

# AUTHORITARIANISM AND FOREIGN POLICY: THE TWIN PILLARS OF RESURGENT RUSSIA

Luke Chambers\*

## Abstract

*The direction in which Vladimir Putin has taken Russia over the past decade has led a number of analysts to express concern about the health of the country's democratic transition and its increasingly assertive behaviour on the global stage. While it is clear that Putin has undermined the liberal developments of the 1990s, however superficial, and reversed Russia's international gravitation towards the West, however incoherent, the linkages between these two developments are still unclear. This study examines the nature of authoritarianism in Russia and its relationship to the strategic imperatives of the Kremlin's foreign policy, with reference to Russia's great-power ambitions for a post-Atlantic, multipolar order.*

**Keywords:** *Russia, authoritarianism, foreign policy, great power, Putin*

## Introduction

In the decade since the arrival of Vladimir Putin to executive office in Moscow, Russia has entered a period of consolidation. The political disorganisation of the 1990s has been replaced with something more resembling relative order; the economy has transformed from a chaotic theatre of criminality, backwardness and instability into a prototype for a more stable, conventional system; fractious elements within the Russian state, though still a threat, have been subject to better control; a sense of Russian national pride is returning; and the Kremlin has shown more assertiveness on the world stage, as both a constructive and destructive agent. Despite the wealth of remaining problems, Putin has pulled Russia out of a self-destructive cauldron in which its very existence as a functioning state was at risk.

Particularly observable in the past decade, however, has been the sense of totality in Russia's transformation. Putin's impact has been of profound measure in both domestic affairs and foreign affairs; indeed, an intriguing development has been the blurring of these two theatres of policy-making. The internal context has undergone what some have regarded as an "authoritarian turn",<sup>1</sup> by which the liberal-democratic developments of the 1990s, however superficial, have been sharply reversed. Not only has this involved the relationship between the individual and the state, importantly, it has also altered the distribution and concentration of political power in Russia, resulting in a highly centralised polity, void of the necessary accountability, institutional power balances and relationships for the functioning of a durable federation. In short, Putin has attempted

---

\* **Luke Chambers** received his MA in History from the University of St Andrews (UK), and has also worked as a foreign affairs analyst for the UK Conservative Party. He is also pursuing graduate studies at the University of Oxford (UK), where his dissertation concerns the instrumentalization of the post-Soviet space in Russian foreign policy during the Putin-Medvedev period.

<sup>1</sup> Vitali Silitski, "Tools of Autocracy", *Journal of Democracy*, 20:2 (2009): 42

to improve and consolidate the same Russian state as Yeltsin; however, his methods have been qualitatively different and relied on replacing superficially developed ideational importations from the Atlantic powers with an organizational design reflective of the specificities of Russia and Russian interests.

Crucially, Russia's external context represents a major theatre of these interests, and the Kremlin's behaviour in various dimensions of its foreign relations has been measurably bolder since 2000. The Estonian government has complained of cyber attacks from Russian state servers in the wake of a dispute concerning a Soviet memorial in Tallinn; Moscow has undermined the economic integrity and energy independence of Ukraine; and, perhaps most notably, Russian troops invaded Georgia proper in August 2008 as a culmination of fifteen years of military tension in separatist regions. While each of these instances of bellicosity on the part of the Kremlin possesses its own modalities and deserves analytical nuance, what is distinctive about Putin-era Russian foreign policy is the presence of a willingness to undermine a fragile regional security balance in order to pursue an enigmatic national interest.

This paper will suggest that endogenous and exogenous behaviour and processes in the last decade relating to Russia should not be viewed as discrete; instead, there is analytical value in evaluating the Kremlin's domestic and foreign agendas as part of a wider, unitary strategy to restore Russia's role as a global actor. The design pursued domestically exerts a strong influence on foreign policy; accordingly, the long-term goals of Russian foreign policy are located within the Russian state as well as without.<sup>2</sup> What makes Russia such an interesting case, however, is the real nature of these domestic and foreign agendas, which still confound much neat political-scientific theorizing. Internally, Putin's quest to restore the supremacy of the state, the central authority of Moscow and the dictatorship of the law have led some to accuse him of authoritarianism, statism and, indeed, of undermining Russia's democratic transition for the purposes of power for its own sake.<sup>3</sup> Externally, the Kremlin's behaviour appears at times expansionist and neo-imperialist, particularly if we limit our analysis to the geopolitics of Eurasia. But these internal and external designs can be traced to a number of important factors, including the intellectual disposition of the Russian leadership, the contextual distribution of power in Russia when the current regime entered office, the fundamental internalized and externalized interests of the Kremlin and the external political and strategic context in which these factors operate.

The tangibility of this nexus of domestic and foreign interests provides a distinct analytical challenge to how we conceptualise foreign policy and the characteristics of agency in the international system. One of the major challenges to scholarship of foreign policy has been to determine how much influence, and what kind of influence, the domestic political context exerts on a state's behaviour towards the international.<sup>4</sup> Analyses of foreign policy that do not take into account the domestic sphere, particularly relating to matters of agency and constraint, run the risk of incompleteness and oversimplification, not to mention of providing little use to the domain of policy-making.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and The West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 219.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Farnham, "Impact of the Political Context on Foreign Policy Decision-Making", *Political Psychology*, 25:3 (2004): 441.

