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Ukraine on the Edge of Russkii Mir

1. Introduction

In 2013, Ukraine was poised to sign an association agreement with the European Union in an attempt to move towards closer cooperation and integration with the West. A last minute reversal led to the “Euromaidan” movement taking the country by storm. These mass protests transformed into full-blown revolution in early 2014, ousting President Viktor Yanukovych. The new government has led Ukraine to establish closer ties with the West. In response, Russia has reestablished itself as an antagonistic, chauvinistic, irredentist force in relation to Ukraine and the West with the annexation of Crimea and with its alleged support of a brutal war raging in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. These actions threaten the peace and stability of Europe. As of July 31, 2015, after an unsteady ceasefire, there have been over 6,832 casualties and 17,087 wounded, with an estimated 1,414,798 internally displaced refugees and a further 925,500 fleeing the country.\(^1\)

The long-term effects of the events of the Ukrainian revolution have yet to be seen, but potential causes can begin to be analyzed. These causes include the struggle for Ukrainian national identity, weak state authority and capacity, socio-economic conditions, and geopolitical clashes. This paper will focus on one cause in particular: the Kremlin-supported doctrine of **Russkii mir** [Русский Мир]. The rise of **Russkii mir**, or “Russian World,” is the story of the rise of modern Russian nationalism and its effect on Russian domestic politics and, ultimately, foreign policy. **Russkii mir** was one of several concepts to emerge in the 1990’s post-Soviet search for a new

\(^1\) *United Nations.*
Russian national identity and a new national narrative, most famously promoted by Soviet
dissident-turned-nationalist Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The concept of Russkii mir was officially co-opted by Russian president Vladimir Putin
and the Kremlin in 2007 as a governmental initiative. It was to be used as a foreign “soft power”
tool, which, on paper, promoted Russian culture and supported ethnic Russians abroad. At the
same time, it was quietly stoking and taking advantage of the already growing popularity of
nationalism at home. On the surface, it is an official peaceful foreign policy initiative, but at its
core, it is fundamentally an ethnocentric, nationalistic, chauvinistic concept based on Russian
culture, values, religion and history that threatens the territorial integrity of surrounding states, as
demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. The most alarming and
significant element of the concept of Russkii mir is that it threatens the stability of the nation-state
system of the post-Cold War order and creates a sense of what I call territorial ambiguity. The
“Russian World” is not bound by the Russian Federation’s political borders. Instead, the blurred,
ambiguous border of Russkii mir expands outwards and meanders through the Baltic States,
Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Kazakhstan before meeting back up with the political
border of Russia.

There is traceable evidence showing Russkii mir’s growing effect on Russian domestic and
foreign policy from 2007 onwards. This growth escalated after the cumulative effects of the 2008
global financial crisis and the fallout from the 2011 Duma and 2012 presidential elections that
threatened the regime’s power and legitimacy. The Kremlin decided to fully merge the official
policy of Russkii mir with the hardline nationalist movement it is based on; it embraced Russian
nationalism as a source of legitimization for authoritarian measures to restore its lost power and
consolidate more power in an effort to combat any potential future loss of power. In a short amount
of time, Putin and the Kremlin restored authoritarianism in Russia to a level unseen since the Soviet years. However, the Ukrainian Revolution threatened Putin’s new national narrative, legitimacy, and power, causing him to take actions that developed the concept of Russkii mir beyond the bounds of domestic politics to become the driving force behind Russian foreign policy. This change can be seen in the Russian government’s words and actions with respect to the Ukrainian crisis.

2. History of Russian National Identity

To understand contemporary Russian nationalism, one must understand the various past forms of nationalism that mark Russia’s millennium-long history. This is especially significant because many key components of the concept of Russkii mir harken back to ideas and history from the dawn of Russian civilization. Historians place the establishment of the first “Russian” state with the formation of Kievan Rus’ in the ninth century. This state grew from its center at Kiev to span large swaths of Ukraine, Belarus, and European Russia and eventually adopted Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium in 988, which further developed the core of Eastern Slavic (Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian) culture. However, Piirainen argues that “Russia had never existed as a nation state, but it had always been the core of a larger empire”\(^2\) until after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Russian Federation in 1991. For hundreds of years, Kievan Rus’ and its successor states were virtually devoid of a concrete national identity due to its focus on empire-building over nation-building.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Piirainen, 161.

