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Against European Hegemony Discourse. Vladimir Putin and Other Voices in the Post-2012 Russia

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ABSTRACT

The reborn anti-corruption related mass protests in Russia in early 2017 once again bring up questions about the political reaction to the previous oppositional awakening of 2011. The nature of the political regime in Russia throughout the 2012-2017 had important normative agenda, which deeply affected European-Russian relations on their intergovernmental level, but also on the identity policies and discourse in the Russian domestic affairs. In this article an overview of the discourses under Vladimir Putin's post-2012 presidential term is given. It is also suggested, that the current corruption-related upraising may have less to do with the mainstream government support rate, than it appears.

KEYWORDS: Russia; Putin; European-Russian relations, Corruption.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the wide range of Russian official discourse sources, Vladimir Putin's personal speech is significantly more important in the construction of the Russian normative agenda. Putin's major and overwhelming public addresses, which include normative allegations, comprise of his annual press conferences and addresses to the Federal Assembly, as well as the Valdai club speeches and large interviews, articles, press-conferences for foreign and domestic media.

Despite of the rather politicized and metaphor-rich language of Vladimir Putin, it is first of all limited by legal and international norms (for example prohibition of the threat of use of force) and necessity to, in the end, to speak over the inconsistency of some of the official positions voiced in line with the current mainstream rhetoric (such as market liberalization or modernization discourses at certain moments in case of the latter). In this sense Putin's position resembles the mainstream collective normative stance of the Russian state and the consensus among elites, however there are other positions voiced specifically by two distinctive groups of discursive narrative projectors:

1) "Liberals" of the Russian state elites, such as German Gref, Alexei Kudrin, Alexei Chubays, and even Dmitry Medvedev. This discourse of the so-called liberal officials, usually aims to support Russian global image of an investment worthy state with comfortable business opportunities despite the seeming dominance of the conservative discourse. This discourse is important, because according to some observers on Russia it was once even considered to be the only real representation of Russian elites' interests and normative standpoints. However, after the Moscow protests of 2011-2012, Putin's comeback to presidency and especially with the launch of the Ukrainian crisis it is largely assumed, that Putin administration is promoting a specific normative agenda, and it is not all about a "liberal" or "oligarchic" coup, which is only satisfying the domestic demand to sustain legitimacy.

2) Marginal or radically militarist discourse projectors, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Konstantin Zatulin or Dmitry Rogozin, and a number of other people performing at prime-time TV shows. Either voiced in coordination with the president administration or not, this discourse resembles the ideal or radical form, of the conservative dimension, which is believed to complete what is left unsaid by the highest officials or what could be qualified as intolerable.

In this sense both such a structure, which allows very flexible policy of normative projection, and the content of its elements, comprise some of the core features of the Russian normative agenda. It also suggests, that the content of the purposed positions over some issues, do not correspond, stand out of, contradict or violate the existing status-quo within Russian society over some principles of what can be said. Moreover, both liberal and conservative frameworks, their existence and legitimate position among elites is meant to showcase more vividly how president's position stands out in contrast.

II. PUTIN'S NORMATIVE SPEECH

In the aforementioned sense Vladimir Putin's normative standpoints are always intersubjectively related and possess specific meaning in relation to the overall Russian domestic discourse, where, it is believed, there is always a more radical or a more liberal position.

While the conservative stance of Vladimir Putin's position is often linked to his personal experience or career background, it is reductionist to put the conservative normative turn of Russia in direct and absolute dependence from the issue of leadership, which also implies a notion of a KGB plot thorough the career in the political teams of Anatoly Sobchak and Boris Eltzin, democratically oriented politicians. Below an epistemic approach is proposed, according to which the evolution of Putin's ideational grounds is traced in relation to the analysis of the discursive binary opposition of Russia-centric or Euro-centric vision of normative hegemony throughout the historical heredity of the Russian discourses. It is suggested, that due to the structure of the political discourse, post-Cold war trauma and the shocking economic liberalization of early 90s, the political leadership has become intersubjectively engaged in shaping of Russia's new normative agenda.