## Regime Type and Foreign Policy

If it can be empirically supported that a state's internal political context – or, indeed, the internal power structure and distribution of any international actor – is a formative aspect of how its foreign relations are conducted, there are significant ramifications for our inferences in a wide range of preoccupations in international relations. The conceptual dividing lines between domestic and foreign affairs – entrenched in the bureaucratic structures of all states – would become pervious, or blurred. Although very few contemporary schools of thought completely disregard the domestic sphere of foreign policy in international relations, such a stipulation would undermine the various fragmentations of realist theory, whose preoccupations with power and structures, and whose reliance on rational choice models of behaviour, afford little importance to an actor's internal characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

There are a number of self-defining linkages between the domestic and the foreign. In the domestic domain of decision-making, borrowing a conceptual model from a one-level game rather than the two-level game represented by foreign policy decision-making, a number of scholars have rightly noted that acceptability is the most basic and fundamental prerequisite for the successful formulation, adoption and implementation of any policy.<sup>7</sup> In any context, a decision must command a minimum of acceptability from interested parties if it is to be adopted. While this may influence foreign policy decision-making in different ways – some states may have a larger foreign affairs “constituency” in the domestic sphere than others – it does not require extreme cases to show that foreign policy decisions can have major effects on the domestic context and are therefore bound by co-decision-makers whose own interests are located primarily in the domestic sphere. This is where regime type may be of decisive importance: if a state's decision-makers are democratically elected officials, their domestic interests in re-election will bind their foreign policy decision-making; if a decision-maker has no domestic constituency, their decisions will, theoretically, be less constrained.

Theories of bureaucratic politics have asked the legitimate question of whether, in policy-making of any kind, the tail wags the dog. In other words, where is the essence of decision located? It seems appropriate that we should be cognisant of the monopoly of expertise and, in some cases, control of information, held by administrative individuals and groups over their political bosses,<sup>8</sup> because this exposes the hierarchical gulf between foreign policy decision-makers and the body of human capital supplying them with necessary information. In the bureaucratic architecture of a number of states, namely Britain, the pool of human capital remains the same, regardless of the government. In others, namely the United States, the physiognomy of human capital resources changes with the government, inevitably creating a different context for the flow and nuance of information to foreign policy decision-makers. It would be difficult, under such circumstances, to suggest that such a bureaucratic shift would have no effect on the design and implementation of foreign policy. For example, one of the most visible characteristics of the Putin era, in administrative terms, has been the widespread appointment of figures with a force-structure background, and a number of scholars have interpreted this as indicative of the value afforded to a particular kind of expertise in Putin's

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and Foreign Policy” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, ed. Steve Smith et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>7</sup> Farnham, “Impact of the Political Context on Foreign Policy Decision-Making,” 443; also see A. George, “Domestic Constraints on Regime Change in US Foreign Policy” in *Change in the International System*, ed. O. R. Holsti (Boulder: Westview, 1980) 233-262; and Henry A. Kissinger, “Reflections on Power and Diplomacy” in *Dimensions of Power and Diplomacy*, ed. E. A. J. Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1964) 17-39.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 95.

Russia, and raised the question of whether this helps explain the recent assertiveness in Russian foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

At the international level, however, these rational conclusions do not translate neatly. Although decision-makers in whatever kind of state have no formal responsibility for external actors, and while it may seem elementary that decision-makers in non-democratic states will have fewer constraints on their actions, this does not necessarily translate into foreign policy prescriptions and pursuits that are fundamentally more adventurous or more aggressive. Correlative studies between regime type dichotomised into “liberal” and “non-liberal” states and the propensity towards war yield interesting results. Between the Congress of Vienna and the beginning of the Reagan administration in 1981, liberal states were responsible for starting 24 of the 56 wars they found themselves in: 43 per cent of culpability. Non-liberal states fought in 187 conflicts and were responsible for the outbreak of 91: 49 per cent of culpability.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps not fair, therefore, to suggest that non-liberal states cause significantly more wars. The evidence above merely suggests that non-liberal states are more war-prone, even if they do not directly light the fuse. This raises questions, however, about the nature of culpability and the triggers of war, for different interpretations of history will place blame at the doors of different agents, or even structures. Despite this, an interesting statistic adds more fuel to this analytical challenge: in the quarter century following the Second World War, the United States intervened militarily in the Third World twice as often as the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Theoretically, domestic factors undoubtedly have an influence on the nature of foreign policy, but apart from a number of assertions – namely that democracies constrain their decision-makers and that liberal democracies do not end up at war with one another – the linkage remains distinctly difficult to define satisfactorily. However, an interesting point of which we should be consistently aware is that the domestic and the foreign each possess little meaning except in reference to one another; moreover, in the age of globalization – loosely defined – whatever real or imagined divisions between these two theatres of policy-making are steadily eroding.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, in the relationship between a state’s domestic politics and its foreign policy, much will also depend on intervening variables, namely its own history, the intermediate- and long-term goals of the leadership and the power projection capability of the state’s military, economic, diplomatic and ideational instruments. In the case of Russia, these factors contribute to the staggering complexity of both domestic political, and foreign strategic, contexts.

## Dimensions of Authoritarianism in Russia

The vast majority of analysts would agree that Russia is not a liberal state; perhaps fewer would agree that Russia is not a democracy; perhaps fewer again would agree that Russia is an authoritarian state. It is arguably more appropriate to evaluate the Russian polity as being in possession of elements of authoritarianism, rather than considering it a fully consolidated authoritarian state. There are four major attributes of authoritarianism visibly present in Russia: firstly, power structures are super-centralised, and regional authorities are subordinated to the centre. Secondly, the electoral practices for executive positions are illiberal, and no real arena exists

---

<sup>9</sup> Nikolai Petrov, “Seven Faces of Putin’s Russia: Federal Districts and the New Level of State-Territorial Composition,” *Security Dialogue*, 33:1 (2002): 73; Olga Kryshchanovska and Stephen White, “Putin’s Militocracy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19:4 (2003): 289.