\(^3\) Billington.
Over the centuries, nation-building efforts from Tsar Ivan IV⁴ through Peter the Great⁵ failed to create a solid Russian identity. Only in the 19th century did Russia witness the beginnings of some kind of national identity formation. Under Nicolas I, the government developed an early prototype of a nation-building policy to establish legitimacy for the autocratic regime based on the three pillars of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.” The most important side of this triad was autocracy, which “guaranteed the strength of Russia” and the “integrity of the state;” the other two elements existed to serve and legitimize the autocracy.⁶ However, there was as yet no strong sense of Russian national identity, and ethnic Russians made up less than half of the population by the late 19th century.⁷ Subjects of the Russian Empire were only united in reality by service to the autocracy and by the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC]. At the same time, efforts led mostly by the Russian cultural intelligentsia contributed to a bottom-up attempt at nation-building.⁸ Poets, novelists, and philosophers created world-renowned works and sparked debate exploring what it meant to be Russian. This debate pitted Westernizers, who “argued for the introduction of representative institutions, for the abolition of serfdom, for the development of industry, and for capitalism.” against Slavophiles, who supported the idea of “Great Russian [ethnic Russian] cultural and political hegemony,” creating a burgeoning discourse on Russian national identity.⁹

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution demolished the existing political and socio-economic systems and replaced them with new ones. With this political transformation came new ideas of national identity. Marxist-Leninist ideology stressed internationalism over ethnic nationalism and

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⁴ Bacon.
⁵ Haas.
⁶ Ibid., 335.
⁷ March, “Nationalism for Export?”
⁸ Billington.
suppressed the Orthodox Church. The Bolsheviks created a “Soviet” identity that relied on political and class unity. The Soviet identity became the new legitimization for the new regime. However, support for internationalism declined over the years, and as a result, “the Party began to endow Russians with a national past, national language and an increasingly familiar national iconography.”\textsuperscript{10} Soviet identity slowly began to merge into Russian identity as the ROC was slightly revived, cultural and historical figures from pre-revolutionary Russia were celebrated, and the other constituent republics of the USSR were subject to Russification.\textsuperscript{11} Despite some government-supported Russian nationalism, Russian identity was never official policy in the Soviet Union and lived in a state of limbo between encouragement and repression.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created fifteen independent states, including the Russian Federation. For the first time in its history, Russia resembled something like a nation-state, with now an overwhelming 80 percent majority ethnic Russian population. At the same time, Russia also became a divided nation, as millions of Russians who lived in other Soviet republic states now found themselves citizens of different countries, millions of whom still find themselves in the same position today.\textsuperscript{12} The first years of the Russian Federation lacked anything resembling a coherent, universally accepted national identity after centuries of repression and underdevelopment. President Boris Yeltsin’s push to bring Russia into the capitalist democratic world resulted in severe economic and political instability. Furthermore, the new government attempted to create a western-style, civic-minded national identity based on citizenship, not ethnic background.\textsuperscript{13} However, because of the turmoil of the 1990’s these ideas never took hold, allowing

\textsuperscript{10} Slezkine, 443.
\textsuperscript{11} March, “Russian Nationalism under Putin.”
\textsuperscript{12} Trenin, \textit{Post-Imperium}.
\textsuperscript{13} Billington.
alternative solutions with varying identities for the future of the Russian Federation to rise and fill the void left in disenchanted Russians by Yeltsin’s policies.

3. The Rise of Putin and Pragmatic Nationalism

President Vladimir Putin, while considered a tyrant by many in the West, is a leader beloved by many Russians for bringing stability to his country after the turbulent 1990’s and working to restore Russia to its former international standing. In his first address as acting president, Putin promised stability to the Russian people after the chaos caused by the radical reforms of the Yeltsin years, which he delivered. There was an impressive strengthening of the Russian state, with most power being consolidated to the presidency, coupled with equally impressive economic growth, precipitated largely by the booming energy sector.

