Hybrid CoE Working Paper 17

How to read Russia: Internal structural disunity, risk-taking, and Russia's restless soul

Hybrid CoE

Hanna Smith – May 2022

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Introduction

Russia has never been an easy partner for other European states. It is also a country that divides opinions, perhaps more than one would expect. What is more, it keeps surprising,[1] especially the policy communities of the EU and NATO as institutions, as well as their member states at regular intervals: the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991; the wars in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999; Putin's rise to power, and Yeltsin's resignation in 1999; Russian troops taking over Pristina Airport in 1999; Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003; Putin's Munich speech in 2007; the war with Georgia in 2008; the annexation of Crimea in 2014; the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015; the constitutional amendments in 2020; and waging a conventional war against Ukraine in February 2022– to name just a few surprises. With the latest surprise, the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has brought a war into Europe that many compare to either WWI or WWII. It is a scene that nobody expected to witness again, and the war has had a profound effect on European security thinking. Events that were considered unthinkable, like Germany returning to military politics; Finland and Sweden seriously moving towards NATO membership; Ukraine breaking once and for all from Russia, as well as hard security being placed on the EU's agenda, are all now not only likely but moving ahead. In this new European security environment, we need to take a look, yet again, at what drives Russia and what the West has not understood. Why is it so difficult to adopt the right approach towards Russia?

There are two mainstreams in Western readings of Russia's policy choices. One bases its analysis on the assumption that Russia is a rational actor safeguarding its national interests in a rational way, and considers that Russian risk analyses are similar to ours, much like any other country. Strong arguments have been made that Russia behaves like a great power, closely comparable to the US and China.[2] The other view often sees Russia as an irrational actor,[3] linking "Russian irrationality" to its leaders, and currently to President Vladimir Putin. This interpretation could explain the abovementioned "surprises", since it is very difficult for the West to view any of them, apart perhaps from the constitutional amendments, as serving Russia's interests.[4]

No matter which reading one chooses to base one's analysis upon, when it comes to planning responses and future policies towards Russia, the utility of the five guiding principles of the EU's policy towards Russia must be questioned. First, the Minsk agreement can no longer be implemented. Second, selective engagement with Russia, and third, people-to-people contacts have become almost impossible to pursue due to Russia turning increasingly towards totalitarianism. Hence, the strict internal

1 CSIS, 'Russia Balance Sheet', Russia and Eurasia Program, https://www.csis.org/programs/russia-and-eurasia-program/archives/russia-balance-sheet. [All links were last accessed on 20 April 2022.]

2 Isaac Chotiner, 'Why John Mearsheimer blames the U.S. for the crisis in Ukraine', *The New Yorker*, 1 March, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine.

3 Greg Satell, 'No, Putin Is Not Acting Rationally', *Forbes*, 12 April 2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/gregsatell/2014/04/12/no-putin-is-not-acting-rationally/.

4 Even the fall of the Soviet Union was seen as inconceivable up until the last minute. The understanding was that it would serve the interests of all entities in the Soviet Union to remain in a Union.

control will make those two principles difficult to adhere to. Fourth, enhancing closer ties with the Eastern Partnership countries has also changed in nature and needs to be rethought. The only remaining principle in the current situation is strengthening resilience in the EU against the Russian threat. In NATO, practical cooperation was already suspended in 2014. The Partnership for Peace agreement that NATO had with Russia, and the NATO-Russia Council had served as channels of cooperation with Russia. Yet even if the door to political and military dialogue is said to remain open, there may be no returning to the old structures in NATO-Russia relations after the war in Ukraine.

While we follow the Russian aggression against Ukraine with mounting disbelief, we also need to try to think ahead and ensure that our situational awareness and analysis of Russia will be more precise than in the past. Future Western policies towards Russia should not make the same mistakes again, namely allowing Russia to divide us, and merely analyzing Russia from our own perspective. In this Hybrid CoE Working Paper, three basic factors that guide Russian policy choices both internally and externally will be introduced: internal structural disunity, risk-taking, and Russia's restless soul. These three factors show that Russia, like most states in world politics, is indeed a rational actor, but its rationality is not as understandable from the Western perspective. The factors are also connected to Russian hybrid threat activities (see Table 1), and should be examined closely since they all have certain strengths and weaknesses depending on the perspective, and will inform future scenarios as well as explain Russian actions.

