



# EUC Paper Series

Policy Insights - Governing Globalization

## **Russia's Challenge to the Existing Global Order**

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In his speeches to the Valdai Discussion Club three years running in fall 2014 through 2016 (Valdai 2014, 2015, 2016), President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation reiterated Russia's refusal to accept as legitimate the post-Cold War international order. In his view that order is simply a set of rules imposed by the West – to its advantage – that the United States and other Western states themselves often do not follow. For Russia, global order should be based on a multipolar system in which a Westphalian sense of absolute sovereignty prevails; the rules for international economic intercourse cannot continue to preference the West and legitimacy must be based on a system that empowers Russia and other emerging state actors.

In other words, Russia continues to challenge the West-centric order that emerged after the collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as its rhetoric and, especially, its actions over the past decade have increasingly made clear (Bodganov 2017). After a short hiatus following the collapse of the USSR, when Russia's new leadership was apparently committed to joining the West and its institutions, this view of Russia and its place in the world has come to dominate the ruling political elite ever since Vladimir Putin emerged as president at the turn of the century. Russian policy veered away from its short-lived collaborative Western orientation to a unilateralist approach based on the idea that Russia was not fully part of Europe or the West, but rather was a Eurasian state with its own culture and interests.

## **The Emergence of the Post-Cold War International Order**

The focus of this article is on global governance in an era in which major new actors join those who have for the past quarter century, and longer, set the rules for what is termed the liberal international order. That order has been characterized by Western, especially U.S., political and economic dominance, the expansion of democratic political institutions and “open door” economic policies.<sup>1</sup> These new actors – most prominently the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China – have begun to challenge the continuing dominant position of the United States and the West in determining what is and what is not acceptable behavior both domestically and internationally.

The current international order is founded on a commitment to democratic political institutions and free trade in an increasingly open international market, as well as on the ban of

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<sup>1</sup> For an assessment of the more assertive Western policy of exporting its view of a stable international system see Sakwa (2015).

military aggression, the protection of the territorial integrity of states, and the sovereign right of non-interference. However, as Michael Boyle (2016) notes, the U.S. and Europe have in fact begun to “carve out a series of exceptions to these principles under the banner of the protection of human rights.” The Russians have been quick to point to what they view as Western hypocrisy in these areas and to use Western arguments in support of exceptions for their own purposes in justifying military interventions in both Ukraine and Syria. They maintain that the responsibility to protect argument can be used as a justification for regime change, in Abkhazia as in Libya; second, the cherry-picking orchestrated by the West in human rights and international law can no longer be justified by the UN Security Council (Boyle 2016, 50, 52).

An extreme version of the U.S. conception of the global system was espoused by the Bush Administration in the period immediately following the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York in September 2001 and still attracts supporters in the United States. The so-called Bush Doctrine asserted U.S. global dominance and the moral right of the United States, alone if necessary, to use that dominance as it saw fit to protect its interests and those of like-minded states. The result was a split between the U.S. and many of its long-term allies and an exacerbation of the divisions in U.S.-Russian relations.<sup>2</sup> Only with the Obama Administration and its less assertive approach to U.S. relations with the rest of the world, was there an improvement, albeit very short-lived, in relations with the Russian Federation. Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine and the absorption of Crimea in early 2014 led to further deterioration of relations between the Russian Federation and the West.

### **The Russian Challenge to the Existing International Order**

The single clearest message presented by Vladimir Putin since his rise to the presidency has concerned the continued greatness of Russia and his commitment to ensuring that Russia was once again viewed by others as the dominant power in post-Soviet space, in Eurasia, and an equal to other Great Powers in determining global affairs. Sometime about 2005 – after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the expansion of both NATO and EU into Central Europe and the Baltics, the announcement of the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood Policy,<sup>3</sup> and the widespread support for the color revolutions in several post-Soviet states that brought down governments closely allied to Moscow<sup>4</sup> – the Russian leadership seems to have come to the decision that the prospects were bleak, if not non-existent, for Russia’s being accepted as an equal by the West and Russia’s interests being accepted as legitimate by the West. Almost immediately, this policy shift resulted in a serious deterioration of relations with the West. The charges at the Munich security conference already in early 2007 that the United States and NATO represented growing threats to Russia’s and the world’s security, the gas wars with Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, and the invasion of Georgia in 2008 were all examples of this growing confrontation.