Increasing the power of the Russian state and the Russian presidency was the main focus of Putin’s first two terms. Steps taken to accomplish this include: reining in the oligarchs, centralizing the state, reasserting control over the regions and their ambitious leaders, greater control over political parties, and increased control over the media.\textsuperscript{14} Oligarchs in Russia had risen to great wealth and political influence during the Yeltsin years. Those oligarchs who did not submit to Putin’s will usually found themselves in exile or in prison. Second, Putin reined in the growing power that regional leaders had enjoyed under Yeltsin. Regional legislative autonomy was severely constrained, federal districts were established to provide the Kremlin with more oversight of regions, and after 2004, regional governors were no longer elected, being appointed by the president instead.\textsuperscript{15} Third, political parties were brought under control. Four parties currently dominate the State Duma, the federal lawmaking body of the Russian state. The party of power,

\textsuperscript{14} Bacon.
\textsuperscript{15} Trenin, \textit{Post-Imperium}.
United Russia, was created by Putin after his first election by combining two existing parties; a second, smaller party, A Just Russia, was also created by Putin to support United Russia. These two parties created with support from the Kremlin provide virtually guaranteed allegiance to the president’s policies. Opposition parties “present no serious threat to the regime” and serve the role of feigning democratic debate. They are subject to suppression through electoral regulations and receive minimal media coverage.

Support for (or indifference to) these policies during Putin’s first two terms can be attributed to increased state control of the media, economic growth, political stability, and Putin’s personal popularity. Freedom House, in its 2003 Press Freedom Survey, downgraded Russia to being not free. The buying of national media channels, suppression of independent media sources, and alleged killings of critical journalists all contributed to an unfree media environment that allowed the Putin government to promote its own agenda. Secondly, during Putin’s first two terms, Russia experienced nearly a decade of growth built mainly upon its energy sector, which was benefitting from rising oil and gas prices. “Between 1999 and 2008, virtually all of the key economic indicators showed positive trends . . . and real GDP in Russia grew by an average of 7.6 percent per year.” Real wages and disposable incomes rose and unemployment declined, which vastly improved the quality of life for the average Russian citizen. This was in stark contrast to the economic crises of the 1990’s during the shock transition to free market capitalism. Coupled with this economic stability, the growing power of Putin and United Russia provided political stability that was missing during the 1990’s, a period rife with constitutional crises and constant power

16 Bacon.
17 Ibid., 113.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 136.
struggles.\textsuperscript{20} Putin’s personal popularity is also a factor. From 2000 to 2008, he enjoyed approval ratings overwhelmingly above 70 percent, and he exited office in 2008 at a high of 86 percent approval.\textsuperscript{21} The previous factors of media control, economic prosperity, and political stability added to his popularity.

During this time, three main schools of Russian ideology came to the forefront of the Russian national discourse: Western liberalism, fundamentalist nationalism, and pragmatic nationalism.\textsuperscript{22} Each tries to define a past, present, and future for Russia by determining what it means culturally and politically to be Russian. These ideas have a profound effect on Russian domestic politics. Furthermore, they try to define Russia’s relationship with the outside world and are relevant to understanding Russian nationalism’s effect on foreign policy.

The liberal westernizers’ core tenet is the idea that “Russia is unquestionably a part of Europe in its history, culture, and mentality, and its natural affinity is with the other European countries.”\textsuperscript{23} They believe that Russia’s ultimate path leads towards western liberal democracy and see cooperation with the West to be of vital importance to the future security of Russia. Western liberalizers support a national identity similar to many Western countries that places more importance on citizenship than ethnicity. Like government policies of the 1990’s, they favor using the Russian term \textit{rossiiskii}, which denotes Russianness regardless of ethnicity, over the term \textit{russkii}, which denotes Russianness as essentially ethnic in composition. Western liberalizers have formed a minority voice in political discourse since Putin came to power.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Levada Center.
\textsuperscript{22} White.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 150.
Fundamentalist nationalists stand at the opposite end of the spectrum. They emphasize “Russia’s Asian characteristics as one of the reasons for its distinctive Eurasian identity.” Advocates of this Eurasian identity also support ideas such as “patriotism, anti-Westernism, imperialism, Orthodox clericalism, militarism, authoritarianism, cultural uniformity, [and] xenophobia.” In regards to foreign policy, some favor restoring Russia’s imperial borders, some favor hegemony over the former Soviet republics through organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], some favor integration using the Eurasian Economic Union [EEU], and some are in favor of creating an Eastern Slavic state consisting of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and parts of Kazakhstan. Regardless of specific ideology, all fundamentalist nationalists strive to restore Russia to its former glory. Another characteristic shared among them is anti-Westernism: antagonism towards the West and its values. Fundamentalist nationalists are often ethnocentric in their views, favoring the use of the term russkii [ethnic Russian] in official discourse as opposed to the more inclusive rossiiskii. Fundamentalists initially were a weaker voice, but have been increasingly growing in influence since Putin took power.