<sup>10</sup> Doyle, “Liberalism and Foreign Policy,” 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 220-21.

for the equitable contestation of political, economic or social interests. Thirdly, jurisprudence functions in a context of legal relativity; in other words, the rule of the law is secondary to the rule of men. Fourthly, there is consistent use of coercive institutions and measures, reinforcing the power of the state over the power of individuals, groups or competing interests.<sup>13</sup> In general, therefore, authority is valued more than freedom or equality. International organizations corroborate these assertions. In 2007, Russia's grades for accountability, public voice, civil liberties, the rule of law and transparency were below 50 per cent of the highest possible score, according to Freedom House.<sup>14</sup> Each of these figures was a regression of the 2005 figures; overall, Freedom House regards Russia as "not free".<sup>15</sup> In the same year the Economist Intelligence Unit placed the quality of Russian democracy 102nd among 167 countries, describing it as a hybrid regime.<sup>16</sup> While Russia is clearly not a totalitarian dictatorship, therefore, it is not liberal.

Early hopes that Putin might engender the democratic Russia many had been expecting – as an improvement on the Yeltsin era's largely failed attempts – were dashed by the time his second term came around. His re-election in 2004 barely involved a campaign. His position had become such that he was being praised for aspects of his tenure that had little to do with his own leadership, most notably the improvements in Russia's economy. Moreover, the Yukos affair and the imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky exposed, for the first time for many Western observers, a darker, coercive nature in the Russian leadership that pointed to worrying prospects for the fragile and (by this stage) superficial Russian democracy.<sup>17</sup> The murder of Anna Politkovskaya, the trial of the suspects, and subsequent streak of murders of activists illustrated the murky nature of the rule of law in Russia. Today, the state still interferes with NGOs and routinely undermines the work of human rights organizations and independent activists.<sup>18</sup>

These aspects are worthy of charges of creeping illiberalism under Putin. However, the shrinking of political space over the past decade – visible in the erosion of accountability at all levels and the narrowing of the circle of elite decision-making – is perhaps a more measurable and distinctive dimension of authoritarianism in Russia, and more relevant to the nexus between state power and the projection of power abroad. The so-called *vertical vlastii* and Putin's bold recentralisation of the nation's regional politics has done more to undermine the fragile and superficial democracy inherited in 2000 than erratic instances of opposition suppression. A major federal reform instigated by Putin has been the creation of the federal "super-districts". Instead of each regional subject in the Russian Federation possessing a presidential representative, Putin abolished the post and shifted power to the head of each super-district. The political presence of the regions has therefore been drastically reduced, their power diluted and marginalized.<sup>19</sup> Administrative centres are often hundreds of miles from regional capitals, and therefore rarely govern with attention to local interests. The territorial composition of the super-districts has also helped to undermine the political weight of the regional units; instead of recognising territorial and ethnic demarcations, each super-

---

<sup>13</sup> Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia* (London: Harvill Press, 2004), 284-85.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Countries at the Crossroads, 2007. Country Profile: Russia* (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2007), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Freedom House, "Map of Freedom," Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/MOF09.pdf> [all sites accessed 26 April 2010].

<sup>16</sup> Laza Kekic, *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Alex Pravda, "Introduction: Putin in Perspective" in *Leading Russia: Putin in Perspective*, ed. Alex Pravda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>18</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *An Uncivil Approach to Civil Society* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/83737/section/2>.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Konitzer and Stephen K. Wegren, "Federalism and Political Recentralization in the Russian Federation: United Russia as the Party of Power," *The Journal of Federalism*, 36:4 (2006): 503.

district contains a soup of various kinds of subjects, fostering weakness and subjugation to Moscow.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, as will be examined later, the constitutional claims of many republics are a key source of potential instability to the Russian state, and the redistribution of power from the federal level to Moscow has removed the institutional and procedural space for these claims to acquire much potency.<sup>21</sup> The ethno-territorial asymmetry of the Yeltsinite federation, by which Moscow was on course to develop bilateral arrangements with nearly all the regional subjects, has therefore been subverted and replaced with a Moscow-knows-best design. In addition to their functional role in subordinating regional power to Moscow, the drawing of the super-districts also exposes a murky aspect of the authoritarian turn, and while ignorant of ethno-territorial particularism, the super-districts are not entirely arbitrary: they reflect Russian military districts, and five of the seven presidential representatives at the inception of the reforms possessed a military or security services background, rendering them loyal to Putin and his agenda.<sup>22</sup>

Authoritarian tendencies can also be detected within the chief executive's prerogative in removing and appointing governors. This has enabled Putin and Medvedev to entrench affiliation with United Russia within regional elites and to undermine dissenting agendas.<sup>23</sup> The Kremlin's interests are thus secured across the country. A further indicator of the authoritarian turn in Russia is Putin's demand that regional law be brought into line with federal law. This forms part of the "dictatorship of the law", by which a unified legal space is created, thus enhancing Moscow's command over regions of Russia where different aspects of jurisprudence are desirable and even necessary, due to religious, ethnic, social or cultural asymmetry.<sup>24</sup>

