

Unitarian Talk

Talk given to the Unitarian church on 8 February 2015

The news from Ukraine remains grim. In order to understand where events may take us in the future, it is worth reviewing what has led to the present struggle between Russia and Ukraine.

What lies at the root of the contest was described in a talk given in August 2013 by Ruslan Pukhov, author of an authoritative study of the new Russian Military Doctrine, and the head of a think tank associated with the Ministry of Defence. He stated that, under the Russian national strategy, Russia's renaissance as a great power requires the restoration of its dominance over other former Soviet republics.

Let us look at the reasons that have pushed Russia to launch its campaign to regain great power status:

- One is that Russia has failed to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic political, security, and economic systems, and instead has faced the Euro-Atlantic world encroaching on its turf,
- The other is that Vladimir Putin, who was in danger of losing public support, has recovered it by pursuing a nationalist course.

Let us first look at Russia's concern that it has been shoved to the side and boxed in. After the end of the Cold war and the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was the general assumption in both Russia and the West that Russia would become fully democratic and eventually join Western institutions. Russia, however, moved away from democracy. Moreover, mistrust and conflicting aspirations allowed for only limited progress towards integration.

NATO refused to accept Russia as a member, because it was not a democracy, and membership would have given Russia a veto. The NATO-Russia Council was however established in 2002 to co-operate on security issues.

The EU was not prepared to consider Russia for membership because of its size, but did conclude a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement in

1994. Only limited progress was made in giving substance to the Agreement's four common spaces: the economic one, that of Freedom, Security and Justice, the area of External Security, and finally the domain of Research, Education, Culture, In additionally it took up to 2012 to qualify to join the WTO.

While NATO and the EU were not prepared to make membership available to Russia, they gradually offered it to the other East European countries, after they had become democracies, and largely in response to pressure from these countries.

NATO was willing to accept as members, states that had put their armed forces under civilian control. In 1997, [Hungary](#), the [Czech Republic](#), and [Poland](#), were invited to join. In 2004, it was the turn of the three Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, plus Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania. Then came [Albania](#) and [Croatia](#) in 2009. No other members have been admitted since then. Ukraine and Georgia were in effect refused in 2008.

The EU was, however, initially more reluctant to accede to requests for membership. The EU eventually admitted in 2004 many Central European states - Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, as well as the three Baltic republics - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Then, in 2007, Bulgaria and Romania became members.

To assuage Russian sensibilities, the EU did not, however, agree to membership for any other East European countries. Instead the EU proposed partnership agreements that provided only free trade and privileged co-operation in return for political and economic reforms. What the EU eventually offered Ukraine in 2012 in response to Ukrainian pressure for EU membership, was an Association Agreement that did not exclude the possibility of eventual membership sometime in the distant future.

The eastward expansion of both NATO and the EU into the Soviet Union's old sphere of influence, and even into formerly Soviet territory unsettled the Russian leadership.

President Putin furthermore believed that the Coloured Revolutions from 2003 to 2005 that shook Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, but especially Ukraine, from 2004-2005, were the result of Western machinations intended to weaken Russia. He was concerned, not merely at the strategic implications of these

Revolutions, but also at the danger that the contagion of democracy might spread to Russia.

In response, the Russians proposed in 2008 a European Security Treaty that stipulated that the activities of any “international organization, military alliance or coalition, shall be implemented with due regard to security interests of all other Parties.” The Russian initiative would have had the effect of:

- blocking the expansion of NATO and possibly the EU,
- preventing Ukraine from joining Western organizations, and
- devaluing existing security arrangements, notably the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the OSCE.

The Russian proposal would notably have dropped OSCE principles that had the effect of protecting other East European states against Russia pressure, notably:

- the non-interference in internal affairs,
- respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and
- the equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

Adding to Western suspicion of Russian intentions were two of the five principles of Russian foreign policy that President Medvedev announced in the same year - the Russian claim to a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood, and to a right to intervene abroad in the defence of Russian citizens.

Russia also proposed in 2008 to the EU a bilateral Union of Europe between Russia and the EU as equals, giving Russia a veto. The Union would have formed a single energy complex, which could have prevented Europe from diversifying its sources of energy. The Union would have also co-ordinated military, political, and strategic matters. North America would not have been included. Neither have been the other East European countries. The EU was not interested.

