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## Putin's Pivot: Understanding the Evolution of Russia's Anti-Western Stance

*Nicole Fernandez*

Nicole Fernandez is a first-generation student who majors in political science and minors in criminal justice. She aspires to become an attorney who practices immigration law. During her senior thesis class, the topic of Russian-American relations immediately captured her interest, as she watched a documentary detailing Putin's evolving interactions with the last five American presidents the summer before. Witnessing the dynamic shifts in these relationships over time piqued her curiosity about Russia's increasingly anti-Western stance. This interest was further fueled by ongoing geopolitical conflicts. Although her research interests lie in Latin American relations with the US, delving into an uncharted area of politics for her thesis presented a deeper understanding of global power dynamics and their ramifications on international affairs.

Within the realm of international relations, the evolution of a nation's stance on foreign policy is often a focal point of rigorous analysis and discourse. Russia, a prominent global power with a rich diplomatic history, has undergone a discernible shift in its approach to the Western world. From an initial aspiration to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and seek integration with the West under Putin's leadership, Russia has increasingly emerged as a formidable adversary to the USA, engaging in proxy conflicts instead. This prompts a critical examination of Vladimir Putin's objectives.

Most scholars specializing in modern Russia concur on one point: the Putin we observe today differs significantly from the Putin of the early 2000s (Liu 2022). This raises a pivotal question: Why has Vladimir Putin adopted an anti-Western stance? Currently, there exists a prevalent belief in a deeply rooted Soviet hostility toward the West. Contrary to this assumption, a massive portion of the post-Soviet period saw the Russian elite, including Putin, express a desire for an alliance and even a partnership with the West, idealizing an economic and social integration with the West. Putin's statements before 2006,

evident in interviews before and after assuming the presidency in 2000, portrayed Russians as "part of the Western European culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or the South, we are Europeans" (Putin 2000). Notably, Putin and his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, expressed interest in joining NATO multiple times. This drastic change prompts us to question whether it stems from Putin's gradual descent into erratic behavior over time or if the transformation is more nuanced? Is his leadership a reflection of Russian history and traditions? The heightened tensions between Russia and the USA in recent years may overshadow the fact that relations between Russia and the West were not always strained. The period preceding this shift witnessed a notable level of cooperation, encompassing arms control, trade, and counterterrorism efforts. However, Putin's return to power revealed an increasing sense of distrust towards western intentions. This discontent was exacerbated by a growing perception of Western encroachment into Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Concurrently, Russia has been positioning itself as a global ideological center, emphasizing traditional and conservative

values as the foundation of its authority and society. This self-perception sharply contrasts with the perceived moral void in the West, characterized by materialism and a detachment from absolute values. This multifaceted evolution sheds light on the complexities that underpin Russia's current anti-Western stance.

This research paper will explore the evolution of Vladimir Putin's stance towards the West, emphasizing pivotal relationships, reactions to global events, and a palpable shift towards an anti-Western sentiment. Central to this investigation is an in-depth analysis of the literature surrounding Putin's evolving stance, a brief history of Russia, the events leading up to Putin's Munich speech in 2007, where he articulated a distinct perspective on the West, and Putin's actions and responses during his third term. By scrutinizing this critical juncture, the paper aims to unravel the specific factors and circumstances that contributed to the consolidation of Putin's anti-Western stance.

### Literature Review

The Western media and academic circles often draw parallels between Vladimir Putin and various facets of Russia's historical figures to display examples of aggression towards the West. However, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* argues that Putin's leadership encapsulates qualities that harmonize with the foundational principles of Russia's history, skillfully bridging the gap between the past and the present. The journal article labels Putin as a "History Man," who "has actively deployed his own and his team's interpretations of Russian history to reinforce policy positions and frame key events." (Hill and Gaddy 2013). This viewpoint is substantiated by President

Putin's scholarly foundation and his persistent incorporation of historical allusions throughout his tenure. It further delves into the enduring connection between the Soviet Union's legacy and contemporary Russia, as exemplified in Putin's leadership through individuals such as Vladimir Yakunin. As a former Soviet official, Yakunin played a pivotal role in overseeing organizations devoted to the revitalization of Russia's Orthodox heritage. His supervision extended to the restoration efforts of historic monasteries and churches (Hill and Gaddy 2013). Scholarly and journalistic publications frequently draw attention to Putin's alleged sympathies with or attempts to bring back aspects of the Soviet system in the contemporary age. These connections resulted from the president's unwillingness to oppose Soviet policies and his failure to denounce the Soviet Union's acts, especially while led by Stalin. *An Eternal Revolution of the Russian Mind* furthers this perspective. The journal article explains that Putin's authoritarian traits, reminiscent of Stalin's, involving stern measures against both oligarchs and the press, have gained approval from the Russian populace, a majority of whom were raised in the Soviet Union, including Putin himself. The author underscores Putin's revival of a Stalinist era phrase, "Lock 'em up, then we'll have order" as well as Putin's tight hold on power (Khrushcheva 2008).