This shift in Russian attitudes toward the West and the decision largely to abandon efforts to work with the West have underlain Moscow’s growing multiple-level challenge to the international order – at the diplomatic level with its major efforts to influence the policies of the

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the Bush Doctrine and its contributions to instability in the international system, including to the deterioration of relations with Russia, see Kanet (2005).

<sup>3</sup> On the EU’s attempt to extend its norms and values eastward via the Eastern Neighborhood Policy see Casier (2012).

<sup>4</sup> On Western support for the color revolutions, including that of Western NGOs, see Stent (2014, pp. 101–106).

BRICS states to challenge the Westcentric system; at the political and security level with the use of the tools of coercive diplomacy against neighboring states as a means, among other goals, of directly challenging Western-imposed norms and Western interests.

### **Russia, the BRICS and the Challenge to the Existing Global Order**

As noted, for the past decade Russia has increasingly challenged the West and the existing international order across a broad set of fronts. These actions have ranged from rhetorical challenges to the global system to the use of military intervention meant to impose its policy objectives on other states, as well as cyber-attacks on national elections and direct support for right-wing political groups in the West seemingly meant to instill instability within the member states of the Western community and to challenge the very existence of that community itself. The rhetorical challenges themselves have included the shifts in stated policy objectives noted above. In addition, verbal attacks on the United States, NATO and the European Union have become more persistent and more vitriolic over the years, as has the Russian effort to develop alternative competing definitions for terms such as “democracy” that challenge Western conceptions of democratic governance. For example, in a speech presented to the Russian Parliament in 2005, he called the collapse of the USSR the greatest political disaster of the twentieth century (President’s Speech 2005). Little more than a year later at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin presented an attack on the US and the West and announced that Russia was back as a major international actor and would not follow the lead of the West in terms of security and foreign policy issues. He also stated that Russia saw itself in conflict with the West and asserted that it was not bound by the Western definition of democracy and that it was trying to establish a ‘sovereign democracy’ that would be independent from external influence (Petrov and McFaul 2005; Herd 2009). The implementation of “sovereign democracy” as a form of governance is part of a major element of Russia’s soft power project designed to challenge the Euro–Atlantic status quo and demonstrate that Russia is unique and just as legitimate as the US or Europe (Stent 2014, 142–43).

Besides challenging Western policy norms and presenting alternative views, Russia has attempted to initiate structural changes in the system. Soon after the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, then President Medvedev proposed a major change in the security environment across all of Europe and Eurasia – one based on quite different assumptions from the existing system (Lomagin 2012; Fernandes 2012). The fact that the proposals came after the Russo-Georgian war and at the time that Russia was expanding the proposed role of its military in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives ensured that they would never be seriously considered by the West (Kanet 2010).

Another more recent effort by Russia to accomplish some of its objectives through institutional means resulted within the BRICS movement of the call for alternative institutions and programs aimed at reducing, even avoiding, dependence on Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>5</sup> This effort has been complemented by the campaign to create the Eurasian Economic Union, which is meant to forge an economic union in former Soviet space that will strengthen Russia’s influence within that space.

One of the very few positive results for Moscow of the Western sanctions imposed on it by the West after its military incursion into Ukraine and absorption of Crimea has been its greatly

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<sup>5</sup> For the efforts of the BRICS states to influence structural elements of the international system and the leading role that Russia has attempted to play in influencing those efforts, see Armijo and Roberts (2014).

expanded role in several multinational groups, notably BRICS, where it served as chair during the year 2015. Ahead of meetings in Ufa, President Putin called for this group to move away from dependence on the international monetary order that depends on the US dollar. The member countries agreed to abandon the dollar and the euro in the US \$500 billion trade among themselves, thereby escaping the rules and regulations imposed by the West on the international system. Coincidentally, in 2015 Russia also chaired the Collective Security Organization (CSO), which includes China and a number of other Asian states. With the *de facto* admission of both India and Pakistan to the organization, the CSO has, in effect, placed itself in a much improved position to influence political and security developments in South Asia at a time when it appears that the United States is likely to withdraw from the level of involvement in the region that it has had in the past (Ufa 2015).