The overthrow of President Yanukovich of Ukraine in a massive popular uprising in Western and Central Ukraine in the winter of 2013 to 2014, and the decision of the new government to sign the EU Association Agreement, launched President Putin on a campaign to subjugate Ukraine.

Putin's spokesman had warned in September 2013 that Russia would institute a trade boycott and might support secessionist movements in Ukraine if Ukraine signed the Association Agreement.

Putin took this position also because he wanted to see Ukraine in Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, which was formed on 1 January 2015.

The Eurasian Economic Union is intended to be a counter-weight to the EU and perhaps eventually to serve as a response to NATO. Its formal structures are modelled on those of the EU. In practice, it may work differently. Russian treatment of Ukraine would suggest that Russia's partners in the Eurasian Economic Union would be no more than semi-sovereign entities without autonomy in foreign policy or in some aspects of domestic policy.

Another means of bringing the other former Soviet republics under control is the Russian claim of the right to intervene in those countries in defence of the rights of those whom the Russians variously describe as Russian citizens, Russian speakers, or simply Russian compatriots, a term that, under Russian law, includes former citizens and their descendants, of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

Since 2009, Russian law allows Russian armed forces to be used to intervene in support of Russian speakers abroad. The Russian law authorizing the invasion of Ukraine did so on the basis of this principle.

This principle constitutes a threat to the sovereignty of other countries of the former Soviet Union and especially those with large Russian minorities, certainly Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. All of these states are worried.

The Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), a think tank attached to the Presidential Administration, which had pushed hard for Russia to invade Ukraine, is now pressing for Russia to overthrow Belarusian leader Lukashenka. Lukashenka has reposted by changing the Belarus military doctrine, so as to respond to the military tactics the Russians have employed in Ukraine.

In reaction to growing Kazakh ethnic nationalism, President Putin stated that Kazakhstan had to remain part of the Russian world. He also described Kazakhstan as an artificial state, a term he has used for Ukraine.

Russia has applied the greatest pressure on the Baltic Republics: Russian forces have staged a raid on Estonia to kidnap an Estonian security official.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has warned Latvia about the treatment of its Russian minority.

Russian military aircraft regularly violate the Baltic airspace.

There may be more trouble to come. In a speech last October, Putin stated that the Ukrainian civil war was an example of a conflict "at the intersection of major states' geopolitical interests," "and I think it will certainly not be the last" a reference possibly to the Baltic Republics, without a clear system of mutual commitments and agreements. His solution was for the West to adopt the Russian security proposals, apparently those of 2008. In November, Sergey Markov, Director of the Institute of Political Studies, who sometimes acts as a Kremlin spokesman, warned that the Latvia and Estonia would probably cease to exist in the event of a major war.

In response, the United States announced in the same month that it would rotate troops into the three Baltic States as long as they wanted. The troops appear to be intended as a tripwire to guarantee an American response in case of a Russian aggression.

In view of Russia's repeated warnings that it might promote the secession of parts of Ukraine if Ukraine decided to align itself with the West, the Russian takeover of Crimea and the instigation of the revolt in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the so-called Donbas, following the overthrow of President Yanukovich in February a year ago, should have come as no surprise.

Contrary to the impression of some, Russia has instigated the revolt in the Donbas region, not in order to absorb it like Crimea, but so as to use the Donbas as a means of controlling all of Ukraine. Russia wishes to force Ukraine to give up the EU Association Agreement and its dream of joining NATO, and instead to join the Eurasian Economic Union.

Putin has stated that he wants to see Ukraine converted into a "federation", with the regions, such as the two in the Donbas, enjoying a certain autonomy in foreign relations, while holding a veto on the foreign and defence policy of the Ukrainian rump state.

Various Russians have described the desired type of federation as similar to that in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or between Greenland and Denmark. Such an arrangement would be, in fact, a loosely jointed confederation. Bosnia is barely a state, and Greenland is on the verge of independence.

An influential voice on Russian foreign policy, Sergey Karaganov, the Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, and a Kremlin adviser, stated in April 2014 that Russia wants “a united, federative Ukraine.., if possible. Only this arrangement will maintain the formal integrity of the state, but Ukraine as a full-fledged state will be a distant historical memory.” “This scenario will ensure Russia's de facto dominance in east and southeast Ukraine and semi-autonomy for the country's west.”

