

## Russia, Ukraine and the West

This short paper has the following aims. It intends to comment on Wladimir Putin's policy towards Europe and the West from the position of the leader of "illiberal democracies", an alternative to the liberal EU. I also wish to offer some explanation of Putin's position in Russia as the national leader, with special attention to culture as an important political factor. Also, I will argue that culture and historical consciousness play a role in the way Putin perceives Russia's place in Europe, especially regarding Eastern and Central Europe.

1./ After the collapse of the USSR and the following years of relative weakening of Russia's position in the world, Russians suffered from frustration caused by the loss of imperial power and their country's global position. The other cause of frustration was internal chaos and economic hardship.

In this context, Putin appeared as a strong leader, who promised to restore Russia's position in the world and give Russians their dignity back and the feeling that they are respected and feared. His legitimacy as the leader was also derived from his presenting himself as the guardian of tradition. Crisis, globalisation, post-communist transformation and post-Soviet chaos caused a loss of ontological security (the sense of living in the familiar, understood and meaningful world) among many Russians. Such a feeling requires some remedy, and for many people, the chosen reaction is a return to tradition as the source of ontological security, where all difficult questions find definite and simple answers, and where we know what is good and what is evil, who is a friend and who is an enemy. People escape to tradition to feel secure, but they also need a strong leader, whom they can trust for safe direction and guidance.

Putin became such a leader, who gave his followers a sense of security and dignity.

2./ But what would be the position of Russia in the global world and its relation to the West and the European Union? The USA has always been seen as the main competitor, respected for its power and perceived as the representative of the liberal western values. Europe was another matter. Before the great enlargement of 2004, it was clear that the EU represented the European West, within which some countries are more significant for Russia than others, but seen as one, relatively integrated political partner. Of course, it has always been easier for Russia to deal with EU member states separately, but such a strategy was somehow obvious – the EU as a whole represents a much stronger partner in negotiations than individual national governments. But when the former Eastern and Central European Soviet satellites joined the EU and NATO, the situation changed. The enlargement was a heavy blow against the Russian sense of dignity and its global position. For many Russians it was also an act of treason – their former allies, of whom Russians tend to believe that they survived only thanks to Russia's help, turned their back on Russia and chose the West. When the same process of EU accession began in Ukraine, it was too much for those Russians who saw Ukraine not only as a former Soviet republic but also as a Slavic country, culturally very close to Russia, though provincial and inferior.

3./ Putin's Russia certainly is not a democracy, but this is true only if we have liberal democracy in mind (leaving aside the question if illiberal democracy is an oxymoron or not). Although we can't be sure what real support Putin enjoys in his country, it is likely that he actually does have the support of the majority of Russians, because of being a strong and efficient leader. But it is not enough for the Russian president. He aspires to create an alliance of illiberal democracies, enjoying popular majority support but without all those checks and balances and liberal values which in his opinion make Western democracies decadent and inefficient. Lukashenka in Byelarus, Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in

Turkey, and Kaczynski in Poland (before he lost power) were candidates for the company of illiberal leaders collectively building an illiberal Europe, a political and ideological alternative to the liberal EU, which was seen as decadent, suicidal because it was determined to let immigrants in who would destroy the European tradition, and unable to make decisions and speak one voice. Such an illiberal Europe is presented as a true depository of the real European tradition and values, in opposition to the post-modern, secular and multicultural EU.

4./ It was essential for Putin to continue his policy of dividing Europe. He presents former Soviet satellites, now EU members as obsessively and irrationally anti-Russian, questioning their true belonging to the EU. He tries to use energy supply as an instrument of division, hoping that business as usual would prevail over the collective will to support Ukraine. He uses Russia's nuclear power as a threat, causing the Polish foreign minister Sikorski to ironically ask Russia to issue such threats not more often than once every three months, as otherwise, they become boring.

5./ Ukraine is seen by the Russian leaders as a country which should belong to Russia, and a country whose culture is not sufficiently distinctive to enable Ukraine to call itself a nation. But culture and history are in the Russian propaganda directed also at another country. Poland is a litmus paper of Russian power: whenever in history Russia was strong, it dominated Poland (or at least its eastern part), while whenever Russia was in trouble, Poland gained independence. So Poland's membership in the European West is from this point of view a symbol of Russia's weakness. This is not acceptable to many Russians. Poland is indeed allergic to Russia, as it has experience of Russian domination. This may not be true for some other former Soviet satellites, which consider Russia either to be their liberators from other oppression or who were not dominated by Russia, at least not before WWII. So Putin did not try to establish friendly relations with the Polish nationalistic government under Kaczynski, but did so for Hungary, here Orban convinced citizens that Hungary would be more secure if they were on good terms with Russia, and would also obtain cheap energy.

6./ So what could the EU do to develop an effective policy towards Russia? As Putin's goal is to divide and weaken the EU, it should remain strong and united. But this does not only mean developing a common foreign and defence policy towards Russia, and not even just continuing to show solidarity with Ukraine. To be safe from Russia's expansionism, the EU must solve its internal problems which divide it and prevent the EU members from speaking one voice. More integration is needed. Russia supports and will continue to support right-wing populist parties, and radical organisations, including religious ones (as they do in Poland), anything that generates internal problems in the EU helps Putin to show the EU's weakness to strengthen his power position vis-a-vis Europe.

Russia understands the language of power, so the EU must learn to use this language in relations with Russia as well.

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