Internal structural disunity

Russia is not a monolith, although its power structure is vertical in line with an authoritarian state system.[5] The system is peculiar and in many ways unique. Historically, the challenge has entailed ruling over such a huge territory and diverse society. A two-pronged approach has been adopted as a way of resolving this: firstly, those in power have had to rely on different force structures to maintain order; and secondly, they have sought to create an environment where there has been freedom of action in the structures, but strategic "guidelines" from above. This means that while the power is vertical, it relies on a networked approach to build influence and control. Even if this is first and foremost an internal issue, certain spill-overs to external relations need to be considered.

Russian force structures as control-keepers

Russian force structures have a long tradition as a power resource for the Russian power elite in general and for the leadership in particular. These structures are meant to ensure regime survival. Dmitri Trenin has noted that on top of Russia's "first army" (armed forces) there is a "second army" (force structure/paramilitary),[6] which consists of a number of ministries and federal services with militarized formations and armed personnel, and which is the force structure that is designed to be predominantly, but not solely, used for internal security. Included in the "second army" are the Ministry of the Interior; the Ministry for Civil Defence and Emergency Situations; the Federal Security Services (FSB), which include the border guards; the Federal Service for the Control of the Drug Trade; the Federal National Guard Service of the Russian Federation; the Foreign Intelligence Services (SVR); and the Ministry of Justice, with responsibility for the federal service for execution of services.[7] One estimate of the force structure/paramilitary personnel numbers can be found in *The Military Balance*, which puts the figure as high as 554,000 employees.[8]

The force structures introduce an element into Russian society that needs to be considered when thinking about Russia's internal dynamics, as well as the durability of the regime even in "times of trouble". It is these structures that will determine whether the regime survives or not. At the same time as being the regime's tool for control, the design of the structures and their connection to, or rather disconnection from, one another exposes a weakness internally. As Bettina Renz has observed, "lack of coordination and overlapping functions between the different force structures have created inefficiencies".[9] This reality sometimes leads to an assumption that Russian policies are uncoordinated, and that the Russian leadership needs to react to its own forces' activities, rather than

5 The latest developments within Russia, especially in the legal domain, indicate that Russia is moving towards totalitarianism. The powers of censorship have increased and the list of fines, penalties and criminal offences is ridiculously long.

6 Quoted in Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Wiley, 2018), 86.

7 Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, 86–120.

8 Figure from *The Military Balance 2021*, the International Institute for Strategic Studies. This does not include all of the intelligence-linked personnel, however.

9 Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, 111.

being the one issuing the orders.[10] This has had a spill-over effect into Russia's external policies: the different cases of poisonings (Litvinenko 2006, Skripal 2018, Navalny 2020) are all instances where a link to the Russian intelligence services has been detected, but a direct link to the Russian regime has been difficult to verify. All three are also cases where the Western community has debated the right course of action to take, even if a clear political decision was made in the Skripal and Navalny cases to hold the Russian regime responsible.

The force structures are also those actors that oversee the internal control when it comes to demonstrations and societal disobedience. If the force structures were united, it might create a powerful bloc to challenge the political power. From the regime's point of view, those actors could side with civil society if there was a large demonstration, for example, and an order was given to start killing the demonstrators. If the force structures are not united, there is always a fear among them that if orders are not obeyed, someone will arrest those who disobey. The regime needs the force structures to be united in their support for the regime, but they also need to be kept in competition with each other so that they do not become too powerful.

For the reasons outlined above, when thinking about whether Putin's leadership will survive the war in Ukraine or not, and what kind of Russia the West will need to deal with, this force structure factor and its role in regime survival is an important component along with the regime's tactics.