Further literature on Putin's admiration of history and conceptualization of Western aggression identifies the "continuity" of Russian history that Putin invokes to transcend the events of the 20th century and bring back the essence of imperialism in Russia. "Narodnost," or nationality, better defined as the "spirit or essence of being Russian" was one of the components of czar Nicholas I's official nationality (Hill and Gaddy 2013). This slogan responded to

the many questions circling the intellectual community's search for Russian purpose and identity. The influence of Slavism and Orthodoxy on Russia's foreign policy choices and its relationships with the West has been extensively explored (Hill and Gaddy 2013). The significance of religion, particularly Orthodoxy, in shaping Russian identity is evident in historical examples, such as the impact of Tsar Nicholas I's motto "Nationality, Autocracy, Orthodoxy" during the 1917 Russian Revolution (Kozelsky 2014). This cultural distinctiveness from Western nations significantly shapes Russia's foreign policy, as reflected in its commitment to protecting Slavic rights and preserving the Russian language and culture among Slavic populations abroad (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2023). Scholars, including James Richter and Ed Mansfield, emphasize that this concept has driven Russia to assert its independence and autonomy on the international stage. *Russian Foreign Policy and the Politics of National Identity* highlights a critical factor in the evolution of Russia's foreign policy—the profound identity crisis and concurrent surge of nationalism within the post-Soviet Russian state (Richter 1996). President Vladimir Putin's leadership has strategically aligned Russia's identity with a narrative that positions the West as neglectful of Russian power and influence (Richter 1996). The concept of "democratization" has also played a role, prompting a few elites to advocate for foreign policy strategies that deviate from the established norms of the "liberal democratic peace" framework (Mansfield and Snyder 1995).

Scholarly discourse highlights a growing trend in Russia's diplomatic approach, emphasizing a strategic focus on consolidating dominance in central Eurasia

rather than pursuing integration within Western spheres of influence, particularly in economic, political, and security realms. Three potential paths for the future of the Russian state are presented by the post-Soviet Russian identity and its impact on European-Russian relations: a liberal democratic model that is in line with the West, a neo-imperialist model that seeks to establish a new empire through military dominance, and the idea of Eurasianism. In particular, Eurasianism "rejects both Sovietism and liberal Westernization as suitable for Russia, stressing instead that the country is an "independent and self-contained civilization" (Likhacheva, Makarov, Makarova. 2015). According to Likhacheva's analysis of the Putin administration's policy since 2000, Eurasianism, seems to be the most appealing and workable option for Russia's future. It strikes a balance between more modest expansionism and the appearance of some of the structures of Western multinational unions, such as the European Union (Likhacheva, Makarov, Makarova. 2015). Mette Skak's research provides valuable insights into the contextual underpinnings of Russia's unilateralism and its increasingly anti-Western stance. Skak's cautionary remarks shed light on the unpredictable nature of foreign policy decisions in post-communist Eastern Europe, resonating with Russia's trajectory (Skak 1996). Expanding on this, *The Irony of Western Ideas in a Multicultural World: Russians' Intellectual Engagement with the "End of History" and "Clash of Civilizations"* by Andrei P Tsygankov, explains how the discourse on Russian foreign policy was characterized by the presence of four ideological groups: liberals, social democrats, statist, and national communists. Each group held distinct perspectives on the role Russia should play in international affairs. Liberals and social

democrats typically advocated for Russian cooperation with Western liberal nations while statist and national communists perceived Russia as distinct and separate from Western ideologies. The statist vision favored practicality and potential cooperation with Western nations, provided it didn't compromise Russia's civilization. Conversely, national communists considered Western countries inherently perilous to Russian interests, portraying Russia as an anti-Western Eurasian imperial power (Tsygankov 2003). Notably, Skak highlights the absence of stabilizing mechanisms, including experienced diplomats and well-established diplomatic norms, attributing this to what she describes as a "praetorian" foreign policy approach. This model "Looks for problems, not the other way round. The point is the ruthless manipulation of agendas by powerful élites, resulting in arbitrary foreign policy decisions" (Skak 1996).