The pragmatic nationalists, led by Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party, have been the dominant voice in domestic and foreign politics. They form a middle ground between western liberalizers and fundamentalists in that they are “convinced that Russia is a European country” but also value Russia’s “special characteristics.” The pragmatists favor a return to great power status, reestablishing hegemony over the post-Soviet space, and strengthening organizations such as the

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24 Ibid., 154.
25 Ibid., 154.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 152.
CIS and the EEU, but also recognize the importance of cooperating with the West when it best serves Russia’s domestic and global interests. Above all, pragmatic nationalists value the independence of Russia in international affairs for the protection of “sovereign democracy,” which is essentially a “managed” democracy leaning towards authoritarianism that suppresses actual democratic values. 

Most importantly, pragmatists began to rely on moderately nationalist rhetoric after realizing the political advantages of pandering to the fundamentalist nationalist base. The nationalist rhetoric experienced a shift from the periphery to the mainstream of Russian politics. This mainly involved putting “significant effort into the construction of a national narrative that would make sense of the historical development of Russia, explain current policies, and develop a national idea suited to contemporary Russia” by restoring and repurposing tsarist and Soviet symbols and history under a new banner of Russian “patriotism” to create a sense of continuity and legitimization from the past through to today’s Russia. This official patriotism became “the closest thing to an ideology” in post-Soviet Russia. With the dominance of pragmatists and growing influence of fundamentalists, nationalism had “become a growing rhetorical staple for ambitious politicians in post-Soviet Russia,” and “Putin increasingly co-opted nationalistic causes to sustain his power.”

4. **Russkii Mir—Russian World**

29 Ibid.
30 March, “Nationalism for Export.”
31 Ibid.
33 Bacon.
34 Trenin, *Getting Russia Right*, 18.
35 Billington, 34.
The co-option of the Russian nationalist movement reached a milestone in June 2007 with Putin’s decree establishing the Russkii mir Foundation with the intent of “promoting the Russian language, as Russia’s national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad.” On the surface, the Foundation is a soft power endeavor, but underneath, this is the first step toward official state Russian nationalism. The Foundation is jointly run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. Its official mission is based upon three main components: the Russian language, Russian culture and heritage, and the Russian people. All of these try to define what makes someone “Russian.” Language is argued by the Foundation to be the core of Russianness, and it actively promotes Russian language acquisition and Russian language media abroad. The Foundation places emphasis on the uniqueness and greatness of Russian culture and promotes Russian cultural, scientific, and historical achievements around the world.

The component of the mission statement most relevant to the Ukrainian conflict is its effort to reconnect “the Russian community abroad with their homeland” and its description of the Russian people living in the “Russian World,” which “is much more than the territory of the Russian Federation and the 143 million people living within its borders.” The Russian people include the large population of ethnic Russians and native Russian speakers that are part of the diaspora, most of whom live in the former Soviet republics. The Russian world extends to include the territory inhabited by these Russians abroad, which chiefly includes southeastern Ukraine,

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36 Russkii Mir Foundation.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Belarus, and northern Kazakhstan, where “Russians,” as defined by the Russkii Mir Foundation, make up either a large plurality or even a majority of the population.  

The idea of Russkii mir is not a new concept. It is based upon centuries of a slowly developing Russian national narrative that gained momentum in the 1990’s as Russia searched for a national identity. Proponents of the Russkii mir ideology combined several strains of Russian nationalism, including linguistic, cultural, and statist/imperial brands of nationalism. Linguistic nationalism sets the parameter of Russianness “to include the thirty million Russian speakers in the former USSR, regardless of place of domicile”; cultural nationalism defines Russianness to be the “community of eastern Slavs with common culture and origins in Kievan Rus’ . . . and usually emphasize Russian Orthodoxy as the bearer of Russian values”; and statist/imperial nationalism “define[s] the Russian nation as a supranational people with a mission to consolidate the former peoples of the USSR or Eurasia within a single multinational state.” These ideas place “Moscow at the center of an Orthodox civilization of kindred neighbors: Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine” and gives the Russian world a territorial ambiguity that has alarming implications for Russian foreign policy. 