In this sense some of Putin's very rare ideational remarks at early stages refer solemnly to several authors, namely intellectuals engaged in a conversation over Russian national identity, and more specifically Russian cultural identity, which does not challenge European normative superiority, namely Ivan Ilyin (in 2005) and Dmitry Likhachov (in 2007). However, in later speeches (post 2012, 3rd term) authors in the domain of "Russian path" conservative discourse such as Lev Gumilev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn are dominant among Putin's references.¹ Moreover, in his 2016 public speeches,

¹ Эволюция Путина: от Сталина к Солженицыну https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/evoljutsija_putina_ot_stalina_k_solzhenitsynu-334149/

Putin directly compares Lenin's and Stalin's approaches as fundamentally opposing ones, giving the favour to Stalin's position on state management.²

While the Russian-centric geopolitical thinking over Russia's role in international affairs has been actively articulated since the famous Munich speech at a Security Conference in 2007, it only went on in anti-Western criticism of the "unipolar" order, which began in early 2000s with anti-US/NATO rhetoric, related to NATO expansion and war in Iraq. However even since then, and throughout Dmitry Medvedev's term Russia and its leaders neither officially articulated, nor pretended to spread exceptional non-European normative agenda, except for two major exceptions. Besides for the first one – the frequently articulated geopolitically justified construct of the "multilateral/multipolar world" – the second one was related to the criticism of democracy and democratic reform in their capacity of parts of the international political debate. The European/Western support for the mass protests and the so-called "color revolutions" in Russian neighbourhood, but also in other parts of the world, were criticized for their discursive hypocrisy, manipulation of the democratic rhetoric for the sake of some material or geopolitical interests. The concept of "sovereign democracy" was brought up in relation to the Russian own political regime in 2007, which was happening at the same time, while concentration of power, raise of the electoral threshold to 7 %, as well prosper of corruption and informal practices were actively discussed in the society.

In this sense the qualities of the regime and the norms and rules dominant in the Russian state, which are related to the political domain itself, do obviously hold normative significance and they are most probably duplicated in other post-Soviet states. However, due to the common transitional status of the post-Soviet regimes, the non-democratic norms and rules do not suggest a unique ideational challenge to the European normative agenda. By contrary, on the discursive level the rule of law and democratic values are often claimed as absolute.

Nevertheless, the major shift in articulation of unique Russian normative agenda came into reality already after pro-democratic protests of 2011-2012. The fact by itself of the launch of Putin's third presidential term is much more serious in terms of its normative significance in comparison with the preceding non-democratic practices, which were often discursively justified by the flaws of the newly born political regime. On the day of election results Putin himself seems to signify this occasion with his emotional speech, claiming

² Путин раскритиковал Ленина за его позицию в споре со Сталиным. www.rbc.ru/politics/25/01/2016/56a64b6d9a794762fc7e85a5

that: “[...] we did it, they didn’t manage to suppress Russia [...]”, implying that irrespective of the normative limitation of the third presidential term, it is legitimized by the people of Russia.³ The metaphoric image of “them suppressing” Russia, wishing to intervene in its domestic affairs just like in the states of colour revolutions, becomes one of the dominant narratives of the Russian political discourse since then. The political rhetoric concerning the “foreign agents” later was adopted as an amendment to law, demanding NGOs, which are “engaged in political activity” to register as foreign agents. It was claimed by the Russian authorities, that the legal prescription took the similar formulation from the US “Foreign Agents Registration Act”, where it is enforced on lobby groups. In Russia, by contrary, the basic civil society activity, which is related to numerous issues and in case funded from abroad, is included into the notion.

The metaphoric images of enemies inside the country, were also been voiced during the 2011 protests, when Putin was asking the opposition “not to rock the boat”.⁴ Later in 2014 he finally voiced the term the “fifth column” - an already very popular one among conservative elites and larger public.⁵ Moreover, in the Russian context, the notion of “foreign agents” brings up the recent memory of dissent labelling in the Soviet Union, when it was one of the most popular convictions, thus also bringing about the memory of necessary measures, which the state and the rightful citizens should uphold in existence of the “agents”.

III. SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE

In the course of the metaphoric discourse of struggle against the suggested Russia’s suppression incentives, there is a construct of sovereignty, which is articulated in the Russia discourse. The sovereignty is constructed in very early modernist terms referring to the Westphalia system stressing the need to “restore” and “defend” the sovereignty. This is also characteristic of the very sensitive position of Russia upon mass protests, revolts and revolutions

³ Путин плакал на Манежной площади. https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/putin_plakal_na_manezhnoy_ploshchadi-192361/

⁴ Путин попросил оппозицию “не раскачивать лодку”. www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2011/11/111123_putin_duma.shtml

⁵ Путин объяснил разницу между оппозицией и “пятой колонной”. www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5492b0f39a79476474d006d8

abroad, such the events in Libya openly criticized by Putin back in 2011.⁶ In fact it has become a normative stance of Russia on the global perspective, but it was always paid more attention to the framework of the sovereignty discourse, when it came to the post-Soviet states. The violation of the Ukrainian sovereignty and “illegitimate *coup d'état*” later became the main discursive interpretations of the Euromaidan and following events. In this context it is also usually suggested that EU states have lost their sovereignty for the sake of the European project and for the sake of the collective Western elites.

Among the Russian state elites, the construct of sovereignty is usually used in its another particular narrow understanding, with little regards to the broader conceptualizations. Ivan Krastev brings the following characterization of Russian debate on sovereignty: “For the Kremlin, sovereignty means capacity. It implies economic independence, military strength and cultural identity. [...] in Moscow’s view, the small states of Central Europe have no capacity to be sovereign. They are doomed to gravitate around sovereign poles of power. In this context, Moscow is ready to acknowledge that membership in the European Union represented a real opportunity for small countries like Bulgaria or Poland, but is not a real option for post-imperial Russia”.⁷ To make it more clear, in an earlier article the author reflects on the impact of this approach on the EU-Russia Relations: “What is threatening in Russia's concept of sovereign democracy is that, in reality, it regards the European Union as a temporary phenomenon, an interesting experiment with no future. Russia's European strategy is based on the expectation that sovereign nation-states will determine Europe's future”.⁸

While the western opinion is inclined towards the legitimization of it, in Russia a democratic revolution, especially in a state close to its borders, is perceived as a critically negative illegitimate phenomenon. Moreover, in case of the Ukrainian uprising of 2013-2014 and the overthrow of the government, another term – *coup d'état*, is usually used. *Coup d'état* (coup of the state) is a term widely spread in relation to Ukraine in public discourse and media among the critics of the Ukrainian uprising. It was first voiced in Davos by Mikola Azarov, still the prime-minister of Ukraine in January 2014, thus bringing up the issue, which was later well supported by Russian state-

⁶ События в Ливии поссорили тандем. https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/sobytiya_v_livii_rossorili_tandem_8178-8178/

⁷ Ivan Krastev, “Russia as the ‘Other Europe’”, *Russia in Global Affairs*. 17/November/2007. eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_9779.

⁸ Ivan Krastev, “Russia vs Europe: the sovereignty wars”, *openDemocracy*. 5 September 2007. www.opendemocracy.net/article/russia_vs_europe_the_sovereignty_wars.

funded media.⁹ Coup d'état became then the core interpretation of the seizure of Yanukovich's government in Russia, and it was also approved by Vladimir Putin.¹⁰

However, the question of regime change legitimacy in Ukraine would be regarded as an "ordinate" geopolitical debate, if was not supplemented by a broader interpretive agenda by state elites in Russia. Namely, Vladimir Putin has stated numerous times the utmost importance and priority of the "sovereign states". In Russia, even the Arab Spring is often compared to the "infamous" Color Revolutions in the states, which Russia traditionally considered as its "zone of privileged interests". Namely, the absolute importance of preserving countries' sovereignty is usually stressed, implying the Western interference as a cornerstone factor, which brings the unrests.¹¹ This conspirational approach indicates a certain degree of sensitivity towards any kind of civil movements and revolutionary processes in other states.