From a realist perspective, the aggression towards the West by Putin is argued to be their fault. In 2014, when Putin seized and incorporated Crimea, John Mearsheimer, in his work titled *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault*, contended that the primary cause of the conflict lay in NATO expansion. Later, in early 2022, as Putin extended his invasion to the rest of Ukraine, Mearsheimer asserted, "The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis." (Chotiner 2022). According to Mearsheimer, the fundamental reason behind Russia's decision to annex Crimea and instigate turmoil in the Donbas region was the eastward expansion of NATO. Additionally, the European Union's (EU) growth, coupled with its promotion of democracy, played a secondary role, posing a threat to Russia's "core strategic interests," a viewpoint strongly emphasized

by Putin on multiple occasions (Mearsheimer 2014). Unlike defensive realism, which emphasizes seeking maximal security, Mearsheimer's offensive realism attributes this to the idea that states, especially major powers, are primarily focused on navigating a world where no external entity shields them from one other. In the anarchic international system, there are strong incentives for states to actively seek opportunities to enhance their power at the expense of rivals (Mearsheimer 2001). At the same time, scholars such as Jonas J. Driedger argue against Mearsheimer's argument. In *The Stopping Power of Sources: Implied Causal Mechanisms and Historical Interpretations in (Mearsheimer's) Arguments on the Russo-Ukrainian War*, Driedger argues that Mearsheimer's claims rest on a historical analysis that is partially inaccurate and incomplete, characterizing key aspects of his arguments as dependent on implied or explicit historical interpretations (Driedger, 2023). Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin's *Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern* proposes that Russia is destined for a recurring cycle in its evolution, characterized by alternating phases of modernization and subsequent authoritarian governance, leading to eventual collapse and resource depletion. Each cycle "has led to repeated frenzies of government activity designed to help the country catch up, with a familiar cycle of coercive state-led industrial growth" eventually necessitating the emergence of a leader in the form of a tsar, general secretary, or dictator (Kotkin 2016). Essentially, Kotkin asserts that this historical pattern was evident in Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia and remains applicable in contemporary post-Soviet Russia. He argues against Mearsheimer's argument, proposing that "Russia is not NATO or the West but Russia's own regime"

(Kotkin 2016). In an interview about Ukraine, Kotkin clarifies that despite Western errors, the blame cannot solely be attributed to the West; the issue lies not in Western imperialism but rather in Russia's strategic decisions to breach longstanding treaty commitments (Lauersen 2022).

### **Brief History of Russia**

Understanding Russia's intricate relationship with the United States necessitates delving into its history, which traces back to the Viking influence in 862, giving rise to the formation of "Rus" - a fusion of Eastern Slavic tribes. The Byzantine Empire's impact introduced Orthodox Christianity, shaping Russian governance (Curtis 1998). The Mongol invasion in the early 1200s left a significant mark, influencing culture and governance. Moscow emerged as a power center, culminating in the decisive Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, firmly establishing Moscow as the heart of Russia (Curtis 1998). The transition from Mongol rule to Russian prominence occurred under Ivan III, known as "the Great," who unified and expanded Russia's territory (Curtis 1998). Ivan IV strengthened Russian governance by creating the first standing army and codifying laws. The "Times of Trouble" in the early 1600s brought invasions and famine, shaping the indomitable spirit of the Russian people. The subsequent Romanov dynasty restored tranquility, seeking to regain lost territories but facing unrest and uprisings in the mid-1600s (Curtis 1998). Peter the Great, during his rule from 1682 to 1725, undertook significant territorial expansion, forming strategic alliances and infusing Western influence into the Russian state. Catherine the Great's reign from 1762 to 1796 promoted Enlightenment principles,

propelling Russia to global power (Lukin 2015).

Alexander I played a pivotal role in establishing diplomatic ties between Russia and the United States during the Napoleonic era (Lieven 2006). The historical relationship between the United States and Russia shifted with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, leading to strained relations. World War II saw a temporary alliance against Nazi Germany. However, not long after the fighting ceased, the Cold War emerged, marked by an arms race and geopolitical standoffs, including the Cuban Missile Crisis (Naftali 2018). Efforts to ease tensions, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, resulted in a temporary thaw during the Nixon administration (The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance 2019).

The effects of these actions proved to be short-lived, as a new era began with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. The Reagan administration's adoption of the "Reagan Doctrine" to confront communism, including support for anti-communist groups like the Taliban, weakened the Soviet Union's influence in Europe and the South (Rival or Partner? The Tests for Russia in the Post-War Middle East 1991). This strategy, which aimed to establish a personal rapport with Soviet leadership, proved successful when Mikhail Gorbachev took over in 1985 and led to the signing of a ballistic missile treaty in 1987 (Wilson 2018). This agreement imposed constraints on the stockpiles of ballistic missile warheads for both countries, thereby reducing the likelihood of a mutually assured destruction (MAD) scenario in the event of foreign aggression. The Soviet Union's demise was finally brought about by a turning point under Gorbachev's leadership. His political and economic initiatives essentially contradicted the

framework that his communist predecessors had set up (Cox 2014). The nations once under Soviet influence embraced independence, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the United States found itself in a unipolar world in which it seemed to be able to impose conditions on other countries, despite conflicting opinions from major entities such as Russia. Formerly a pro-Western liberal who wanted to build a capitalist partnership with the United States, Boris Yeltsin grew more and more dissatisfied with American activities, most notably the bombardment of Kosovo, Yugoslavia, in 1999 (Yesson 1999). Yeltsin's choice of a successor was significantly influenced by the chauvinistic attitude of the United States and his dissatisfaction with Russia's declining state. He chose Vladimir Putin, an intelligence officer and the head of the Russian secret police, who, during his first term, tried to strengthen its relations with the United States.