The idea of Russkii mir draws upon history to legitimize its claims. According to Russkii mir mythology, Russia is the heir to the civilizational space left by the 10th century medieval state of Kievan Rus’. This is considered by many historians to be the first Eastern Slavic state, because, at the time, distinct Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian identities had yet been formed; instead, the various tribes inhabiting the area, which includes much of modern-day Ukraine and Belarus as

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39 Coalson.
41 Jensen.
well as the heartland of European Russia, shared a general East Slavic culture.\textsuperscript{42} Russkii mir claims Kievan Rus’ as the first “Russian” state, implying the cultural and political inheritance of its legacy. It makes the claim that Eastern Slavic groups, languages, and cultures are not unique or independent, but merely subsets of Russian ethnicity, language, and culture. Russkii mir devalues and denies the ethnic autonomy of Belarusians and Ukrainians who have, in the years since the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, developed unique identities. It follows in the thinking of Imperial Russia that classified Belarusians and Ukrainians as White Russians and Little Russians respectively, subordinate to Great (ethnic) Russians.\textsuperscript{43} The concept proposes that the three groups of Eastern Slavs must be reunited under a Russian state. Russkii mir is also based around the Russian Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{44} Russkii mir claims that Kievan Rus’, and therefore also Russia, are the spiritual heirs to Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. It revives the ideas of “Third Rome” and “Holy Rus’,” implying that the Eastern Slavs should be united by one faith under the Patriarch in Moscow. Furthermore, it calls for a resurgence of the ROC by increasing its influence in the social and political spheres.

One of the earliest advocates of the idea of Russkii mir was the Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His ideas were first published in "Rebuilding Russia" in 1990 in the dying days of the Soviet Union. In it “he criticizes the Soviet government's haphazard border policies that he says carved up traditional Rus’. He advocates a ‘Russian Union’ encompassing Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and the ethnic Russian parts of Kazakhstan.”\textsuperscript{45} This is because he is “confident of the fundamental unity of the Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian peoples”, who “all together emerged

\begin{itemize}
\item[Molchanov.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Aron.]
\item[Coalson.]
\end{itemize}
from the treasured Kyiv”, and refers to Belarusians and Ukrainians as “White Russians and Little Russians.”\textsuperscript{46} Though he “acknowledges the suffering of Ukrainians under the Soviets,” he also claims “that is no reason to ‘hack off Ukraine’ and, especially ‘those parts that weren't part of old Ukraine . . . Novorossiya or Crimea or Donbas,’” believing that “if Ukraine is to be independent, then those regions should be allowed self-determination.”\textsuperscript{47} Since then, Solzhenitsyn became a standard bearer of Russkii mir. Putin also developed a close association with Solzhenitsyn in his later years. After Putin’s first presidential meeting with Solzhenitsyn in 2000, it was reported that they “expressed agreement on almost all issues,” and after these talks, Putin began in earnest his effort “to appropriate ownership and legitimacy over the formulation of the Russian national identity.”\textsuperscript{48} As demonstrated by Solzhenitsyn, the goal of Russkii mir combines linguistic, cultural, and statist/imperialist nationalism to create an Eastern Slavic state under the banner of Russia that reunites the Russian world.

5. Russkii Mir and Foreign Policy 2007–2011

After the adoption of Russkii mir in 2007 by the Kremlin, the official policies of soft power begin to have their first effects on foreign policy. The territorial ambiguity of the Russian World allowed the Russian government to pursue a foreign policy that utilized the idea of protecting the rights of “Russians” abroad.\textsuperscript{49} Official policy stated that the most important indicators of membership in the Russian World were language and how an individual identifies; it was not just limited to ethnic Russians.\textsuperscript{50} Growing rhetoric on protecting Russian “compatriots” abroad soon

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Laruelle, 142.
\textsuperscript{49} Kudors.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
led to a hard power defense of *Russkii mir*. According to Zavelev, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War can be seen as “the first attempt to protect its citizens and compatriots abroad through military force” by claiming to defend members of the Russian World in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The conflict “marked a deviation” from the Kremlin’s previous pragmatism by “showing an unprecedented spill-over from the domestic to the foreign policy realms.” Moscow’s anti-Western rhetoric against Georgia’s move to the West, coupled with its nationalist rhetoric supporting the rights of ethnic Russians in the breakaway regions and the rights of Abkhazians and Ossetians to self-determination, gave the Russian government the legitimacy it needed to intervene militarily.