These measures paint a clear picture of the authoritarianism at work in Russia. Whether we choose to focus on the quality of democracy, the coercive methods used by the state in suppressing dissent or the erosion of accountability and the restructuring of power, Russia is clearly an illiberal polity and the authority of the state is valued far beyond the authority of the body politic, or institutions such as the courts or regional polities. State power, according to Robert Service, has become the "shibboleth" of the Putin regime.<sup>25</sup> The domestic sphere of a resurgent Russia is defined, therefore, as a theatre of building and consolidating the power of the state and restructuring the nation's political and legal institutions in a way that entrenches the ubiquitous centrality of the Kremlin. But for what purpose? These developments are not occurring in a vacuum. Internal consolidation is only one pillar of resurgent Russia. Due to many factors – recent history, geographical size, the estranged Russian diaspora, civilizational identity – Russia's renaissance cannot be contained within its own borders. The international still beckons the Kremlin in a volume perhaps only heard by post-imperial centres of power whose former global status has vanished. The internal is defined against the other pillar of a resurgent Russia: the unerring aspiration, once again, to rise to great-power status.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> David Cashaback, "Risky Strategies? Putin's Federal Reforms and the Accommodation of Difference in Russia," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 3 (2003): 22.

<sup>21</sup> Viktor Mart'ianov, "The Decline of Public Politics in Russia: From Public Politics to Political Administration," *Russian Politics and Law*, 45:5 (2007): 68.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Hyde, "Putin's Federal Reforms and Their Implications for Presidential Power in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53:5 (2001): 724; and C. Ross, "Putin's Federal Reforms and the Consolidation of Federalism in Russia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back!," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 36 (2003): 35.

<sup>23</sup> Konitzer and Wegren, "Federalism and Political Recentralization in the Russian Federation," 503.

<sup>24</sup> Cashaback, "Risky Strategies?," 22.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Service, *The Penguin History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 550.

<sup>26</sup> Janusz Bugajski, "Russia's Pragmatic Reimperialization," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 4:1 (2010): 9.

## The Twin Pillars of Resurgent Russia

Any state with aspirations towards great-power status must first satisfy a minimum of requisite criteria. In some states, these criteria are fulfilled automatically by the nature of the regime, but in most, decision-makers need to forge the particular foundations of a great power in order for aspiration to become reality. All major great powers and empires in modern history have satisfied most of these criteria. First, the executive must possess *legitimacy* to rule: there must be no or few question marks surrounding its presence or its nature. Second, great powers require *security*: a severe deterioration of internal law and order or a perpetual desecuritization of border regions, for example, will hinder the centre's potential international reach, essential for any major power. Third, a great power should possess a clear *identity* or have clearly defined measures for ameliorating identity-related cleavages within the state if it is to project its power internationally. Fourth, all great powers possess *gravity*: the geopolitical weight and indispensability to be treated as an equal among other great powers, through the development of military, economic and ideational strength.

A resurgent Russia poses an interesting challenge to how we understand these concepts. In liberal states, while controlling for the inevitable nexus between the internal and the external, most of these issues can be ascribed to either domestic or foreign policy, and do not require a twin pillar imperative. Legitimacy, in liberal states, is acquired by default in domestic constitutional designs and practices. In establishing the legitimacy of the executive, foreign policy is, unsurprisingly, an externality. In non-democratic states, however, foreign policy can be a useful theatre in which a potentially illegitimate government can legitimise itself: a resounding victory in a foreign war, for example, can assuage opposition to a non-elected executive. Security in democracies is provided by non-corrupt professional and public agencies loyal to the executive and political institutions. In non-democratic states, this kind of integrity and loyalty is often difficult to achieve. In the securitization of borders there are, admittedly, externalities to be considered for both kinds of states. Though there are occasional examples of its occurrence, democracies are less likely to invoke national security threats due to the nature of the regime alone, or the kinds of personalities in power. Identity is often a prerequisite for democratic survival or for the success of democratic transition.<sup>27</sup> Coherent national identities are internalized and allow for liberal institutions and norms to be created and consolidated, employing national identity as a lowest common denominator. It would be unfair to suggest that authoritarian states do not possess coherent national identities – many do – but in the case of Russia, the formulation of identity places demands on domestic and foreign theatres.<sup>28</sup> As with many illiberal states, identity can be forged by what it is not and by whose values it does not share – the West, primarily the United States. Gravity is the one aspect of great-power status where, *ex vi termini*, the domestic and the foreign usually constitute two pillars of the same design. A severely weak state cannot project power abroad in either hard or soft terms. Conversely, there are examples of states whose gravity has developed not as a consequence of foreign adventures and displays of power, but rather through domestic consolidation.

Russia desires to be treated as an equal, in power-political terms, by global hegemonies such as the United States, and the Kremlin's intermediate- and long-term foreign policy ambitions centre on the aspiration for great-power status in a multipolar world.<sup>29</sup> The original Foreign Policy Concept, published in June 2000, stated that Russia aimed “to achieve firm and prestigious positions in the world community, most fully consistent with the interests of the Russian Federation as a great

---

<sup>27</sup> See Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics*, 2:3 (1970).