### **Vladimir Putin: Background**

Vladimir Putin, born in 1952, spent his early years in a communal flat in Petersburg. He excelled in law and German at Leningrad State University, showcasing his prowess in judo and eventually joining the KGB. His career took him to East Germany in 1985, where he witnessed the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. Upon returning to Russia, he joined the administration of liberal mayor Anatolii Sobchak.

Putin's political ascent began with his resignation from the KGB during the August 1991 coup, receiving support from liberal figures (Putin 2000). He was made head of the Federal Security Service by Yeltsin in 1998, and soon after, he was named

secretary of the Security Council, and prime minister in 1999 (Pike 2000). After Yeltsin's resignation on December 31, 1999, Putin assumed the role of sitting president, winning the March 2000 elections with approximately 53 percent of the vote (Russia. Presidential Election, 2000). Notably, Putin's biography reflected a blend of loyalty to the state and elements of both liberal and authoritarian perspectives, with his ability to navigate Kremlin politics contributing to his appeal among Russian voters. He prioritized avoiding any perception of weakness among his people. Conscious of the potential adverse effects on the Russian economy and national security, he exercised caution in avoiding conflict with the United States. In the pursuit of stability and strategic interests, Putin aimed to steer clear of confrontation, displaying tolerance toward the expanding Western influence that had led to the loss of much of Eastern Europe.

### **NATO and Putin**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, established on April 4, 1949, in response to shared concerns about the Soviet Union and Communism, was a key security alliance ratifying a security pact that committed member nations to mutual defense in the face of an armed attack (North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 1949 n.d.). In the aftermath of the Cold War, doubts emerged regarding NATO's continued relevance. Rather than disbanding, however, NATO transformed, expanding its role into a global security organization and incorporating democracy and Western values. This evolution led NATO to engage in a range of missions, including counterterrorism efforts and peacekeeping operations, as it adapted to emerging threats in the post-Cold War era. According to NATO's official policy, "NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to

Russia" (NATO 2021). The cornerstone of NATO's commitment to defense lies in Article 5 of its founding charter, a mutual defense clause that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" (NATO 2023a). However, Russia remains unconvinced. To provide a balanced perspective, it is important to acknowledge that NATO has a history of involvement in conflicts that do not directly pertain to the security of its member nations. Russia's skepticism is rooted in its observation of NATO's actions in various international crises that extend beyond the defense of its member states.

Shaped by the evolving geopolitical landscape post-Cold War, Putin's initial approach, alongside key figures such as Yeltsin, Dmitri Medvedev, and Mikhail Gorbachev, was influenced by shared concerns about the ramifications of NATO expansion to Russia's national interest and security, shaping subsequent actions (McFaul 2022). This shift in the Kremlin's perspective, however, defies a simple attribution to a resurgence of Soviet ideology or a connection to Russian identity. The term "national interest" is not static or inherent; instead, it is a construct shaped and defined by individuals in positions of authority. Policymakers wield significant influence in formulating this conceptual framework. Before reaching decisions, these policymakers must "engage in a process of interpretation to understand both what situation the state faces and how they should respond to it" (Weldes 1996). The efficacy of this interpretation hinges on a shared understanding among state officials and the public, thereby conferring legitimacy upon state actions. Over time, the perception of NATO's expansion has grown more pronounced, heightening anxieties about Western dominance and reinforcing existing skepticism within

Russian foreign policy. It is crucial to underscore the legitimacy of these concerns. Despite Russia's vulnerability following the fall of the USSR, the United States was able to increase its hold on power by expanding NATO.

In the late 1990s, Kosovo, a region in the Balkans, witnessed the outbreak of a conflict marred by ethnic tensions and violence. Responding to the crisis, NATO acted in 1999 by initiating a bombing campaign against Yugoslav (Serbian) forces with the aim "to prevent more human suffering and more repression and violence against the civilian population of Kosovo" (Solana 1999). This intervention, however, did not align with Russia's interests and beliefs, as mentioned before. The common Slavic and Christian Orthodox ancestry of the Russian and Serbian peoples maintained a deep historical and cultural bond, even in the absence of a formal alliance between Yugoslavia and Russia throughout that period. Consequently, Russian nationalists perceived NATO's bombing campaign as a direct attack on their Slavic brethren. Russia cast doubt on NATO's characterization of the Kosovo intervention as purely humanitarian, expressing concerns that "the military action without UN sanction, NATO was undermining the very foundation of the world order" (Brovkin n.d.). For Putin, the independence of Kosovo set a concerning precedent, believing it would have repercussions for the West. (Putin calls Kosovo independence 'terrible precedent' 2008).

