

Chapter 2

Title

**A Call for an End of the Reality Distortion
in the Discourse about Putin's Russia**

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Introduction It is easy to criticize predictions made in the past about the future when this has become our present. We are all aware that the end of the Cold War did not lead to Francis Fukuyama's end of history, however, it seems that although within the expert community only the biggest optimists still hold on to Fukuyama's hypothesis, many of us – including myself – still hope that somehow it will become true. It becomes especially obvious when dealing with the democratic development of the Russian Federation. For the general population the changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall brought more freedom, but at the same time different restraints and more insecurity. Enough has been published about the simultaneity dilemma – the problem of having to undergo two or even three transitions (political, economic and social) at the same time – and therefore I will not further elaborate on this, however, will use the results from this as a starting point for my argumentation (Offe, 1991).

Memories and "Ostalgia" There are various reasons for people to be dissatisfied with the development after the Iron Curtain lifted. Participants of the peaceful revolution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that wanted to make socialism more democratic suddenly found themselves integrated – almost swallowed up – into the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany. Women and men working in their profession for decades

suddenly became unemployed. And people that have arranged themselves within the old system are told that their lives that they have been living are a historical dead end. As a result, we can observe a certain nostalgia for the past, in German there is even a special term coined by this called “Ostalgia”, which combines the words East and nostalgia, meaning that people from the GDR have a certain nostalgia for their lives back during socialist times.

The human mind is a fascinating thing, we tend to black out bad things from our memories and elevate the positive aspects of our past. This is certainly helpful to keep us sane and able to move on and move forward, however, it bears a certain danger to be exploited by demagogues. In fact, this is exactly what Vladimir Putin is doing when speaking about “Novorussia”. To his understanding, this new Russia will actually be what has been historically part of the Russian Empire and/or the USSR. Interestingly, he is able to combine the nostalgia for the Soviet times with the tsarist ambitions, something that would be mutually exclusive, if we look at the historical truth. But this is part of the exploitation, using historical analogies and putting them into a fitting context for one’s own benefit by playing with the above-described condition of the human mind. Putin is not the first and will certainly not be the last politician to play with this condition.

Distorted realities Keeping the memory alive can help us avoid repeating mistakes, but there is also a certain danger to clinging to the past, which can hamper progress and detain us from being able to evolve. The fear of the return of history gets us stuck in the present rather than shaping the future. Both patterns can be observed when analyzing EU–Russia relations today, however, there is also a third state of mind, which I call the ‘reality distortion’. When we look at the discourse about the development of the Russian Federation under Putin, one could get the impression that a non-minor part of the expert

community – again including myself – is or was hoping that if we write often enough that the Kremlin will change and believe strongly enough in those words, it will actually happen.

After Vladimir Putin became president of the Russian Federation for the first time in 2000, many (Western) politicians were happy about the strengthening weak state since they were more afraid of a violent break-up similar to Yugoslavia than a strong power vertical in Moscow. In 2004 then German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called Putin a “flawless democrat”. To be precise, he was asked by a journalist if he believes that Putin is a flawless democrat and Schröder replied: “These are always such terms. I do believe him and I am convinced that he is one” (Schröder, 2014: 140; translation by the author). Schröder justifies his answer by saying that if he had answered with no, this would have had consequences for the foreign policy of Germany. This certainly has some truth to it, however, he is still convinced until today, that Putin’s aims are a functioning democracy and a stable political system (Schröder, 2014: 139). We can only speculate if the former Chancellor defends the Russian president out of his own interests – Schröder became shortly

Figure 1.
New Russia
on territory
of Ukraine
ca. 1897



after being voted out of office chairman of the supervisory board of the Nord Stream AG, the operating company of a pipeline connecting the Russian Federation with Germany, which had been initiated during his term. Whether he has personal reasons to believe that Putin is a flawless democrat or his reality is distorted might only know the former Chancellor himself. Nevertheless, this condition exists among the (German) expert community. When Dmitry Medvedev became president, the condition worsened and – including myself – claims were raised that if we just wait and see and believe it strong enough, the political system in the Kremlin would reform itself. Even when Putin was re-elected as president, the pattern continued. After the events in Crimea, we could see a change. The media is now portraying Putin as the evil man in Moscow, which is an equal reality distortion. Some experts claim that sanctions never change a system but rather strengthen the regime, which is true in a number of cases that can be observed throughout the recent history (Cuba, Iran, Belarus), however, again the perception is distorted. There have been cases where sanctions certainly contributed to a revolutionary situation, as for example, in