<sup>28</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 14-15.

power, as one of the most influential centers of the modern world.”<sup>30</sup> Such a project demands a strong nexus of coherent and complementary domestic and foreign policies and, as such, demands both pillars to be facing towards the same goal. According to the revised 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, “Differences between domestic and external means of ensuring national interests and security are gradually disappearing. In this context, our foreign policy becomes one of major instruments of the steady national development.”<sup>31</sup>

The first major roadblock to any great-power aspirations is an illegitimate executive. A leadership whose grip on power is perpetually unstable cannot hope to guide a nation to prominent global status, as uncertainty concerning a state’s future – internally and externally – begins with the health of the political status quo. As with liberal states, executive leadership is central to a state’s development. In Russia, however, the physiognomy and capability of leadership has proven more enduringly reflective of how the Kremlin can project its power both within the Russian polity and into the international. As Alex Pravda suggests, the nature of the handover to Putin in 2000 and the recovery of presidential leadership in the wake of the Yeltsin period is suggestive of the potency of the Russian presidency even after a period of deep incoherence and weakness in the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> The overwhelming popularity enjoyed by Putin is testament to the support for the statist, authoritarian direction in which he has led the country and the foreign policy he has pursued. During the Yeltsin period, poll figures suggest that few Russians harboured any real trust in the presidency or the government. While 28 per cent of Russians claimed they had trust in Yeltsin in 1993, only 2 per cent did in late 1998. Correspondingly, the government’s approval ratings fell consistently through the 1990s from 18 per cent in 1993 to a mere 8 per cent in 1998.<sup>33</sup> Measurements of democratic culture suggest around half of all Russians believed they had no real input into the governance of the country.<sup>34</sup> What is perhaps most compelling about these figures is that they must be evaluated in tandem with polls that indicate a high level of support for the ideals of democracy among the Russian public.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, loyalty to the government among civil servants was undermined by the state’s inability to collect and redistribute taxes in the form of wages. These factors suggested a serious need, in 2000, to restore the respectability of the Russian leadership. Putin has largely succeeded, if his glittering public image and approval ratings are to be taken at face value; in short, statism and authoritarianism has, ironically, won over the public, despite their support for nebulous concepts of democracy.<sup>36</sup>

Foreign policy, too, is an important aspect of the restoration of executive legitimacy in Russia. Most recent choices in the Kremlin’s foreign policy decision-making have found consonance, according to poll data, with the average Russian. Though more in the domain of identity than legitimacy, in strictly strategic terms, a number of stances and actions have cemented the legitimacy of the executive because they harmonize with the public’s view of their strategic place in the world, however superficial. Although a majority of Russians feel generally moderate or positive towards

---

<sup>30</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, President of the Russian Federation, 2000, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, President of the Russian Federation, 2008, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.

<sup>32</sup> Pravda, “Introduction: Putin in Perspective”, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen White, *Russia’s New Politics: The Management of a Postcommunist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 270.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>35</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, December 2009, [http://www.russiavotes.org/national\\_issues/national\\_issues\\_politics.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/national_issues/national_issues_politics.php).

<sup>36</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, February-March 2009, [http://www.russiavotes.org/president/presidency\\_performance.php#202](http://www.russiavotes.org/president/presidency_performance.php#202).



the United States, the policy of balancing against the United States has galvanised Putin's support in Russia, largely due to painful memories of junior partnership in the 1990s, but mainly because Russians generally harbour opinions that the two countries' interests diverge on most matters.<sup>37</sup> The policy of halting the encroachment of NATO into areas of the post-Soviet space has also chimed with the popular mood: a majority of Russians still believe that Moscow should feel threatened by NATO, and a similar figure is supportive of Moscow forming counterbalancing alliances or remaining a singular bloc against NATO.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, if the war in Georgia was part of the Kremlin's strategy to stop the advance of NATO further into the post-Soviet space, the legitimizing effects – though by 2008 there were few question marks as to the legitimacy of the chief executive in the Putin-Medvedev tandem – were significant: 74 per cent of Russians believe that Georgia acquiring NATO membership would constitute some kind of threat to Russia.<sup>39</sup>

The purpose of this explanation has been to highlight the consonance with the two pillars of Putin's design for Russia among the public. This is important because legitimacy is located in the internal, not the external, and despite the authoritarian nature of the Russian state in the pursuit of great-power status, the executive cannot leave the public behind. Putin's restoration of the presidency from a dilapidated, unpopular shell of an office to the undisputed throne of a resurgent Russia has adopted both domestic and foreign tactics, indicating a distinctive characteristic of the relationship between elites and publics in Russia. Whereas in many states, publics are unmoved by the international, or by their nation's place in the world, many Russians have strong views on the matter, demanding a twin-pillar approach to the restoration of legitimacy at executive level.

The second major roadblock to the acquisition of great-power status lies in the domain of security. A state consistently plagued with desecuritization within, along or across its borders cannot hope to project its power into the international in the manner by which the Kremlin envisions the intermediate-term future. In a number of ways, the aspects of security Putin has striven to improve can be compared with the 1990s in the same manner with which the legitimacy of the executive was compared: in the Yeltsin period it is no exaggeration to suggest that Russia was at risk of falling apart as a polity, and a sizeable portion of Putin's early popularity can be traced to his stance on Chechnya.<sup>40</sup> But separatist movements in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and other political units of the North Caucasus continually represent headaches for the Kremlin and form the primary threat to the tranquillity of everyday life in Russia.<sup>41</sup> The complex nature of these groups in the North Caucasus, and the sketchy intelligence on their links, illustrates the demands for a solid nexus between internal and external designs. Domestically, Putin has lyrically threatened to "drag terrorists from the sewers"; internationally, the Kremlin cannot hope to alleviate such viscous threats to its security alone, and must engage with states under similar pressures, namely the United States.<sup>42</sup> A majority of Russians believe that the Chechen question should be answered by force, but only around one-tenth feel that this can continue indefinitely.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, in percentage terms, the same body of opinion that supports Putin's authoritarian turn also believes in force backed up by an

---

<sup>37</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, April 2008, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_usa\\_nato.php#541](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_usa_nato.php#541).

<sup>38</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, February-March 2009, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_usa\\_nato.php#541](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_usa_nato.php#541).