### **The Changing of Perspective**

For over ten years, Russia continued to cooperate and assimilate with the West, and the connection between the two countries stayed steady. Putin and President George W. Bush shared a notably amicable relationship. Russia was the first



nation to extend aid to the United States following the 9/11 attacks. Putin, among the first foreign leaders to directly communicate with President Bush, expressed “his condolences to the president and the American people and his unequivocal support for whatever reactions the American president might decide to take.” (McFaul 2001). As a gesture of goodwill, Putin went further by opting to shut down Soviet-era military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, aiming to appease the United States. Additionally, he committed to collaborating closely with Washington on various fronts, including the joint effort to address terrorism and other shared concerns (Russia to Abandon Bases in Cuba and Vietnam 2001). But over time, Russia's elite began to abandon this goal as it became clear that Western integration was a unilateral fiction. In 2002, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. To defend against “growing missile threats,” Bush was cited claiming that the pact was “now behind us” and restating his commitment to deploying missile defenses “as soon as possible” (U.S. Withdraws from ABM Treaty; Global Response Muted 2002). Perceiving this as a threat to their national security and interests, Russia responded, “it would no longer be bound by the START II nuclear arms reduction agreement” (Russia Declares Itself No Longer Bound by START II 2002). Under Putin's direction, the Russian elite began a more forceful defense of Russian national interests rather than giving in to the West.

The counterterrorism cooperation came to an end on September 1, 2004, when armed terrorists, mostly Ingush and Chechen, took control of Beslan's School Number One in one of Russia's autonomous republics. After the occurrence, Putin alleged that the United States had played a role in fueling separatist sentiments by

exerting pressure on Russia to engage in negotiations with them and offering refuge to the Chechens and the political asylum to minister of foreign affairs of Ichkeria in 2004 (Claim (in 2004, 2015 and 2017): The U.S. Government Supported Chechen Separatism). Putin said in a speech following the events, “Some would like to tear from us a ‘juicy piece of pie’. Others help them. They help, reasoning that Russia remains one of the world's major nuclear powers, and as such still represents a threat to them. And so, they reason that this threat should be removed.” (Address by President Vladimir Putin 2004). Nonetheless, Putin's assertion was only accurate to some extent. The initial stance of the Bush administration was against Akhmadov's asylum request but changed. Nonetheless, Putin's view of the U.S. as an untrustworthy ally and a geopolitical adversary significantly influenced his subsequent decisions, contributing to strained relations with the West.

### Munich 2007

During the Munich Security Conference on February 10, 2007, President Putin's speech unveiled a fresh perspective from the Kremlin on Russia's position and role in the global landscape. During the conference, a significant number of individuals in America were absorbed in the developments of the Iraq “surge,” overlooking the growing assertiveness and discontent exhibited by Russia towards the established global order. Notably, a year before delivering his Munich speech, Putin started outlining his complaints during meetings with Western officials by reading off cards that he kept in his pocket (Roxburgh 2011). Among his criticisms were more widely known ones, such as NATO's expansion and its bombing war against Kosovo. Putin's frustration at the West interfering in what he saw to be

Russia's internal affairs was also featured among his cards (Roxburgh 2011). Putin characterized America as the unipolar, heedless, and dominant player in the world system. He issued a warning that a new iron curtain was falling on Europe as a result of US actions, giving a brief overview of the global order in 2007 before launching into his address in Munich:

However, what is a unipolar world?... It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within (Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007).

By insinuating that the United States dictates the terms in Europe, Putin sought to discredit European nations and foster a division between them and their allies. Using the widespread European opposition to the Iraq War as evidence, Putin suggested that the U.S. operated without constraints on the global stage, stating, "The United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations." (Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007). Putin believed that by exploiting political disagreements, particularly regarding issues like Iraq and Middle Eastern refugees, he would be able to gradually sow discord within the Western alliance. In his view, the eventual fracturing of Western unity was a plausible long-term outcome.

Putin also questioned the American promotion of democracy, accusing the country of being hypocritical in its backing of autocratic nations. He contended that the United States had shown disrespect for global agreement by eschewing UN

clearance for military operations in Kosovo and Iraq, underscoring an "almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts" (Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007). Putin added that the US had elevated NATO and the EU above the UN as groups that make decisions, claiming that the UN must approve any lawful use of force. In the process of undermining Russia's power in the UN Security Council, he painted NATO and the EU as instruments employed by enemies to pretend to be legitimate. Putin sought to use a divide-and-conquer tactic to weaken and bring these organizations down by designating them as dangers to Russian security.

In the same speech Putin attacked the OSCE bureaucracy, claiming it served the interests of particular countries and functions independently of its member states. He raised concerns about the possibility of manipulating decision-making processes to the advantage of nations or groups. Putin also drew attention to the OSCE's impact on intentionally funded NGOs, stating, "Such interference does not promote the development of democratic states at all. On the contrary, it makes them dependent and, as a consequence, politically and economically unstable" (Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007).