Russian delegation of policy implementation and outsourcing

The second feature of Russian disunity is the non-institutional delegation of policymaking and outsourcing, which the Hybrid CoE Trend Report from 2019 notes as a trend.[11] This implies seeking maximum power with minimum responsibility, and creates an atmosphere in which non-institutional actors act in such a way that they interpret "orders" as coming from the Kremlin. This could also be seen as relevant for the force structures, although somewhat different in nature. Non-institutional actors want to serve the country but are not affiliated to government institutions. This type of action makes it very difficult for outside observers, and sometimes even for those on the inside, to interpret what the policy line is, as mixed messages are sent and there is an ongoing guessing game over who holds the power, apart from the President. This situation enables the Kremlin to act as a seemingly responsible actor that maintains order in the country, while keeping it destabilized. Such a situation has almost always existed in Russian politics historically and is linked to the authoritarian form of its state system. It polarizes Russian society and creates duality through different interpretations of reality (conventional versus modern, conservative versus liberal, young versus old, east versus west, etc.).

10 Esther Addley, Luke Harding and Shaun Walker, 'Litvinenko "probably murdered on personal orders of Putin"', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/21/alexander-litvinenko-was-probably-murdered-on-personal-orders-of-putin.

11 Hanna Smith & Cristina Juola, 'Putin 4.0 Trends – Is there anything new?', Hybrid CoE (Trend Report 1, August 2019), 9, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-1-putin-4–0-trends-is-there-anything-new/.

When implementation of the state's strategic vision as formulated by the Kremlin is outsourced to non-state or close-to-state agencies, it gives the Kremlin "plausible deniability" of its involvement vis-à-vis both international and domestic audiences. Internationally, this manifests in Russia's denial of its role in illegal and/or unacceptable and/or questionable actions. Domestically, it works by portraying casualties in action as private actors unconnected to the state.[12] In both cases, the Kremlin will not be held accountable, but it can express support if the action is successful. There has been a clear trend for the Kremlin's increasing use of non-state actors and contractors. Examples include the Night Wolves (biker gang), Cossack regiments mobilized to help the Russian military intelligence (GRU) troops, different hobby clubs such as shooting clubs, paintball clubs, martial art studios, and so forth. Examples where the GRU has used "outsourcing" include hacking, operations outside Russia (Donbas, Syria, Africa), as well as the organization of a youth camp in Serbia. In the war in Ukraine in 2022, there is a strong indication that Russia is seeking to use "outside" actors like the Chechens, the Wagner Group, and foreign fighters from Syria and elsewhere.[13] If the atrocities committed in Ukraine can be attributed by Russia to troops other than Russian troops, it would be a prime example of how the outsourcing works.

This type of approach serves to polarize Russian society into many different groups, meaning that it is very difficult to form a united opposition to those in power. It removes the responsibility and accountability of the power, which can be highly dangerous, encouraging risk-taking for example. When executed well, power is retained in the hands of the Kremlin and civil society in a suitably disconnected way. The downside of this is that it has also become an internal weakness for Russia, hindering dynamic action, efficiency and joint action. The power of unity does not exist as such, and needs to be artificially enhanced at regular intervals. Assistance needs to be enlisted from state resources like the Church. This type of system is also unpredictable for its creators, calling for different types of law enforcement and intelligence services, as outlined above.

Both the non-institutional delegation of policy implementation and outsourcing and the role of the force structures can also explain several aspects of Russian behaviour in the current situation, especially in relation to the war in Ukraine. The force structure will guarantee regime survival and internal control. If this is upheld, the regime is much freer to act outside of Russia's borders, and even economic hardship can be turned into a narrative that supports the regime instead of undermining it. This constellation also means that the regime is not willing to punish any form of force structures for atrocities that they have committed.

Both of these factors should be taken into consideration when looking beyond the war in Ukraine (which may be a long-term conflict). If they don't change, Russia will not change, and surprises will keep happening. These two factors should also be monitored even if Russia were

12 Smith & Juola, 'Putin 4.0 Trends', 9.

13 Julian Borger, 'Russia deploys up to 20,000 mercenaries from Syria, Libya and elsewhere in Donbas', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/apr/19/russia-ukraine-war-zelenskiy-says-battle-for-donbas-has-begun-dialogue-between-macron-and-putin-stalls-live?page=with:block-625ee8d48f08cf2f8765ec30#block-625ee8d48f08cf2f8765ec30.

to embark on another democratization process. The regime needs to be able to show that it is ready to lose power through elections, prepared to accept different powerful civil society actors, is pushing hard for transparency, respects the rule of law, and is ensuring that there is accountability and democratic oversight of power. Until such time, the authoritarian system will remain and Russia will be a very unreliable partner politically, economically, and in terms of societal relations and military matters.