### **Russia, Regional Integration and the Challenge to the Existing Global Order**

Russia's major institutional challenge to the existing international order has probably been the campaign to develop the Eurasian Economic Union. Beginning during Putin's 2011 presidential election campaign, this initiative is meant to challenge the applicability of global norms as they might apply to a group of states of which Russia is but one. In this case, it applies to post-Soviet space, in order to counter what Moscow has viewed as an "assault" on its interests in that region, especially that east of the Urals. The purpose of the Union is to integrate the economies of former Soviet states into a Moscow-centered organization that would supposedly contribute to the modernization and economic expansion of the member countries. Crucial for the success of the proposal would be the membership of Ukraine, which has the largest economy by far after Russia's among the potential members. This brought Russian policy directly into conflict with the Neighborhood Policy of the European Union in both Ukraine and Armenia, both of which the EU was courting for special relationships that, *de facto*, were exclusive and would have precluded those countries committing themselves to any integration project with Russia and the Eurasian Union (Casier 2016).

Although Ukraine had seemingly committed itself to an Association Agreement with the European Union, in fall 2013 President Yanukovich announced that Ukraine would sign a strategic partnership agreement with Russia rather than that with the EU. The result was widespread domestic opposition that led eventually to Yanukovich's flight from the country in February 2014 and the election of a new, Western-oriented government and to Russian military intervention, including the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation and support for the ongoing secessionist efforts in Eastern Ukraine. It was these actions by the Russian government that led to a broad range of economic sanctions imposed on Moscow by the United States and the European Union and to the continuing deterioration of relations.

Russia has relied very heavily on economic coercion of the type that many have described in the past (e.g., Nygren 2008) in generating support for the EEC. Of the six East European and Caucasian countries that both the European Union and Russia have targeted for closer ties in recent years three have gravitated to each side. Geographic location, including isolation from the Russian Federation, has probably been a determining factor in the case of Moldova's opting for closer ties to the EU. For Azerbaijan the oil and gas boom and relative economic independence from Russia has been of central importance in permitting the leadership to pursue an independent path, as the close political relationship with the United States and NATO Georgia has maintained over the past decade has enable Tbilisi to tie itself more closely to the European Union.

The relevant point here is the fact that for the better part of the past decade Russia has systematically used economic, political and security pressures – along with various regional institutional developments – as instruments to challenge the existing international system and to draw other states away from that system and closer to itself. Its appeals have been political in nature to those who find Western demands to replicate Western norms and values; they have been based on the attempts to build institutional ties outside the purview of Western control. They have also involved economic pressures to raise the costs for those states that decide to ignore Russian policy preferences, as well as military threats as we will discuss in the next section of this paper.

### **Russia, Coercive Diplomacy and the Challenge to the Existing Global Order**

When Bertil Nygren (2008) wrote a decade ago about the increasing pressure that Moscow put on its near neighbors to “guide” them toward policies in line with the former’s interests, he focused almost exclusively on the “power of the purse” and on “pipeline politics” – examples of Russia’s use of the economic dependence of most other post-Soviet states on Russia for their economic well-being. This was especially true in the case of energy dependence in Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. Until the time of the first color revolutions in the years 2003-2005, Russia was willing to negotiate its economic and political differences with “near abroad” states and to accept the disadvantageous economic relationships that often existed. In return, they were generally able to work out political differences with likeminded semi-authoritarian regimes in Kyiv, Minsk and Tbilisi. However, with the uprisings associated with the color revolutions and the coming to power in some of these states governments desirous of distancing themselves from dependence on Moscow and tying themselves more closely to the European Union and to NATO, such pragmatic relationships became much more difficult for Moscow.

Many other analysts have also tracked the importance of economic instruments and “soft power” in Russia’s efforts to accomplish its foreign policy objectives, especially those related to the attempt to hold other CIS states in line in what has become an increasingly competitive relationship with the West. Nikita Lomagin (2017) has pointed out that for “President Putin management of the economic agenda became a central component of Moscow’s relations with the international community and its outlook on the world.” He concludes, however, that Russia’s overall position in this type of economic “warfare” is not a strong one, because of the overdependence of its financial and energy sectors on the West.