<sup>39</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, September 2008; January-February 2010, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_usa\\_nato.php#541](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_usa_nato.php#541).

<sup>40</sup> Eugene Huskey, "Overcoming the Yeltsin Legacy: Vladimir Putin and Russian Political Reform" in *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, ed. Archie Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 85.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Stuermer, *Putin and the Rise of Russia* (London: Phoenix, 2008), 110.

<sup>42</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, September 2004; December 2007, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_chechnya.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_chechnya.php).

internationalization of the threat to Russian security. Importantly, in 2000 Russians held the threats posed to their national security by separatist groups almost equal to that of the United States. By 2004, however, this threat perception had fallen to almost half of that perceived to be posed by the United States.<sup>44</sup> Putin's toughness appears to have resonated and at least created the illusion of an improved securitization of the southern border.

While a majority of Russians support the use of force in Chechnya and the Russian defence establishment's assertions that terrorism in the North Caucasus is representative of global terrorism, the Kremlin's interpretation of NATO encroachment into regions of the post-Soviet space is considered a similar threat to Russian security.<sup>45</sup> Here, again, the nexus between the domestic and the foreign is evident. The Kremlin has asserted that internal Russian territorial integrity will not be compromised by terrorism on its southern borders; by the same token, neither will Russian strategic integrity be compromised by the encroachment of the Atlantic powers into its sphere of influence.<sup>46</sup> The sense of besiegement from external powers along the massive Russian frontier, comprising borders with fourteen states and stretching from Norway to North Korea, has undoubtedly contributed to the project of bolstering the state and centralising the power in the internal dimension. As noted above, Russians do not generally feel that NATO's designs in the post-Soviet space are entirely neutral, equating the Baltic States' membership in NATO and the EU, and talk of Ukraine's gravitation towards NATO, as hostile to Russian security. NATO membership of these states also constitutes serious constraints on Russian domestic policy in oblasts such as Kaliningrad, due to its geographic location, despite NATO assurances.

In general this kind of NATO presence in Russia's immediate neighbourhood undermines Russia's ability to act as a great power or, more specifically, to establish indivisible hegemony over its Eurasian sphere of interest. A major imperative of the Russian strategy in Georgia was to secure itself against NATO expansion into the Caucasus, ensuring a continuing context of instability in Georgia, thereby dissuading the Atlantic powers from viewing Georgia as fertile territory for inclusion. In short, the Kremlin ensured Tbilisi would simply come with too much baggage for NATO.<sup>47</sup> This strategic design relates to the Russian domestic sphere in many important ways, but most particularly in the kind of establishment Putin has engineered among senior reaches of the Russian government. Security service personnel and serving or retired military personnel are generally known to harbour strong views on Russian foreign policy, where a priority theatre of strategy is considered to be the Near Abroad: Eurasianism, dominant among the military and *siloviki* elite, can help to explain the general hostility towards any type of incursion into the post-Soviet space, whose underlying manifesto can be traced to the worldwide process of globalization and not necessarily a strategic threat to the Russian state.<sup>48</sup> Overall, securitization is of prime importance for Russia's great-power aspirations, and securing the state against internal and external threats demands a nexus of internal and external instrumentation. Much of Putin's attitude, and that of his militocracy, has harmonized with the public sentiment, and his strong stance on separatist terrorism and the encroachment of Atlantic institutions into Russia's neighbourhood are two sides of the same coin: only by strengthening the state at home can Russian power be used to stem separatism and dissuade Western "besiegement" abroad; correspondingly, only by deflecting foreign threats can the process of strengthening the state be continued.

---

<sup>44</sup> New Russia Barometer VIII-XV, 2000-07, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_russia\\_place.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_russia_place.php).

<sup>45</sup> Levada Center, Nationwide Survey, September 2008, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_russia\\_place.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_russia_place.php).

<sup>46</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 241.

<sup>47</sup> James Sherr, "The Implications of the Russia-Georgia War for European Security" in *The Guns of August, 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2009), 209-10.

<sup>48</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 241.

Thirdly, few great powers have maintained their status in international affairs under the weight of identity crises and the consequential, more tangible effects of these crises. This does not necessarily imply that the citizens of great powers must possess a homogenous, unitary identity shared by all in order for it to project its power; however, great powers rarely ignore questions of identity and usually confront them if potential fissures emerge. Since the mid-nineteenth century, national awakenings have constituted the largest share of the causes of imperial or state fragmentation, instead of conventional military defeat.

Russia is a multiethnic and multiconfessional state and, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has experienced difficulty in establishing a neat national identity, at home and abroad.<sup>49</sup> There are three major channels for the epic questions of civilizational identity in Russia. The first guides Russia towards Europe, claiming common ancestry of Christendom and disqualifying the Asiatic identity along the fault-lines of Eurasia. In this school of thought, Russia is a different, exotic Europe, historically influenced by a multitude of non-European cultures; however, Russians are fundamentally still Europeans.<sup>50</sup> The second guides Russia towards Asia, marking a similar fault-line division in great-power geopolitical identity. Culturally, this sentiment can be traced to the divergent paths Russia and Europe have traversed in modern history and the Asian influences in Russia's national story.<sup>51</sup> The third channel does not guide Russia anywhere except back to Moscow: according to this school, Russia is special. In matters of politics, religion and ethno-cultural pluralism, Russia is distinct from West and East and, crucially for this study, should design political architecture that is best suited to Russia, and should carve out a role in the world best suited to Russia.