Finally, Putin concluded that the United States had triggered a new Cold War. Like the last Cold War, this war could have grave consequences for Europe and the world. He said:

And now they are trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us. These walls may be virtual, but they are nevertheless dividing, ones that cut

through our continent. And is it possible that we will once again require many years and decades, as well as several generations of politicians, to disassemble and dismantle these new walls? (Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007).

Putin's Munich speech marked a significant pivot in US-Russian relations, characterized by explicit descriptions as he sternly criticized the United States, the European Union, and NATO. While Putin refrained from explicitly naming the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, it was apparent that his references to these events were embedded in his commentary on the OSCE and the promotion of democracy. Putin maintained two perspectives that fundamentally clashed with Western viewpoints. Firstly, he contended that former Soviet states like Georgia and Ukraine fell under Russia's distinct influence. Secondly, he attributed the decisions of Georgia and Ukraine to distance themselves from their sphere of influence to Western influence and involvement. Essentially, Putin cemented his newly formed stance on the West.

### **The Reset: 2008-2012**

In 2008, tensions escalated between Russia and the USA when NATO allies reached a consensus that "Georgia will become a NATO member, provided it meets all necessary requirements. This decision has since been reaffirmed at successive NATO summits." (NATO 2023d). For Russia, a neighboring nation, this was an unacceptable development that the Kremlin could not tolerate. The prospect of Georgia joining NATO posed an existential security threat to Russia, as it implied the placement of American missiles directly on its border. In response, Russia invaded Georgia as a

deterrent, aiming to dissuade its neighbor from pursuing NATO membership (Dickinson 2021). Russia's response is not entirely unexpected when drawing parallels to the historical context of the USA's reaction during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In that instance, the Soviet Union deployed missiles in Cuba to safeguard the revolution against the U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion (Milestones: 1961–1968 - Office of the Historian). The United States reacted vehemently, nearly causing a global conflict and the onset of another world war.

To comply with the constitutional ban on holding office for more than two terms in a row, Putin stepped down from his position that same year in favor of Dmitry Medvedev, who was chosen as his replacement. Putin became prime minister in 2008 and Medvedev became president (Cooper 2009). His tenure in office closely aligned with the United Russia Party's stance, supporting similar socioeconomic policies. While Medvedev displayed a slightly more liberal approach to state repression, particularly toward dissent that did not pose a threat to the regime, his governance largely adhered to established principles, providing a reset period for both Russia and the US. Obama visited Moscow at the beginning of July 2009, when he met with Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev. Speaking before the New Economic School, Obama stated, "America wants a strong, peaceful, and prosperous Russia. This belief is rooted in our respect for the Russian people, and a shared history between our nations that goes beyond competition" (VOA 2009). He stressed the need for a new beginning between both countries and emphasizing that the American and Russian governments needed to do more than simply hit a reset button.

During this period, U.S.-Russian

relations were characterized by pragmatism. In 2010, the United States and Russia reached a significant agreement to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weapons. What followed was the nuclear arms reduction treaty, named New START. Under this treaty, both countries had “seven years to meet the treaty’s central limits on strategic offensive arms (by February 5, 2018) and are then obligated to maintain those limits for as long as the treaty remains in force” (New START Treaty 2020). The agreement “capped accountable deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs at 1,550, down approximately 30 percent from the 2,200-limit set by SORT and down 74 percent from the START-accountable limit of 6,000.” (New START at a Glance 2022). It was signed by President Obama and President Medvedev and continued to try to normalize relations with the West (Baker 2010). However, it was short-lived due to NATO’s military intervention in Libya in 2011.

In March 2011, NATO intervened in Libya to quell Muammar Gaddafi’s brutal regime, supporting Libyan rebels in their struggle. Notably, Russia abstained from the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which granted authorization for member states to take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians (Resolution 1973 2011). Russia contended that NATO’s actions, which followed, were excessive and, in their view, illegal, as Putin stated, “They showed to the whole world how he (Gaddafi) was killed; there was blood all over. Is that what they call a democracy?” (Putin Slams U.S. on Gaddafi Killing 2011). When the United Nations attempted to pass a comparable resolution regarding Syria and “attempts to quash his country’s own nascent uprising,” Russia firmly vetoed it (O’Connor 2021). This veto served as a stark indication of Russia’s disapproval of the events that transpired in

Libya and its steadfast determination to prevent a repetition of such interventions. Russia’s dissatisfaction with NATO’s actions in Libya can be attributed to a combination of factors. Firstly, at that time, Russia was actively engaged in negotiations with Gaddafi for “access to a port on the Mediterranean, seeking to expand its influence both in Mediterranean waters and on African soil,” and the intervention disrupted these diplomatic efforts (Ishetiar 2019). Additionally, Russian companies had significant investments in Libyan oil reserves, and the ensuing chaos jeopardized their interests (Takeyh 2001). However, perhaps the most prominent concern for Russia was its perception of NATO’s increasing assertiveness in international affairs as “an act of betrayal” (O’Connor 2021). The intervention in Libya served as a telling example to Russia, indicating that NATO had become even more proactive in its interventions, raising apprehensions about the alliance’s evolving role on the global stage. Libya posed no direct threat to NATO, and it had “begun to cooperate actively with Western governments in key areas such as nuclear disarmament” (Ishetiar 2019).