Besides exerting economic pressure on neighboring states in the effort to accomplish foreign policy goals, often precisely to tie them more closely to Russia and to assert Russia’s status as the dominant power in the region in the competition with the West, Russia has also employed both the threat of the use of military power and military power itself – most notably in the war with Georgia in 2008 and with Ukraine since the confrontation in winter 2013-14.

Although Russia was willing to use military capabilities to achieve goals in the immediate post-Soviet years, according to Stanislav Tkachenko (2017) it was really not until the confrontation with Georgia and more recent concerns about Ukraine that Moscow developed a coordinated approach to the use of threats and actual military force to achieve policy objectives. This has required a rebuilding of Russian military capabilities especially in the years following the Russo-Georgian war and limiting the use of military power so that it does not challenge the foundations of the current security order, even though it might challenge portions of that order. This is exactly what occurred in the cases of Russian military involvement in Georgia, Ukraine and, most recently, in Syria. In all of these cases, Moscow has challenged the existing order, that preferred by the

United States and the West. However, in all these cases, Russia has limited its involvement so as not to run the risk of direct confrontation with the West.

As Tkachenko (2017) notes, the initial goals of Russia's coercive diplomacy have been simple – “[i]n Syria, the aim is to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power and to stop the epidemic of ‘the Arab Spring.’ In Ukraine, Russia is looking for a neutral status of this country as well as for leaders who will be supportive of the strategic interests of Russia and independent from U.S. pressure.” Once these objectives have been met the goal is to move to the level of negotiating a longer-term settlement. Such a policy requires that the majority of the population support the policy and that the risk of failure is low, as was the case in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine, Crimea and Syria more recently.

### **President Donald Trump, the Russian Federation and the Future of the Liberal Global Order**

Among analysts of the current global economic, political and security order there is general agreement that without the central role of the United States in stabilizing the system, it is likely to erode, or even collapse. Riccardo Alcaro of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Brookings Institution has pointed out:

To conclude, the liberal order is challenged and less capable of functioning than in the past. Yet, its pillars – Western power and the liberal discourse – are far from collapse. Western power is in relative decline, but no country in the world, not even China, has the ability (or the willingness, for that matter) to replace the fundamental role played by the US as ultimate guarantor of international security. Even if it so willed, China would lack the influence the US derives from the liberal discourse, which might have lost relevance but continues to be faced with a lack of valid alternatives. Governance within the current system is more complicated, but not structurally impossible (Alcaro 2015).<sup>6</sup>

As we have argued in this article, Mr. Putin and the Russian leadership around him are fully committed to undermining and replacing the current liberal world order that has been crafted by the United States and its major allies in fits and starts over the course of the past several generations – to meet its own interests and goals. Russia's efforts to redefine the existing world order and to reduce the dominant position of the United States in defining and maintaining that order seems to have gained an important new ally in Donald Trump and those around him in the White House and in control of the U.S. Congress. The latter seem to question the very foundations of that order and to call for the United States' withdrawal from it. President Trump's questioning of the continued relevance of NATO, his opposition to multilateral trade agreements and to multilateral organizations in general, and the “costs” associated with the leadership role that the U.S. has undertaken in establishing a global system based on rules and institutions that the U.S. itself has found beneficial to its own interests, even if the financial costs associated with that

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<sup>6</sup> Given the statements of Donald Trump and key members of his administration and the initial policies that the new Administration appears to be pursuing, analysts and political leaders across the world question the willingness, commitment and ability of the United States government to project the kind of influence that it has had because of its commitment to a liberal discourse for much of the past half century (Rubin, 2017).

leadership role are carried disproportionately by the United States.<sup>7</sup> Trump appears to prefer an international system based primarily on bilateral relationships, as do Mr. Putin and his associates in Moscow. This, added to the rise of nationalist movements across much of Europe, does not augur well for the future of the existing international order, or for the relative stability that that order has brought with it.

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<sup>7</sup> In a brief essay on President Trump's "America First" policy *The Economist* notes that

multinational institutions such as the UN, World Trade Organisation, IMF and World Bank may occasionally constrain America, but overall they enhance its influence. . . . Uncle Sam foots a disproportionate part of the bills. Yet this has also given America exceptional sway over global rules governing everything from trade to security. Walk away, and the result will not be a better deal. It will be China first and America's allies diminished; not peace through strength so much as weakness somehow conjured out of primacy ("China First," 2017).

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