Sovereignty in this regard is usually brought up as an argument not just against any direct political influence into the domestic affairs of the states, but resembles a sort of an anti-Western stance. In one of his 2014 speeches Putin even declared, that the Internet is a "CIA project",¹² and also there were serious concerns on behalf of Russian officials about the future functioning of Google, Facebook, Twitter and other corporations in Russia. Thus, the foundations of the globalised world were purposely shaken as soon as according to the Russian state elites, they are both a tool for political interference, and also a danger for the "traditional values" of the Russian society. The latter is particularly a matter of debate, since the leakage occurred from the "Foundations of State Cultural Policy" project policy papers in the first days of April, 2014.¹³

⁹ "Coups for export: US has history of supporting anti-govt upheavals", Russia Today, March 22 2014, rt.com/news/us-sponsored-coups-ukraine-517/

¹⁰ "Russia reserves the right to intervene in Ukraine, says Putin", Euronews, March 4, 2014, www.euronews.com/2014/03/04/putin-use-of-force-in-ukraine-is-a-last-resort/

¹¹ Anatoliy El Myurid, "The Experiment is Over", *Vzglyad*, vz.ru/opinions/2013/4/24/630131/p3/, and also: Vicken Cheterian, "The Arab revolt and the colour revolutions". *Open Democracy*, www.opendemocracy.net/vicken-cheterian/arab-revolt-and-colour-revolutions

¹² "Putin calls internet a 'CIA project' renewing fears of web breakup", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/vladimir-putin-web-breakup-internet-cia

¹³ "The New Cultural Policy: Return to the Traditions and 'Clean Up' the Internet", *RBC*, top.rbc.ru/society/09/04/2014/916903.shtml

IV. DUKHOVNIIE SKREPY

In the discussed episode of post-Ukrainian discourse in Russia, it is important to differentiate the elements of discourse determined by the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbass – i.e. the semi-militarist anti-coup rhetoric - which is more probable to go through a modification for the sake of political expediency in the future, from the larger normative shift of the recent years, namely the introduction of “traditional values” and related constructs.

Putin’s comeback in 2012 was largely legitimized by the majority of population in Russia and state elites, while critically assessed by oppositional, specifically liberal middle-class elites, and it was first of all resembled in the wide spread of political irony and satire,¹⁴ rather than in massively supported political activity. Putin’s most significant response to growing liberal opposition was the new large-scale anti-corruption rhetoric, followed by the corruption scandal in defence ministry related “Oboronservice” and resignation of the defense minister Anatliy Serdyukov. In his address to Federal Assembly in 2012, the major part of the speech was devoted to corruption, while the change of the game rules was implied for the elites. Speaking about the “moral authority of the state” and need for “cleaning up and renewal of the state institutions”, Putin also cites Solzhenitsyin and uses the word “moral” for 19 times. It is the moment the term “*dukhovnie skrepi*”, which literally means “spiritual buckles”, has been introduced to the society and later became the word of the town for the whole traditional conservative turn in Russian public discourse. In the English version of Kremlin website, there is a specific translation given in the following way: “It is painful for me to say this, but I must say it. Today, Russian society suffers from apparent deficit of spiritual values [*dukhovnie skrepi*] such as charity, empathy, compassion, support and mutual assistance. A deficit of things that have always, throughout our entire history, made us stronger and more powerful; these are the things we have always been proud of”.¹⁵

However, Putin’s spiritual values are yet vague and uncertain. Across his rhetoric the very as usual accurate use of “*rossiyskiy*” – Russian national, instead of “*russkiy*” (ethnic Russian), “*pravoslavniy*” (orthodox) has always implied adherence to the (post-)imperial design of national identity, however when used, the latter constructs were signifying a special degree of sensitivity. Russian language and specifically the ethnic Russian culture are given significant position for the imposition of a positive normativity, which is obvious

¹⁴ Господин Хорший echo.msk.ru/programs/mr_good/

¹⁵ Address to the Federal Assembly 2012 en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118

for the political rhetoric, but in the context of Putin's conservative turn it however suggests the introduction of the Russian own, not European-Russian colonialist agenda.