However, the 2008 Georgian conflict was only a brief foray of *Russkii mir* from the domestic to the foreign policy sphere, as the Medvedev administration began the infamous U.S.-Russia “reset.” After the Georgian conflict, in an October 2008 interview with Russian newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov “announced that Moscow’s relations with Russian compatriots residing abroad would be developed based on the principles of soft power;” Russia did return to a soft power policy, relying on state-controlled media to promote its messages and ideals at home and in the near abroad. The Georgian conflict prompted Western fears of a new Cold War, similar to the Western rhetoric seen today. At the time, March stressed that “Western concerns over an imminent ‘New Cold War’ prompted by value competition between an authoritarian, nationalist Russian ‘sovereign democracy’ and Western liberal democracy are dramatic oversimplifications” and emphasized the fact that there was a retreat of

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51 Zavelev. “Первая попытка защиты своих граждан и соотечественников за рубежом с помощью военной силы.”
53 Kudors.
aggressive rhetoric due to the “reset” and that “most ‘nationalist’ rhetoric appears to be primarily for domestic use”. March argued that despite Western fears, a rise in nationalism would mostly harm the Russian government and its pragmatic approach.\(^5^4\) However, he does acknowledge the potential for a dramatic change to Russian nationalism and its potential effect on foreign policy. March argues that “nevertheless, the Russian elite lacks a consistent alternative legitimating ideology apart from nationalism, which increases temptations to ‘ride the nationalist tiger’” and that Russia could become more “unpredictable” if foreign policy begins to be based on “ideological nationalism.”\(^5^5\)

While the Kremlin was retreating after the “reset,” the ROC ramped up its own nationalist rhetoric based on the ideas of \textit{Russkii mir}. In a 2009 trip to Ukraine, the recently promoted leader of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill, greatly raised the influence of the church in domestic and foreign affairs. Kirill claimed that “Russians and Ukrainians were one and the same people and called on them not to sacrifice their values in the pursuit of closer ties with Europe.”\(^5^6\) He defended his itinerary and message by saying that "there is no imperialism here, no domination over others. There is only a clear Orthodox doctrine: the patriarch is everyone's father, regardless of the color of passports in people's pockets or the state in which they live."\(^5^7\) Kirill's continued actions over the years suggest a strong adherence to the ideas of \textit{Russkii mir}, and he has proved to be a valuable soft power tool for the Kremlin.

\textbf{6. Authoritarian and Nationalistic Resurgence 2012–2013}

\(^{5^4}\) March, “Nationalism for Export,” 403.

\(^{5^5}\) Ibid.

\(^{5^6}\) Bigg.

\(^{5^7}\) Ibid.
The 2011 Duma and 2012 presidential elections fundamentally changed the course of the development of nationalism in Russia. After one term of a Medvedev presidency, Putin was poised to retake his place in the Kremlin. However, these elections were revealed to be fraudulent and led to “massive middle-class protests . . . in 80 of the largest Russian cities during the winter of 2011–12 and the following spring,” which “were intensely anti-Putin.”\(^{58}\) Attitudes towards the governing elites and Putin were souring. Besides the questionable elections, the Russian people were still feeling the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, when the Russian economy shrank nearly 8 percent over the course of a year.\(^{59}\) Economic stagnation and threats to the quality of life that Russians had grown accustomed to over the first two Putin terms added to the overall dissatisfaction, leading to these massive protests. Most alarming to the Kremlin, Putin’s personal approval ratings began to sink and reached an all-time low of 61% in November 2013.\(^{60}\) Though an approval rating of 61% in a Western democracy is considered a success, to Putin it was a sign of an imminent threat to his power. The Kremlin’s grasp on the population was slipping and needed to find a way to reconsolidate and re-legitimize its power.

To better understand the drastic changes in Russian domestic and foreign politics since Putin began his third term, one must have a basic understanding of the literature on ethnic politics, nationalism, and political power legitimization. Ethnicity is a term seen in international relations and comparative politics discourse mainly in relation to “ethnic conflict”. According to former Special UN Development Program advisor Mahbun ul Haq, “[t]he conflicts of the future are more likely to be between people rather than states over issues related to culture, ethnicity or religion.”\(^{61}\)

\(^{58}\) Aron, 20.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
\(^{60}\) Ibid.
\(^{61}\) Eller, 1.
Scholars agree that there is no one definition of ethnicity, as it is innately a fluid social construct that has many constantly changing factors which define it, but can be defined as “a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language, or institutions.”