Following the events in Libya, Russia increasingly adopted a perspective that went beyond viewing NATO solely as a defensive alliance. Instead, Russia came to perceive NATO as an organization with offensive inclinations. From the Russian perspective, these interventions exemplified a wider trend of the West meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, further fueling an anti-Western sentiment embedded in Russia’s foreign policy. It is noteworthy that NATO’s engagement in Libya received backing from the Arab League and featured the participation of 14 Arab coalition members. Furthermore, the UN International Commission of Inquiry on Libya reported

no violations of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) or international law, instead commending that, "NATO conducted a highly precise campaign with a demonstrable determination to avoid civilian casualties" (NATO 2023c).

### **The Return: 2012 Russian Election**

President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin declared in September 2011 that they would take turns leading the country, with Putin taking over as president once again. The two leaders said that they had already decided on this course of action before Medvedev's 2008 election (TRANSCRIPT: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Editors-in-Chief of Leading Foreign Media Outlets. 2012). This statement faced strong criticism from numerous Russians who perceived it as the outcome of a clandestine arrangement. Initially, the discontent was somewhat restrained, however it eventually turned into a growing dissatisfaction with Putin and Medvedev, sparking protests. The December 2011 election to the Russian legislature, the Duma, which many Russians considered neither free nor fair, acted as a triggering factor for more extensive public unrest. Anti-election protests started well in advance of polling day and continued for many weeks, with several demonstrations taking place in Moscow and numerous other locations. Still, two hours after voting closed on March 4, 2012, and after around one-third of polling stations indicated that Putin had garnered enough votes for a first-round victory, 63.6 percent of the 71.8 million votes cast went to Putin, according to the CEC's final assessment (Russia Votes 2012). Following this event, Putin enacted legislation to significantly elevate penalties for individuals participating in protests that contravene regulations governing public

order and pose a potential threat to his regime (Bryanski 2012).

The return of Putin raised concerns within the U.S. administration, given that the successful "reset" of relations between the U.S. and Russia was at stake. However, it was not until 2014 that the relationship between these two countries took an irreversible turn.

### **Severed Ties: Ukraine**

U.S.-Russia relations definitively deteriorated in 2014 amid the discord over Ukraine. The seeds of this discord can be traced back to the early 2000s, during the nationalist protests of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Throughout this period, Russian President Vladimir Putin consistently cautioned the United States against extending military assistance to Ukraine and attempting to integrate it into NATO, characterizing such actions as hostile towards Russia (Masters 2022). However, it was not until the protests associated with the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine that tensions escalated significantly. The removal of Ukrainian President Yanukovich, known for his pro-Russia stances, and the subsequent installation of a pro-Western leader occurred amidst massive protests posing a threat to neighboring Russian republics. The Kremlin, in turn, accused the United States and the European Union of supporting the protests that led to this political shift. This pivotal event marked a critical turning point in the already strained relations between the United States and Russia.

With the help of Russian military intelligence and Spetsnaz special troops, President Yanukovich sought refuge in Russia during a period of chaos within the central government. By the middle of March 2014, Russian forces had successfully

occupied Ukraine's Crimean peninsula as a result of this calculated move, effectively culminating in a de facto annexation of the country's southernmost region. At the same time, in just three weeks, Russian military forces seized control of parts of the Donbas, which include the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, which are located near the Russian border (Żochowski, Sadowski, and Menkiszak 2014). Crimea, characterized by an ethnic Russian majority, witnessed a reclamation into Russian hands during this period. In response to these actions, the Kremlin encountered substantial sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western nations. These sanctions were a manifestation of the international community's disapproval, as evidenced by documents such as the EU (Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union 2014).