Figure 2.
New Russia



the toppling of the Milošević regime in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Revolutionary situations can occur when people are able to protest, in the sense that state repression is not forcing them to worry about basic needs like how to feed one's family. Having the feeling of loosing some of the gained freedoms within a repressive regime can contribute to a revolutionary situation and this is where sanctions can actually make a difference. However, there is no blue print for successful regime change and a change does not automatically lead to democratic development (Thompson, 2004). We can identify certain factors that can contribute to a successful democratic revolution as well as factors for unsuccessful attempts to make a regime more democratic can be identified. Nevertheless, there is never a single cause for either the victory or the defeat of the democratic forces, but rather a combination of implicates. If we analyze democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, we can identify those implicates such as a strong united opposition, a developed civil society, support through external actors, triggering events like stolen elections and the state security forces are either siding with the protesters or remain neutral (Schäffer, 2008: 60). Therefore, theory can be exported and practically implemented, as it has been stated, amongst others, by Andrei Vladimirov in his Article "Revolution for Export" (Vladimirov, 2004). No matter how different the situation in, for instance, Serbia, Georgia or Ukraine was during the so-called colorful revolutions between 2000 and 2004, there is one thing they all have in common after the ousting of the ancien régime: the power vacuum has to be filled and once the common goal – change – is achieved, the rifts between the oppositional forces begin to surface which have been layered by the uniting fight against the former ruling elites. Democratic consolidation is a long and difficult process. The opposition has lost its smallest common denominator – altering the status quo – and is now in power. New challenges

emerge and different political – and for example in the case of Ukraine also personal – ideals and ways become apparent that have been not as visible as during the revolution. Furthermore, the support by the majority of the population is challenged by the simultaneity dilemma. The inevitable loss for parts of the people can then in turn create a new revolutionary situation. External actors such as the European Union can contribute to alleviate the situation, however, the opportunity for (antidemocratic) counter-revolution could be exploited. In the case of Russia the sanctions will not create a revolutionary situation and the European Union is not at all capable of dealing with such a hypothetical event, in fact, Brussels is already struggling to deal with the fall out in Ukraine, which had not been expected as is the other cases before or also in the Arab spring. But the sanctions are not aiming at creating a revolutionary situation, in fact, if Putin will be ousted, the probability to get even more hardliners to power in Moscow is much more likely than a democratic regime change and I do believe that the EU is aware of that. Nevertheless, the sanctions are a signal to the Kremlin, that there are consequences for the actions of the Russian administration. Therefore, a continuation of the negotiations should accompany the sanctions, not only but also because all other options are suboptimal. No reaction is equally dangerous as military actions. Historical analogies as for instance with the Hitler regime are not helpful especially when the West has also set historical precedencies as in the case of Kosovo. I am perfectly aware that this cannot be compared and I have no intention to do so, however, the West is not free from acting without double standards in international relations and the Russian propaganda is well aware of exploiting this. In fact, the PR-strategy of the Kremlin is flawless when it comes to the intended effects on the population in Russia and also in the disputed regions not only in Ukraine but also for instance in Transnistria.

The Eurasian Union and Putin's ambitions When Putin became president again in 2012, he made it very clear that his aim is to restore the Russian standing in the world. During his election campaign Putin already announced his plans for an Eurasian Union (EAU) and as first step Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed on an economic union in November 2011. A treaty was signed in May 2014 and if all three parliaments ratify it (which is highly likely to happen given the influence all three presidents have in their political system), will go into effect on 1 January 2015. While the EU is struggling with fostering relations with its Eastern neighbors within the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Kremlin is preparing a “hegemonic project to restore some parts of the former Soviet Union” (Schmierer 2011, translation by the author). Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also shown interest in joining the EAU. However, the success of Putin's brainchild hinged on whether or not Ukraine would become a member, because this would mean victory over the attempts of the Brussels to bring Kiev closer to the EU. Former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich always tried to balance interests between the EU and Russia. With the possible signing of the Association Agreement (AA) including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) at the EaP summit in Vilnius in November 2013, the most important foreign policy project of Putin was directly challenged and threatened to become a failure. While a DCFTA also could replace Russia as Ukraine's most important trade partner, a closer association with the EU would have made Ukraine becoming part of the Eurasian Union less likely. Yanukovich never ruled out Ukraine joining the EAU, but lately became less inclined to do so, since he began to realize that Ukraine would most likely only be a junior partner in such a Union with the Russian Federation being the dominant partner. A relationship with the EU in turn could be more on eye level. When Putin managed to exert the Kremlins leverage on Yanukovich through the energy