This desired international identity will only be forged and consolidated if the domestic machinations of identity politics correspond. If Russians identify with Europeanness, eventually the state will have to change to reflect this. Similarly, the state would have to adapt to reflect a politico-cultural gravitation towards Asia. But these sentiments are not resigned to vague discussions on ethno-cultural identity, and the poll figures are telling. A majority of Russians still prefer a unique political system tailored to the perceived specificities of Russian identity and the Russian psyche; furthermore, this system is imagined to occur endogenously and autonomously, without external interference.<sup>52</sup> More specifically, Russians are understood to be in favour of some kind of concept of democracy, but what is often forgotten is that, when asked about what kind of democracy they would prefer, an overwhelming majority indicated that Russia should have its own particular brand, following its national traditions, not that espoused by the West.<sup>53</sup> Russians are reasonably clear on their desire to be regarded as unique. But when asked to explain what was special about Russia, and why it should possess a *sui generis* political representation of their special identity, the respondents pointed to a plethora of things that might characterise it. Economic development where people mattered more than profit and values distinct from the West garnered the most popular choices by slim margins, ideas which are not exactly unique cultural or ethnic artefacts.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 179.

<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?," in *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, ed. Archie Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 430.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Levada Centre, Nationwide Survey, December 2009, [http://www.russiavotes.org/national\\_issues/national\\_issues\\_politics.php#615](http://www.russiavotes.org/national_issues/national_issues_politics.php#615).

<sup>53</sup> Levada Centre, Nationwide Survey, January 2008, [http://www.russiavotes.org/national\\_issues/national\\_issues\\_politics.php#615](http://www.russiavotes.org/national_issues/national_issues_politics.php#615).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Putin's statist authoritarianism appears to have succeeded in rescuing Russian identity from the triangular trap of European-Asiatic-*sui generis* characterisations. Between 2000 and 2004, Russians who "often" considered themselves European remained at relatively constant rate, hovering around 19 per cent.<sup>55</sup> Russians who said they would "never" consider themselves European shot up from 19 to 46 per cent. Most compelling, perhaps, is poll evidence that suggests the middle ground in identity politics has shifted under Putin.<sup>56</sup> While in 2000 a vast majority of people were ambivalent or undecided about whether or not they felt European, those who "never" or "rarely" felt European had become the majority by 2004.<sup>57</sup>

This identification with *sui generis* status is important, particularly when we consider the linkages between national identity and foreign policy. By formalising its status as a nation of unique identity – neither European nor Asiatic – Russia can export identity to the level of geopolitics, where it also hopes to forge a unique character and sphere of influence. This partly explains the Kremlin's long-term strategy to balance against the Atlantic order and help shape a post-Atlantic power distribution resembling nineteenth-century Europe, where no one power had the capability to establish total hegemony and foreign policy was conducted on a strategic chessboard with zero-sum calculations. The same logic prevails, only on a grander chessboard; instead of states, players are civilizations: Russian identity is, therefore, of paramount importance. Indeed, the Foreign Policy Concept clearly stresses that the international order should be more reflective of wider "civilizational" identities and not, presumably, merely the dominant Western civilization.<sup>58</sup> Recent developments in Russian foreign policy – notably the war in Georgia, the gas disputes with Ukraine and an increasingly assertive attitude in Central Asia – are less about imperialization for its own sake as they are about drawing lines in the sand behind which the Kremlin can be confident of hegemonic status.<sup>59</sup> *Sui generis* status in its immediate neighbourhood – the non-EU post-Soviet space – is pivotal to the Kremlin's global aspirations. An identity of depth and durability is a prerequisite for the formulation and stabilization of a post-Soviet sphere of influence and, consequently, the instrumentalization of this sphere of influence in a post-Atlantic order of multipolar power distribution and great-power balancing. Imperialism, therefore, is concerned with gathering the post-Soviet space into a civilizational bloc in preparation for a post-Atlantic order, and not merely a short-term, insidious pursuit of power. This categorical uniqueness, combined with a statist project whose stipulations value the state's ability to exercise power over the state's ability to guarantee rights, leads us to the fourth aspect of Russia's resurgence; it is this dimension where the twin pillars of internal authoritarianism and external great-power posturing are perhaps the most visible.

Gravity, or more fundamentally, geopolitical power, is the final and perhaps most important attribute of a great power. Gravity can be characterised in many ways but there are a number of criteria that must be met for a state to project force, hard or soft. Firstly, a great power cannot exert force on the international system without a strong central state. There should be no or little constitutional or political relativity, and executive power must be indivisible. Stability should be the norm and credible threats to the executive and its design should be non-existent or extremely rare. In short, the state as a unit should resemble as much as possible the unitary actor described by neorealists. Secondly, gravity originates in some key characteristic that renders a state indispensable to the international balance of power, be it geographic location, military strength, economic power or the possession of natural resources, or ideational messianism. A distinct, durable centrality to

---

<sup>55</sup> New Russia Barometer XV-XIII, 2000-2004, [http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security\\_russia\\_place.php#nr2](http://www.russiavotes.org/security/security_russia_place.php#nr2).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Foreign Policy Concept, 2008, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.