Risk-taking – Russian roulette and/or a game of poker?

Timothy Ash, a risk analyst at BlueBay Asset Management, expressed concern in January 2022 that Putin is a gambler who may have gone too far to back down. According to Ash, "It will all come down to whether he is a rash gambler, who wants to wager on one big win, or a calculated risk-taker prepared to notch up incremental wins."[14]

An argument could be made that Russia has a different risk-taking logic from the one applied in the West. This could explain why Russia has surprised the West so many times, especially in terms of military action. As Dmitry Gorenburg has put it, "Russian leaders are prospect theory players who take greater risks to prevent anticipated defeats than they do to pursue potential opportunities. They seek to prevent foreign policy defeats that could translate into a loss of power in the region, a loss of great power status, or, in some cases, translate into political defeats at home."[15] This type of thinking results from risk-taking that is unfamiliar from the Western point of view. In a *Financial Times* interview in 2019, Putin replied to a question about whether his risk-taking had increased: "It did not increase or decrease. Risk must always be well-justified." He went on to quote a Russian saying: "He who doesn't take risks, never drinks champagne."[16] Putin's approach to the question shows that his reasoning about risk is part of a broader strategic culture, rather than calculated and tailored to a particular issue.

Putin's risk-taking has been heavily debated with regard to his decision to wage a conventional, 20th-century type of war against Ukraine. For some time now, Putin's policy towards the West has been characterized by decisive, risk-taking actions, using conflict to exploit perceived points of vulnerability in the Western system.[17] Putin's military involvement in Syria was seen by many analysts at the time as a risky venture since it jeopardized Russian internal stability, and also risked opening a new front of competition with the West. However, it did not create internal instability, and did not serve to worsen Russia's relations with the West. In fact, Russia's operation in Syria has been viewed as a success in both Russia and the West, duly contributing to growing self-confidence among the Russian regime. Russian military involvement in Syria in 2015 was the first unilateral and sizeable out-of-area operation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the West, the success was attributed to the fact that Putin was seen as a master tactician instead of a grand strategist.[18] This interpretation was based on false assumptions and Western conceptual thinking. The result was that on the Western side, Russian tactics were mapped and analyzed in detail, but the strategic vision of challenging the West, demonstrating Russia's military might and

14 Jamie Dettmer, 'Is Russia's Putin a Rash Gambler or Calculating Risk-Taker?', VOA News, 27 January 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/is-putin-a-rash-gambler-or-calculating-risk-taker/6415299.html.

15 Dmitry Gorenburg, 'Russian Strategic Culture in a Baltic Crisis', Security Insight (Marshall Center, March 2019), https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-strategic-culture-baltic-crisis-0.

16 Dettmer, 'Is Russia's Putin a Rash Gambler'.

17 Stephen R. Covington, 'The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria', Paper (Belfer Center, December 2015), https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/meaning-russias-campaign-syria.

18 Covington, 'The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria'.

aspiration to increase its influence in those areas where it had exerted influence during the Cold War and to create new dividing lines, received little attention. This led to Russia becoming an agenda-setter and the West adopting a reactive mode. The West reacted to Russian activities, but not to its strategic vision and interests.

Russian risk-taking, which fails to make sense from the Western perspective, is rooted in the Russian strategic deterrence approach. Accordingly, Russia's direct and indirect uses of force have led observers to conclude that deliberate escalation is part of its strategic deterrence approach. As Anya Loukianova Fink observed after examining several sources:

> "Strategic deterrence is built on Russia's view of conflicts as defensive, preventive, and just. Russian military writings describe it as an approach with elements of deterrence, containment, and compellence that aims to "induce fear" in opponents. To achieve this and other effects, Russian military theorists focus on the importance of tailoring nonmilitary means and the direct and indirect uses of military force."[19]