In the same speech in 2012 he goes on with stressing that "For centuries, Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation, a civilization-state bonded by the [ethnic] Russian people, [ethnic] Russian language and [ethnic] Russian culture native for all of us, uniting us and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world. We treat and will continue to treat with great care and respect every ethnic group, every nation in the Russian Federation [Rossiyskaya Federatsiya]. Our diversity has always been and remains the source of our beauty and our strength". The sensitivity and special metaphoric allegation is always present, when speaking about "*russskiy*" issues, as in the same speech Putin says: "To the rest of the planet, regardless of our ethnicity, we have been and continue to be one people. I recall one of my meetings with veterans. There were representatives of several ethnicities: Tatars, Ukrainians, Georgians, and ethnic Russians of course. One of the veterans, who was not an ethnic Russian, said, "As far as the entire world is concerned, we are one people, we are Russians [*russskie!*]." That was true during the war, and it has always been true."

In this same way the overall ambiguity over the Russian public and official discourse over traditionalism looks like. While in the most of the cases traditionalist conservative discourse is supposed to be applied to ethnic, nativist, soil- and family-oriented, ethnic cultures related constructs and also psychological perceptions of the general public – in Russia however this is problematic. That is why more than in any other case, Putin's traditionalism is more a constitutive and recreating, that the one which applies to largely known historical role models. At the same time traditionalist discourse in Russia cannot withstand from applying to ethnic Russian features, but make it discursively even more uncertain in order to avoid the dangerous tropes. Putin himself is very concrete here – chauvinism and radical ethnic nationalism is prohibited, and especially for ethnic Russians.

V. FILLING THE GAP IN A CONSERVATIVE MIND

While the (post-)imperial all-Russian identity is stressed on the highest level, the officials of lower level, public figures and state media are the ones to still fulfill the ethnic Russian dimension of the public discourse, which is also crucially important for the state policies in terms of rationalization of some ethnic-related discourses, such as: *russskiy mir*, *russskaya vesna*, *sootchestvinniki*,

the Christian-orthodox discourse.

In the course of 2013 the similar rhetoric is mostly supplemented by the state media and pro-Putin intellectuals. Putin's own position is moderate while the public discourse is activated around activation of Stalinist discourse and proposition to rename the city of Volgograd back to Stalingrad again. In this context certain localized but marginal cases of Putin's cult appear, especially among groups related to semiformal groups of *militia* – the “Nightwolves” bikers club and different Cossack organizations. Together with the state's anti-gay rhetoric and legislative regulations as well creates a specific atmosphere in Russia of 2012-2014. The metaphoric discourse is rarely challenged among wider population, but as it intensifies it does not really have any specific correlation with Vladimir Putin's rating.

One of the major characteristics of this period, is the very intensive articulation of the Kazan Universiade and Sochi Olympics discourses, which is signified by numerous researchers as a narrative, which creates very specific structure of discourse and specifically power discourse in the state (Gronskaya and Makarychev 2014; Alekseyeva 2014). According to Makarychev,¹⁶ the politics of mega events “are playgrounds for ideological articulations of the Kremlin's hegemonic discourse. The Sochi Olympics are an essential part of Russia's triumphalist narrative of “rising from its knees,” retrieving its great power status, and returning to the “premier league” of world politics.” What is more, as Makarychev puts it, the mega-events of this scale are used for authoritative mobilization, which therefore leaves the room for exceptional measures and “temporary suspension of normal rules”. In this sense the author brings up the example of the official declaration of the temporary non-enforcement of the anti-gay propaganda law.