Furthermore, scholars have also argued that “ethnic conflict” is actually often a manufactured conflict that is really political and socio-economical in nature rather than being inherently based on ethnicity. The second important concept to understanding the rise of nationalism in Russia is that of legitimacy. A leader, institution, or government has legitimacy when it is accepted as correct and proper by a group of people. “Legitimacy thus creates power that relies not on coercion but on consent . . . Legitimacy, however [as in the case of Russia], does not depend on freedom or equality; a society may be largely unfree or unequal and still view its state as legitimate.”

The ideas of ethnicity and legitimacy meet together in the concept of nationalism, which is “both an ideology and a political movement which hold the nation and the sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values, and which manages to mobilize the political will of a people or a large section of a population.” It utilizes ethnic identity to create a national identity and narrative to legitimize the government of the state. The key to legitimizing a government through nationalism is to use “invented traditions,” which have the ability of “establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority,” to create a sense of national identity. Scholars also point out the importance of historical mythmaking to provide a basis for a national narrative and

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62 Ibid., 13.
63 Jesse and Williams.
64 O’Neil, 40.
65 Eller, 20.
66 Bonnell, 2.
legitimacy. Kertzer argues that “[t]he struggle for power is the struggle to tame the past, to seize it, to make it both intelligible and useful by objectifying it, by simplifying it. The invention of a future thus presupposes the invention of a past.”

It is in this context and looking back towards a history of legitimizing authoritarianism through ideology or national narrative that Putin fully co-opts the fundamentalist nationalist movement to reconsolidate and legitimate his power. Since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, the government has taken extensive authoritarian measures to nip opposition in the bud. Opposition parties have been suppressed through electoral reforms, opposition leaders have been jailed, laws against “foreign NGOs” clamped down on civil society, harsh penalties were put in place for unauthorized protest, laws were passed to make it harder for independent media services to operate, and the internet became closely monitored and censored. At the same time, the Kremlin fully co-opted fundamentalist nationalism to legitimize its increasingly authoritarian regime. The Kremlin’s new version of nationalism mainly drew from the ideas of Russkii mir. Aron identifies four main components that define the official concept of Russkii mir in the wake of the 2012 election: ethnicity, religion, rejecting ‘western values’, and Russia as the ‘victim.’

Rhetoric from government officials became imbued with Russian ethnocentrism, for example, by favoring russkii over rossiiskii; the importance of the ROC was increased and traditional values influenced Russian law, such as the passage of anti-LGBT legislation; and lastly, the revamped official narrative of Russkii mir draws upon ideas of Eurasianism and “sovereign democracy” by endorsing the rejection of “Western values” and promoting the idea that Russia is a victim of Western corruption and aggression.

67 Kertzer, 85.
68 Aron.
69 Ibid.
7. *Russkii Mir* and Ukraine: Foreign Policy 2013-Present

The big question is: why has what was originally a Ukrainian domestic crisis led to Russian intervention and annexation? Scholars have pointed out the undeniably intertwined and complicated histories, politics, and cultures of Ukraine and Russia. The history of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine is one of competing identity crises—“Russians struggle to accommodate Ukrainian ‘otherness’” and “Ukrainians find it difficult to rediscover Russian ‘sameness.’”\(^{70}\) Though deeply related and interconnected peoples, “Russia’s attempts to dictate to Ukraine what the Ukrainian policy should be like may not be excused by any amount of cultural similarities” and “reciprocally, the Ukrainian quest to become a part of Europe as opposed to the Eurasian Russia, overrates the cultural distance between the two and creates false imagery, which can only impede Ukraine’s progress in the desired direction.”\(^{71}\)

In the mythology of *Russkii mir*, Ukraine plays an extremely important role. Kiev is held as the birthplace of Russian civilization. Ukraine also straddles the Russian world with its ambiguous borders generally dividing the country into two: western and central Ukraine compose the Ukrainian heartland, and southern and eastern Ukraine constitute the important historical region known as Novorossiia in the *Russkii mir* narrative. Novorossiia formed part of the Russian Empire for centuries and became home to generations of ethnic Russians. After the arbitrary delineation of the USSR’s intrastate borders and the passing of Crimea to Ukraine during the Soviet period, the USSR’s dissolution left many Russians in southeastern Ukraine.