This approach is in line with hybrid threat activity as well, where the idea is to harm and undermine the target before it even realizes that it is a target. Notably, Russia's targets of hybrid threat activity have been democratic countries, and countries undergoing democratization in geographical areas that Russia views as strategically important. Therefore, hybrid threat activity can also be seen as a part of Russian strategic deterrence measures. Its purpose is to change the West's behaviour and action by diverting attention, and blurring situational awareness through deception and the creation of fear factors. "Deterrence" signalling activities of this sort may run the risk of inadvertent escalation during a critical time, while mobilization activities could contribute to the perception that a conflict is unavoidable.[20] Russia's use of military tools since the end of the Cold War can conceivably be interpreted through these lenses – Russia is, from its perspective, in conflict with the West and sees all democratic countries as enemies. This is, in fact, a logical line of thought if viewed from the perspective of an authoritarian leader who sees enemies everywhere, and whose main priority is to maintain his grip on power. Democracy by default poses a threat to the Russian power elite, and to Putin.

This type of risk-taking presents a challenge for the West, and makes the West-Russia relationship extremely complicated. According to Edward A. McLellan, "With a lower threshold for conflict, deterrence will become more difficult; compellence and coercive diplomacy more risky, and uncertainty will dominate in an already unstable relationship."[21] Many within Russia contemplate and understand Western ways. However, they are also servants of their own system, which means that diplomacy and economic relations, for example, can have unpredictable rules.

19 Anya Loukianova Fink, 'The Evolving Russian Concept of Strategic Deterrence: Risks and Responses', Arms Control Association, July/August 2017, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017–07/features/evolving-russian-concept-strategic-deterrence-risks-responses.

20 Fink, 'The Evolving Russian Concept of Strategic Deterrence'.

21 Edward A. McLellan, 'Russia's Strategic Beliefs Today; The Risk of War in the Future', *Orbis*, Volume 61, Issue 2, (2017): 255–268.

Russia's restless soul

The third and final factor is Russia's restless soul, which is connected to the country's identity. The question of identity is always complicated, and perhaps even more so in the case of Russia. The country is geographically located between East and West, Europe and Asia.[22] It has a Byzantine cultural heritage, but its ethnicity and language are Slavic. It has erstwhile been the third largest empire in the world, and the other superpower in the Cold War world order. It is these elements (Byzantine culture, Asian lands, Slavic nature, European encounters, and greatness) that Russian identity is built upon. It is also these elements that are in constant conflict with each other. The authoritarian regime has also shaped and attempted to shape the identity narratives based on the needs of the regime. This has created perplexing dilemmas, not only for those that try to cooperate with Russia and analyze it from outside, but also for Russia itself. When examined from the perspective of expert speeches and statements, Russia is European yet threatened by the West, including European countries; Russia is its own unique civilization (isolationist, neither Asian nor European); and Russia is a global great power (in its outreach). Its cultural base is Byzantine, while most of its lands are in Asia (question of cultural supremacy).

Russia had the opportunity to choose an ethnic nation-state format characterized by democracy in the 1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 84% of the Russian Federation was composed of ethnic Russians. This represented a historic opportunity for the Russian Federation to base its identity on a common culture, created by its political and intellectual elites and transmitted through a universal system of education, as is the case in most Western countries. In the case of Russia, the creation of a common culture and base has always been more difficult, however. As Vera Tolz has shown, both the civic and ethnic elements of nationhood in Russia were weakened by the peculiar form of Russian state-building. As Russia was a multi-ethnic empire, the development of a Russian ethnic identity was stunted. The development of a unifying civic identity within the borders of the state was stultified by the fact that the governments of Russia and the USSR were authoritarian and, moreover, poorly institutionalized compared with governments in Western Europe.[23]

A report entitled *National Identity: The 25-Year Search for a New Russia*, published by Russia Direct in 2016, presents many different takes on Russian identity. It also shows how difficult it has been, and still is, to establish a national identity for Russia. Different leaders – Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin and now Putin – have all sought to define Russian national identity in their own ways, which has resulted in a fluid identity that continues to evolve over time and with each change of leader. The report asks the question "Why does new Russia look so much like the old Russia?", and also provides the answer: "The last quarter century has shown that the 'new Russia', which rose out of the ashes of the U.S.S.R., was 'new' only in intentions and slogans. The reality, however, is that when given a choice between solving problems with traditional methods, or with new and

22 Katalin Miklóssy and Hanna Smith, *Strategic Culture in Russia's Neighborhood* (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 11–12.