<sup>59</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 242.

international relations will ensure a state's role as a shaper of the global order, and not a follower. In other words, a power with a prominent role as a centre of gravity will be a subject, not an object of international order and in many contexts, such a power will have the capability to ensure that the international order is designed to harmonize with its national interests. As with large centres of gravity in the physical world, a great power is, *ceteris paribus*, immovable. Indeed, the emergence of a new world order, consisting of an increasing number of "poles", or centres of gravity, is a primary concern in how Russian foreign relations are conducted, and the imperative behind much of the Kremlin's vision of the Russian state's domestic consolidation. According to the Foreign Policy Concept: "Russia attaches great importance to improving the manageability of the world development and establishing a self-regulating international system."<sup>60</sup>

In order for the Kremlin to guarantee its survivability in such an international order, consolidating the state's power is of utmost importance. Russia is no longer a source of global ideational strength and Moscow's image as moral artefact has been severely tarnished for the foreseeable future. Russia is not constructed on the basis of values exportable to other theatres, unlike the United States or Europe; therefore, Putin's authoritarian statism is the most potent alternative to guarantee the entrenchment of Moscow as a global centre of gravity. In a global order the likes of which the Kremlin longs for, Moscow would be an immovable centre of power, not unlike the status it enjoyed at the height of the Cold War.

Injecting democratic culture into Russian politics would certainly undermine this project. Not only would liberal norms take time to entrench themselves in Russian society and diffuse into the political process, or vice versa, undermining the immediacy of Russian great-power aspirations; increasing the volume of political space in Russia would risk the ascendancy of a different kind of foreign policy elite: Westernizing or, worse, more combative and ideology-driven elements.<sup>61</sup> Apart from a few exceptional instances, the course of Russian foreign policy in the last decade has been remarkably pragmatic and has steered a middle course between engagement with the Atlantic powers on key matters of mutual concern, namely terrorism and economic cooperation, and a geopolitical assertiveness reminiscent in some cases of neo-imperialism. The human capital behind the decision-making that has generated this course is distinctly thin and centrally located, and this is another facet of the *vertical vlastii* by which Putin has moved the country in an authoritarian direction.<sup>62</sup> By consolidating the power of the core, and through a firm grip on foreign policy elites, Putin has entrenched a perception of the world as one of waning US dominance and growing multipolarity. The course resulting from this is one of pragmatism and opportunism, safe from the dangerous extremes of Yeltsin-Kozyrev-era integrationism or nakedly imperialistic, anti-Western, neo-Soviet revanchism.

Interestingly, while this statist project will weigh down Moscow's status as a centre of gravity in a global order of whatever character, the more dynamic attributes of the Russian state, if suitably instrumentalized, already render Russia an indispensable centre of gravity in the world.<sup>63</sup> The sheer size of the Russian nation and the multitude of borders it shares with other states presents it with a more natural, immediate and diverse wealth of bilateral relationships than most other states. Its imperial past also guarantees it a particular kind of role in the affairs of Soviet successor states,

---

<sup>60</sup> Foreign Policy Concept, 2008, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.

<sup>61</sup> Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 129.

<sup>62</sup> Bugajski, "Russia's Pragmatic Reimperialization," 9.

<sup>63</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:2 (2007): 109.

though this theatre of its foreign relations has different characteristics across the region.<sup>64</sup> The extremely favourable distribution of hydrocarbons within its territory and its indispensability as a transit agent for Central Asian energy supplies anoint it with both economic power and a high degree of responsibility for European energy security, as witnessed in Ukraine throughout the Putin presidency.<sup>65</sup> In international terms, Moscow's identity as a citadel of ideational-moral messianism, as noted, has disappeared, thus the other attributes of gravitational supremacy are enhanced. Given these factors, the Kremlin's opportunistic tactics should come as no surprise.

Clearly the importance of geopolitical power is incorporative of both the internal and external directions of policy-making. According to the Kremlin's statist project, a strong state at home will engender a strong international status; at the same time, an effective, durable posture in the international arena will empower the state at home, as Russians tend to regard Russia's place in the world as a major source of national pride and as a yardstick by which to evaluate the performance of the president and government. The international gravitational power of the Kremlin, in the minds of the Russian foreign policy elite, is drawn from the legitimacy of the chief executive, the security of the state and a strong sense of the uniqueness of Russian national identity. But these things are disparate when isolated; adopted together as part of the twin pillar project of a resurgent Russia, they form the basis for Russia's quest to restore itself as a great power from within and without.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the dual paths pursued by Putin since 2000 – of strengthening the state at home and reasserting Russia's role abroad – should not be regarded as discrete agendas or as coincidental parallel developments. The re-emergence of Russia from the humiliation and degradation of the 1990s owes as much to both theatres of the Kremlin's vision for the country. The strategy pursued internally fuels the strategy pursued internationally, and the strategy pursued internationally acts as legitimation for the strategy pursued internally.

This study has taken care not to suggest that illiberalism should be considered a general prerequisite for aggression in foreign policy, or that we should expect all authoritarian states to act irresponsibly towards other international actors. The normative discretion of the individual observer will command whether illiberal practices within the Russian polity are viewed as being directly responsible for the expansionist tendencies observable in some – not all – dimensions of Russian foreign relations. However, the Putinist manifesto is holistic; therefore, the empowerment of the state through legitimization, securitization and the consolidation of identity provides the Kremlin with more gravity and a wider array of options to pursue internationally. With all the above-mentioned imperatives, democracy is incompatible, not because the Russian public would necessarily guide a meeker foreign policy towards important strategic subjects like Ukraine, Georgia, Europe, China or the United States, but because etched into the Russian foreign policy decision-maker's psyche is the memory of the 1990s, when democracy, neoliberal economics and a relegation to the role of a defeated shell of an empire were all part of the same stark reality. Russia's internal health determines its destiny among the nations of the earth. In the decade since Putin's ascendancy, it should come as no surprise that this imperative still guides the Kremlin's hand.

---

<sup>64</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, "Why Empires Reemerge: Imperial Collapse and Imperial Revival in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics*, 31:2 (1999): 137.

<sup>65</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 246-255.