dependency of Kiev to prevent a signing of the AA, the events of the Euromaidan opened a new window of opportunity for Moscow. While the EU was taken by surprise, Putin seized the *occasione* in the best Machiavellian sense, which has also implications for Belarus and Kazakhstan. Both countries are partners of Moscow within the EAU. The sanctions against Russia and the economical implications will directly affect Minsk and Astana. The violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine also might have further consequences. The Kremlin has shown before that they are willing to use force under false pretenses to protect ethnic Russians – for instance, in the case of Georgia 2008. While I do not want to debate the question of guilt here, it is evident that the reaction from Moscow was disproportionate. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan have a comparatively large ethnic Russian minority. Any development concerning the EAU that could endanger this important project of president Putin could potentially lead to a use of disproportionate reactions under those false pretenses. Crimea might be economically insignificant for Ukraine, however, for the current government it is certainly a heavy burden since it has not been able to do anything to prevent this breach of international law. This is problematic for their legitimacy that still needs to be democratically consolidated with the upcoming elections. Furthermore, consequences for Ukraine are potential other referenda in the Eastern regions that would continue to destabilize the country. There are additionally to that of course consequences for the Ukrainians and especially Tatars living in Crimea (new currency, passports, laws, regulations etc.), and there are also consequences for other countries with a large Russian minority. All in all the situation forced by the Kremlin is very dangerous and the next steps should be taken very cautiously by all parties involved. The role of the EU will be a crucial one, and Brussels has been acting very reasonable and with a more or less united foreign policy that

we have not experienced in the last couple of years. In our global interdependent economy sanctions can be harmful for both sides, nevertheless, Russia is highly dependent on its oil and gas exports to Western Europe in the same way Western Europe needs those imports. But I do think that Russia has a higher vulnerability since Western Europe will be able to adapt easier to a potential oil and gas import stop from Russia than the Kremlin will be able to find other recipients and this will eventually be more harmful for the Russian economy than for the Western European economies.

The danger of another great power war is connected to those economic interdependencies and should make it much more unlikely in theory. I do not believe that either Putin, or the Western leaders (including the USA) want a war. But we have learned from history that wars can be triggered from unlikely scenarios and Vladimir Putin is currently hazarding the consequences of such a situation, which I personally find very dangerous. Again the EU is playing a vital role here for instance at the meeting in Minsk. The important and positive thing about the meeting was that both the new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and Putin are speaking with each other. Nevertheless, the negotiations have not had an effect on the fighting on the ground, since the other conflicting party – the separatists – are not participating. Although it is apparent that Russian soldiers are involved in the conflict the Kremlin can only have a limited influence on the hostilities. Nevertheless, Moscow is also not contributing to find a solution and the constant violation of the border by Russian soldiers is certainly not helping to restore peace in Eastern Ukraine. A solution for the conflict does not seem likely in the foreseeable future. The parliamentary elections in Ukraine might help to alleviate the situation a bit, although a diplomatic solution to end the hostilities soon also seem unlikely. The big question here will be: How far is Putin willing to go? Russia will probably not invade Ukraine,

however, Putin is certainly willing to use his Machiavellian approach and seize an opportunity like a further escalation of the conflict to his benefit similarly as we could see it on Crimea. The sanctions from the West are affecting the Russian economy more than Putin is willing to admit and the conflict is a perfect opportunity to deflect from domestic problems. The sanctions will be harmful for both the European Union and the Russian Federation. Nevertheless Moscow has more to lose than the European countries. It would also be important for Brussels to find a more unified and thus quicker approach. Unfortunately it does not seem that this will be the case, also not with the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy under the new Juncker Commission. In any case the sanctions are the right approach, because they are the petty evil compared to any other option. The European countries should further engage in communicating with Putin and negotiate a solution acceptable for all parties (directly or indirectly) involved in the conflict.

End the reality distortion Now what does this all mean for the analysis and the future of EU-Russia relations? Neither the reality distortion nor a complete pessimistic approach will further the discussion. A sober approach that takes all actors into account would be the optimal solution and this has existed before and does exist (Meister, 2014; Rinke, 2014). The important point, however, is that no matter how hard we believe in a change from within the Kremlin, it is not going to become reality. An enforcement from outside is equally utopistic and to my understanding an even more dangerous option. We should be aware of the facts, learn from our history but continue to engage in dialogue. Make our intentions clear. Draw lines. Lines that should not be crossed. Accept different approaches. Embrace different realities – without one of them being distorted. It is enough that the Russian foreign

policy is based on illusions, we should not be delusional when analyzing it (Sukhov, 2014). And the reality is that we will not see a transformation of the Russian Federation any time soon, but the reality is also, that we are no longer living in a bipolar world and it is not going to return no matter how much the image of Putin in the Western media is portrayed as the antagonist. We should accept this reality – that we are living in a multipolar world, that realities have become complex. At least more complex than they have been before the end of the Cold War. Otherwise we might sleepwalk into another catastrophe. And then history might end. But not in the sense Fukuyama meant it.

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