Putin's Speech at the Valdai Conference in October 2014 responded defiantly to what he called the United States' "unilateral diktat" (RFE/RL 2014). Amidst the conflict in Ukraine, Western attention focused on Vladimir Putin's remarks at the Valdai forum, where his blunt, anti-Western comments surprised those unfamiliar with his recent discourses. However, these statements aligned with sentiments expressed in his earlier Munich speech. The annexation of Crimea by Russia, though unexpected in the West, is viewed as the culmination of Putin's consistent worldview and grand strategy spanning 14 years. This development reflects the escalating tensions between the United States and Russia, with Putin's belief that the U.S. did not win the Cold War but that "Instead of establishing a new balance of power, essential for maintaining order and stability, they took steps that threw the system into sharp and deep imbalance" (Speech and the Following Discussion at

the Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007). According to Putin, the United States took advantage of Russia during a vulnerable period (Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club 2014). Putin's goal was to highlight the shortcomings of a US-led order, not so much to convince the entire community of the intrinsic benefits of a world order shaped by Russia. One of Putin's recurring themes in many of his recent statements is to encourage doubt about the US, NATO, and EU's long-term viability. Putin stressed this argument during the Valdai summit. He stated that the rise of several hostile entities has been facilitated by a US-dominated global order: "Colleagues, this period of unipolar domination has convincingly demonstrated that having only one power center does not make global processes more manageable. On the contrary, this kind of unstable construction has shown its inability to fight the real threats such as regional conflicts, terrorism, drug trafficking, religious fanaticism, chauvinism, and new-Nazism" (Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club 2014). Putin's remarks at the Valdai forum exemplify his rhetorical approach to questioning the global leadership of the United States. In doing so, he portrays Russia as a beleaguered entity, positioning it as a victim in the geopolitical landscape. Additionally, Putin characterizes public revolutions as existential threats to his rule, attributing them to Western influence.

In 2022, the United States, along with the newly elected Ukrainian leadership under President Zelensky, continued exploring the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO (Associated Press 2021). The potential accession raised concerns, as any conflict along the historically disputed borders between Russia and Ukraine could provide NATO forces with an opportunity to swiftly engage Russia. In response, Russia insisted

on NATO ceasing activities in Ukraine and preventing former Soviet states from joining, accompanied by threats of military action. These demands were widely viewed as impractical, conflicting with the voluntary NATO memberships of Eastern European states for security reasons. Notably, Russia's proposal for a treaty to block Ukraine's NATO entry ran counter to NATO's "open door" policy, despite a reserved response to Ukraine's requests (Coyer 2022). Putin publicly declared war on Ukraine on February 24 when he launched a "special military operation." By highlighting the goals of "demilitarization and denazification" of Ukraine and contesting its legitimacy, Putin defended the operation as a means to "protect the people" of breakaway republics under Russian authority (Treisman 2022). Putin exposed his vulnerabilities by suggesting the possibility of an internal uprising akin to what he alleges neo-Nazis orchestrated in Ukraine. His paramount concern has consistently revolved around securing and preserving domestic authority. As the "Kremlin-controlled security forces continue to go to great lengths to repress popular activism at home, the invasion of Ukraine is ironically driving up coordinated anti-Putin activism both abroad and domestically" (Kachmar 2022). Russian missiles targeted different locations within Ukraine, along with troop invasions from the north, east, and south, despite official declarations that they had no intention of occupying the country and that they supported the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination (BBC News 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Returning to the initial question, Putin's anti-Western stance is not solely rooted in his deep appreciation for Russian history, tradition, and nationalism, but also in a

strategic response to perceived threats to his regime. The trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations, marked by periods of cooperation followed by disillusionment, underscores Putin's belief that the West, led by the United States, undermines Russia's national interests and sovereignty. Putin's anti-Western rhetoric and actions can be understood as a strategic response to perceived threats to Russia's geopolitical standing and a means of consolidating domestic support through the portrayal of Russia as a victim in the face of Western encroachment.

As demonstrated by his speeches, Putin uses political divisions between and within Western World nations to undermine Western institutions. Putin's third term of presidency, especially after events in 2014, caused Russian politicians to become radicalized and accommodated a less pragmatic position of official nationalism that was in some of its key aspects influenced by radical statism and national communism. Framing external influences as provocateurs of domestic turmoil allows Putin to leverage an anti-Western narrative to foster national unity, suppress dissent, and maintain political control.

Initially approaching international relations with caution, driven by a desire for stability and strategic interests, Putin's stance underwent a transformative evolution, prominently influenced by pivotal events such as the 2004 Beslan school hostage crisis and the Munich Security Conference in 2007. The Beslan hostage crisis marked a turning point, amplifying Putin's skepticism toward the West. The tragic event led to accusations of indirect U.S. support for terrorism, fostering a narrative of external interference and betrayal. Simultaneously, the Munich Security Conference provided a platform for Putin to articulate his mounting concerns about Western actions,

criticizing NATO's expansion, intervention in Kosovo, and perceived interference in Russia's internal affairs. His speech marked a pronounced shift from cautious cooperation to open defiance, expressing dissatisfaction with Western disregard for international norms and disrespect for Russia's sovereign interests. These critical events, coupled with the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, NATO's intervention in Libya, and Western involvement in revolutions in former Soviet states, collectively solidified Putin's view of the West as a threat. The growing conviction that NATO was evolving into an organization with offensive inclinations fueled Putin's defiance, leading to assertive actions in Ukraine and the protection of Russia's geopolitical interests against perceived Western encroachment.

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