VI. CRIMEA AS NORMAL

In the course of the 2013-2014 there are therefore two major discursive strategies of normative revisionism in relation to the previous early 90s Eurocentric status-quo of the Russian normative agenda. The Ukrainian-related discourse is preceded with large-scale mobilization and traditions-oriented normative discourse, which is also closely related to specifically Vladimir Putin's individual political actions and motives.

In this sense the personality of Vladimir Putin becomes intersubjectively

¹⁶ The Politics of Sports Mega-Events in Russia: Kazan, Sochi, and Beyond. www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/politics-sports-mega-events-russia-kazan-sochi-and-beyond

associated with any normative solution in the state, as he is regarded the only valid normative actor on the state level. Moreover, the control over the discourse suggests that any opinion, which is expressed through the canonical federal media channels or by officials is thus in the scope of upside-down legitimized discourse framework.

This is crucial in understanding of the tremendous uplift of Putin's ratings after the annexation of Crimea. While Putin never openly articulated the need to recover the control over once lost Crimea, unlike some public figures and officials really did, he is the central figure in the pre-Ukrainian period of mass traditional conservative mobilizing discourse.

In this is sense it is necessary to assume, that the structure of the pre-Ukrainian discourse left little space to alternative reactions to Euromaidan. In other words, this is where the political elite became the hostage of its own normative policies and anti-European discourse, when it was also supplemented by the widespread constructs of specific geopolitical interests of Russia in relation to Ukraine and the West. It also presupposed the very strong antagonism of the Russian position during the mass protests in Ukraine, when Dmitry Medvedev applied to Victor Yanukovich urging him not to be weak and keep the power, "not to be a rag".¹⁷ While Putin's new normative and cultural project for Russia had already come into force for more than a year, the revolution in Ukraine signified or could at least be perceived as a rejection of this project, the prioritization of the alternative – European values. In this sense, the Russian reaction to Ukraine was since then predominantly domestic-oriented.

In this regard, Putin's address to Federal Assembly of March 2014 after the annexation of Crimea is a focal point.¹⁸ Crimea "should be part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian. Otherwise, dear friends (I am addressing both Ukraine and Russia), you and we – the Russians and the Ukrainians – could lose Crimea completely, and that could happen in the near historical perspective". The danger for the Crimea, and specifically its ethnic Russian and "Russian-speaking" population was suggested to come from radical ultra-right coup of Kyiv. In Russian intellectual discourse, the Russian language has always been given a specific importance as a symbol of pro-Russian identity in the Russian-Ukrainian identity conflict, while the ethnic, political, normative or other differences are disregarded. In the larger discursive framework launched by Putin, it is the language and nationalism,

¹⁷ Медведев призвал Януковича не быть «тряпкой», www.forbes.ru/news/251154-medvedev-prizval-yanukovicha-ne-byt-tryapkoj

¹⁸ https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/krym_mozhet_byt_tolko_rossijskim_rech_vladimira_putina_polnostju_chast_1-365256/

which signify the difference between Russian and specific Ukrainian identity, propagated by Euromaidan. In this sense the incentives of the Ukrainian people towards European model of development is rejected, it is declared to be impossible. In other words, Putin's discourse selectively chooses, thus constructs a specific image of the Ukrainian revolution – the fair anti-corruption demands of the people, manipulated by an ultra-right coup, leaving the normative issues of protesters' own priorities aside. In the framework of these constructions the analogue of the devastating and dangerous Ukrainian revolution is hardly possible in Russia's "stable sovereignty".