\(^{70}\) Molchanov, 7–8.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 8.
The turn of Ukraine towards the West, therefore, presented a fundamental threat to the narrative of Russkii mir. If the birthplace of Russian culture became part of the West, it would be impossible to reconcile it with other facets of Russkii mir ideology, such as the uniqueness and greatness of Russian culture and its political independence from the West. Furthermore, a potentially democratic European Ukraine is a direct threat to Putin’s model of authoritarian, “sovereign” democracy. If Ukraine eventually proves the European model to be successful, what is to stop the Russian people from also trying to pursue this path? With the threat of fundamentalist backlash over the loss of a key part of the Russian world and the threat of democratization and a potential Russian “color revolution,” Putin and the Kremlin decided to act to ensure the turn to Europe was unsuccessful, while satisfying the needs of fundamentalists who supported the concept of Russkii mir.72

After announcing its intentions to sign an association agreement with the EU in late 2013, Ukraine and its president Viktor Yanukovych were on the receiving end of intense political and economic pressures from the Kremlin.73 At the same time, the Kremlin stoked intense Russian nationalist sentiment in eastern Ukraine and Crimea as an added pressure on the government in Kiev. Yanukovych’s eventual backtrack and return to Russia’s sphere of control triggered the Euromaidan protests and 2014 Ukrainian revolution with the ousting of Yanukovych.

The revolution crossed a line for Putin and the Kremlin—the new revolutionary Ukraine was on the path to Europe and steps needed to be taken to force that path to be difficult and almost unattainable in order to prevent a successful Western, democratic Ukraine, while placating fundamentalist nationalist sentiment at home. There was no other option besides coming to the

72 Jensen.
73 Aron.
defense of Novorossiia. The annexation of Crimea by Russia was heralded as a reunification of Russian land and a great victory for the Russian people. In various speeches following the annexation, Putin’s nationalist rhetoric described Crimea as ethnic Russian land, Sevastopol as an ethnic Russian city, and almost always referred to Russians with the ethnic term, and referred to the idea of *Russkii mir* and protecting Russians who lived in the Russian World. The proxy war in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine provided the political instability Putin required to keep Ukraine from becoming a successful state. Both the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas satisfied the fundamentalist nationalist movement. This upwelling of popular fundamentalist nationalism provides “the regime not only with vitally needed legitimacy but also with a powerful way to mobilize public opinion. Aggressive foreign policy is therefore a domestic political imperative.” The Ukrainian crisis has caused Putin’s popularity to bounce back to record levels, hitting an all-time high of 88 percent approval in September 2014 and averaging in the mid to high 80s since the annexation of Crimea.

8. Conclusion

After analyzing the history of the growth of Russian nationalism, it is clear that it is now an important and vital factor not only in domestic politics, but also foreign policy. The events that have transpired in Ukraine over the past several years are evidence of this development. This new Russian nationalism is based on the idea of *Russkii mir*, which creates a territorially ambiguous “Russian world,” over which the Kremlin can claim control and legitimacy. The regional and global implications are great. The Baltic States, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan all have significant populations of ethnic Russians and all have expressed concern over *Russkii mir*.

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 23.
76 Levada Center.
threatening their territorial integrity. Globally, a resurgent, aggressive Russia has returned to the international scene, causing war and political instability on the doorstep of Europe. Russian actions to legitimate authoritarian power on ethno-nationalist politics also set dangerous precedents for other authoritarian regimes throughout the world. The crisis in Ukraine has also called into question the possibility of a new “Cold War” and has brought U.S.-Russian relations to a low-point, unseen since the original Cold War. However, the future is very unpredictable, especially when concerning Russia. There are signs of a potential retreat of nationalist rhetoric and of a potential peace deal in Ukraine brokered by the U.S. and Russia. There is also the possibility of the hybrid war in Ukraine to turn into a fully-fledged interstate war between Russia and Ukraine. The conflict may also continue perpetually, joining the ranks of the many frozen conflicts that inhabit the post-Soviet space. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that Russkii mir and Russian nationalism are here to stay: in Russian domestic politics and, as a result, in its foreign policy. What the West can take away from the Ukrainian crisis is that it is “impossible to dissociate foreign policy from domestic developments.”77 In order to understand current and future Russian foreign policy, one must recognize the need to understand Russian domestic politics and the important role therein of Russian nationalism.

Works Cited


77 Mendras, 30.


Kudors, Andis. “Russian World”—Russia’s Soft Power Approach to Compatriots Policy.”


