aside:**
- **Were the military responses to the Ukraine crisis in 2014 Putin's alone? A collective response?
Counterfactual: absent Putin, would others have made the same decisions? Putin certainly "led from the front" (seizes initiative; provides energy and determination), but that does not mean those behind him disagreed with what he was advocating and doing.**
- **Future research may shed light.**

Yet some switch “flipped” within Putin in 2014

- **Emotion > reason? (Telephone call with Merkl in 2014)**
 - **Emotions go from fear or disappointment to anger?**
 - **Imperialism goes from latent → manifest?**
 - **Imperialism PLUS national-security?**
 - **Or imperialist anger > national-security fears?**
- Invasion of Ukraine, 2022? Was it avoidable? At what point did it become “inevitable”?**

...NEXT TIME....