The second ironically articulated word in the town after the *dukhovnie skrepi*, the motto of "Crimeaisours", originating as a social media hash tag, became thus an important issue in Russian public discourse, while the declarative stance of "I am not a Crimeaisours" is not so much about a person, who supports the Ukrainian revolution or rejects the Crimean fate as part of Russia, but the one who is generally a supporter of a Eurocentric vision for Russia instead. While this is the middle-class liberal discourse, in this sense, however a vast part of those supporting the annexation of Crimea most probably would not put a contradiction between the European normal and annexation. In 2015 data, 52% of Levada center respondents chose that the Crimeaisours slogan symbolizes "triumph and pride for reunification of Crimea".¹⁹

VII. FIGHTING ISLAMIC RADICALISM

This securitization of the oppositional or civil society activities (financed or supported from abroad) and around the mega-events, as well as later of the pro-Ukrainian discourse within Russia - is therefore transferred to the radical Islamism issue. The latter securitized issue applies to a wider common-sense perception of security, and it is relevant even for the most liberal parts of the society. With the politicization of the Syrian war and ISIS, Islamism within Russia and in Caucasus is found in the center of the set of securitized issues, which first of all raises the overall level of discursive alert, which, in turn applies to the other issues, which are still there in the security discourse.

Thus, when Vladimir Putin is framing the security discourse during his

¹⁹ "КРЫМНАШ" - ЗВУЧИТ ГОРДО. www.levada.ru/2015/11/23/krymnash-zvuchit-gordo/

speeches for example at the FSB Collegium²⁰ meeting, the report on a bunch of foreign agents is exposed, followed by apprehensive commentaries on radical Islamism cells within the country, and then by the activities of NGOs and their pro-Ukrainian (in this context - pro-European) incline within Russia. However, in the framework of the security priorities discussions, such issues as the military conflict next to the Russian border and the probable consequences of a questionable control over illegal turnover of weaponry back to Russia is left off the state rhetoric.

The European and generally Western elites, supporting the Ukrainian revolution and also condemning the annexation of Crimea and Russia-backed separatism in Donbass – are therefore presented in a radically antagonistic light and in this context the Eurocentric part of Russian public also suffers the alienation from mainstream, legitimate Russian identity. Yet far from the Soviet levels of “enemies of the people” discourse, the political opposition is suppressed, dehumanized or just left off the major federal levels of media channels, depending specifically on its normative standpoint in the binary Russia as a core or Russia as part of Europe opposition.

The principal Russian-centric vision of the national identity is above all constructed, but also intersubjectively constructing the idea of Russian geopolitical interests. Irrespective of the observable Russian interests in Syria, such as its previous military far-posts at the Mediterranean or financial investment in Assad regime, the major securitized issue, which rationalizes the sending of troops to Syria is the danger of radical fundamentalist Islam. Islamism in this sense is both a part of the Western hegemonic plan to redraw the map of the Middle East, but it is also a factor of international relations, which, according to the official Russian position, already has or inevitably will be out of Western control. Moreover, the stronger Islamists are in the Middle East, the more threats it bears for the Caucasus region’s islamisation.

In this sense “stable”, “sovereign” and “legitimate”, and moreover anti-Western Assad regime, fits thoroughly into the Russian discursive paradigm as an ally force in the Middle East. The economic sanctions, Donbass issues, Crimea, and others are gradually replaced by the discourse of the “global significance of Russia”, and the sending of troops there (formally allowed by the Federal Assembly in September 2015, and largely broadcasted, however with no exact data and figures of operations) symbolizes the impossibility of solving some of the hardest global issues without Russian participation. In other

²⁰ 258 иностранных агентов, 400 радикальных сайтов и другие детали речи Путина на коллегии ФСБ. https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/258_inostrannyh_agentov_400_radikalnyh_sajtov_i_drugie_detali_rechi_putina_na_kollegii_fsb-366484/

words, despite the sanctions and ostracism from the West, a certain “bottom line” of suppressing Russian principal positions is drawn up. The significance of Russia is constructed as a feature of the structure of international relations, which cannot be sanctioned and cancelled, thus alienation of Russia is fruitless in the end.