Russia seems intent to maintain the Donbas struggle as a frozen conflict, in order to force Ukraine to negotiate such a constitutional arrangement with the rebels. Should Russia succeed, it would mean the surrender of Ukrainian independence, and probably the end of its democracy,.

Russia felt obliged, perhaps so as to avoid further Western sanctions, to negotiate, together with the Rebels, the Ceasefire Agreement of 5 September 2014 with Ukraine, and to renew it in December. Observance of the Ceasefire terms has been piecemeal at best.

Russia has not felt bound to obey the stipulations of the Ceasefire to withdraw foreign troops and weapons from Ukraine or to put the Russian-Ukrainian border area under international monitoring. Russia has always denied it has any troops in Ukraine or is supplying weapons to the rebels.

The rebels for their part now claim that they are also not bound by the Ceasefire, and are intent on enlarging the territory under their control. By early January, the rebels had expanded their territory by 500 square kilometres since the inception of the Ceasefire.

The Russians claim not to have any control on the rebels, all the while supplying them with men and weapons so as to continue their advance.

Russia insists moreover that Ukraine has to negotiate the new constitutional arrangement with the rebels, if it wants to put an end to the combats. Since a reduction of fighting over the holiday period, it has resumed at the highest level of intensity. New and advanced weapons that

the Ukrainians are incapable of equalling, have rolled across the Russian border in increasing numbers. The so-called Prime Minister of Donetsk has announced his intention of conquering all of the Donbas. The Rebels now hold about 40%. A recent issue of the Economist quotes Sergei Markov, the informal Kremlin voice, as saying that Russia needs to topple the government in Kyiv and occupy Odessa and Kharkiv. Only then, he writes, "will sanctions be lifted, the junta driven out of power and Ukraine become democratic and federal - in exchange for not taking Kiev."

As I mentioned at the beginning, Putin's aggressiveness may be partly due to his fear of losing control at home. Putin's strong popularity during the first decade of the new century had been founded on two factors: the stability that he brought to Russia and a rising standard of living fuelled by the increasing prices on hydro-carbons. Russia enjoyed an average annual growth of over 5% of the GDP. By 2013 the growth had, however, slowed to about one and a half percent. The decline in economic growth, a consequent drop in support in public opinion polls, resulted in massive demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg that lasted from late fall until early May of 2012 against his return to office as President.

The policy of aggressive nationalism is intended, according to Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Institute in Moscow "to seek to ensure the survival of autocratic rule by restoring militarism and a fortress mentality in Russia."

Stoking the fires of nationalism has worked. Putin's rating in polls has shot up from the lower sixties to the upper eighties at the time of the annexation of Crimea.

The problem with relying on nationalism for popular support is, however, that you can be condemned to continue to feed popular appetites with new successes, especially if, as now, your actions have led to a serious economic crisis. And as Putin remarked in an unguarded moment, in Russia, failed leaders can be put against the wall and shot.

The military defeat of Ukraine should not be an option for the West:

- By invading a neighbouring country and annexing its territory, Russia has thrown out the principles of international law that maintained peace, and security in Europe for almost 70 years.

- Russia is seeking to destroy a nascent Ukrainian democracy.
- The subjugation of Ukraine could lead to increased Russian pressure in Central Europe, the Balkans and the Black Sea.
- It would likely produce a humanitarian disaster and send Ukrainian refugees streaming into Western Europe.
- It might also invite further Russian adventures.

Under the circumstances, the West would be well advised to continue its support for Ukrainian independence.

A compromise could likely be found, if Putin is prepared to accept Ukrainian sovereignty and independence:

- Ukraine might, instead of seeking NATO membership, formally reassert its neutrality. Ukraine has little to lose. NATO has in effect twice rejected its application.
- The EU has offered free trade with the Eurasian Economic Union. The EU might therefore amend the Association Agreement with Ukraine so as to allow the country to have free trade with both the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union.
- Putin appears to have revived the Russian proposals of 2008 for East-West security treaties. Perhaps the West should respond with counter-proposals of our own. It was out of initially strongly opposed viewpoints that were negotiated the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which marked a major step towards eventually ending the Cold War.
- ds eventually ending the Cold War.