VIII. RUSSIA AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

As long as the economic sanctions on Russia and the high devaluation of the Russian currency is largely justified with the need to stand strong on the principal positions over Ukraine, Vladimir Putin’s personal rating reaches one of the highest positions throughout his stay in power. The economic limitations and restrictions on import are presented in a positive light as a change for “importozameshenie” (replacement of the imported goods by the local production of analogues), a discourse which also tolerates the perspective of autarky, if necessary, and which is supposed to bring a boost in the framework of the even older “[innovative] modernization” discourse. Moreover, the autarkic discourse merges with the previous conservative rhetoric and references are made to the innate feature of the Russian people to endure even the hardest difficulties, as the ones, who suffered during the Great Patriotic War and the siege of Stalingrad, but for the ideals of the nation. This national identity construction supports a normativisation of suffering on a very basic and common level of consciousness, which is found in the Russian literary tradition also.

The notion of the temporary suffering for the coming benefit of being collectively “dealt with” on the global political arena is principal in the sense of normatively prioritizing the importance of personal and collective interests. In the end, the economic difficulties are regularly rejected to be considered serious, like Putin stressing their low impact back in June 2015,²¹ as well as Medvedev’s speech in January 2016.²²

While since the early conservative turn of 2012, “extraordinariness” of the domestic politics towards large scale revisionism of the Eurocentric normative agenda in Russia, had been tied to specific securitized issues – and from

²¹ Путин: «Нам предрекали глубокий кризис. Этого не произошло». https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/peterburgskogo_ekonomicheskij_forum_2015/putin_nam_predrekali_glubokij_krizis_etogo_ne_proi-389539/

²² “Нашу экономику обещали порвать в клочья, но этого не произошло”. https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/rech_medvedeva-401629/

mid-2015 and thereafter it is largely connected to the Russian foreign policy and external activities. Russia's alienation from the European interests (structure and content, both of which are normative), norms and rules are perceived as a self-sufficient goal. As long as the international community would not deal with Russia, even formally, but to the degree Russia deserves it as a global power, they are behaving irrationally. As Vladimir Putin rhetorically asks "[...] Do you even imagine what you are doing? [...]" in his UN General Assembly speech, drawing a comparison between current Russia's significance for global peace and multilateralism with the British, Soviet and US consensus during Yalta peace conference.²³

Vladimir Putin's and the official Russian discourse reject its revisionist stance. In other words, the European status quo is connected not the with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but with the preceding post WWII Yaltan agreements, and in this framework, Russia keeps close to "international norms and law" and acts legitimately, while it is the collective West, which is revisionist about world order. The sanctions and antagonism towards Russia are therefore hegemonic power projections to suppress Russia, while the Russian society supports its leadership in conducting a "fair world order", which is the only way to defend and preserve the Russian national identity.

It is therefore supported by the notion that the early Soviet and early 90s foreign policies of Russia were naïve and wrong, while the normative approximation and democratic peace in larger European area are illusive and only cover the real interests of certain hegemonic elites.²⁴

Another major discourse, launched by Putin and related to the extraordinary context of the Russian domestic politics is the fight against corruption, but in the later period it is separated from the discourse on *dukovnie skrepy* and in a situation of economic crisis is specifically related to the restrictions on the export of capital by Russian tycoons and oligarchs. However, by the selective activities against corruption, as in the case of the scandalous report on Yuri Chaika, Russian Prosecutor General or numerous human rights violations in Chechnya, and a moderate reaction to them, the rules of the informal political practices, individual loyalty and clientelism are still declared dominant.²⁵ Corruption is the specific area of Russian domestic affairs which currently appears in the center of political turbulence with a new report by

²³ Речь Путина в ООН. Полное видео https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/putin_oop-395270/

²⁴ "Нас обманывали». Речь Путина в Сочи". https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/nas_obmanuyvali_rech_putina_v_sochi-396776/

²⁵ "Угроза национальной безопасности". Полный текст доклада Ильи Яшина о Рамзани Кадырове <https://openrussia.org/post/view/12965/>

Alexei Navalny on Dmitry Medvedev's possessions. In this sense, the alternatives to repression of the uprisings, would not in the end go very much in defiance with the mainstream Russian normative agenda.

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