23 Vera Tolz, 'The Search for a National Identity in the Russia of Yeltsin and Putin', in *Restructuring Post-Communist Russia*, ed. Yitzhak Brudny, Jonathan Frankel, and Stefani Hoffman (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

innovative ways, Russian officials and the public almost always choose the old, tried and true methods."[24] This is an important observation. It takes time to renew and reshape national identities.

The report makes another interesting observation: post-Cold War Russia has revealed different identities through different individuals. It mentions three types of elites that have all influenced Russian politics, but also the West in its perception of Russia. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, influential figures from the Soviet-era intelligentsia included people like St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak, economist and politician Yegor Gaidar, and journalist and media manager Yegor Yakovlev. The mid-1990s to the early 2000s was a time when oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky were very close to the state power and were also able to set the agenda for Russian policies. Moreover, politician and businessman Anatoly Chubais, who was responsible for privatization in Russia, became a symbol of the epoch, as the report put it. The third type of influence, framed as bureaucratic revenge, was exerted by Vladimir Putin. It was characterized as follows: "The control of public opinion once again was under the watchful eye of former members of the Soviet bureaucratic elite and members of the secret services."[25]

This type of categorization of post-Soviet identities also provides a perspective on why the understanding of Russia is so different in the West. It depends on which groups one had encounters with and at which time, since the groups also changed in character over time. In the end, all three seem to have lost the quest for Russian identity, as the report states:

"The Russia of the Soviet intellectual could not become part of the West; its leaders did not have the political know-how to keep political power. The Russia of the oligarchs could not find new ideals, except for material wealth, and was close to physical disintegration. Putin's Russia, after a couple of attempts to renew itself, started resembling not a new country, ready to face the challenges of the 21st century, but the Soviet Union of the mid-1970s, with its anti-Western sentiments, internal political stagnation, and deep structural problems in the economic sector."[26]

In all three of the aforementioned attempts to find a new identity and/or direction for Russia, the Russian relationship with the West has been a key element. Three alternatives were ostensibly on offer for Russia as well: integration with the West, partnership with the West, or competition with the West. The different debates on Russian identity and where it belongs would appear to have been cunningly used by Putin's regime not only to divide the elites within Russia, but also to confuse the Western community. When identity becomes part of the political game, society arguably becomes restless and embarks on a search for its own identity, leading to polarization and disunity. This translates into different types of activity: demonstrations, hacking, spirited performances, extreme types of behaviour, and so forth.

24 Ivan Tsvetkov, 'The evolution of Russian identity 1991–2016', *Russia Direct*, Volume 4, Issue 6 (2016): 4. https://russia-direct.org/system/files/journal/RussiaDirect_Report_NationalIdentity_The25YearSearch-ForANewRussia_June_2016_0.pdf.

25 Tsvetkov, 'The evolution of Russian identity 1991–2016', 5.

26 Tsvetkov, 'The evolution of Russian identity 1991–2016', 9.

This shows how difficult it has been to formulate a Russian identity. For this reason, it seems that since 2012, Putin's Russia has sought its identity in its imperial past. Today's Russia has inherited Soviet Union status factors such as a seat on the UN Security Council, and a nuclear arsenal, bolstering its self-identification as a great power. Russia has also adopted a coat of arms symbolizing its 500-year history of expansionism, authoritarianism, and mission thinking (since 1492), effectively anchoring the Russian identity in its imperial past. In both identities – the great power of the Soviet era and imperial Russia – the country is bigger than the Russian Federation's borders today. This is a significant factor influencing Russia's policy choices and its behaviour towards its neighbours, and in international politics more broadly. The imperial identity always lends itself to Russia's responsibility to defend different "security" interests beyond its borders. Russia has sought to protect (the orthodox) religion, to defend Slavs (pan-Slavism in the 19th century as a pretext for Russia's involvement in the Balkans), and to safeguard Russians and Russian-speakers abroad (today's context).[27] In all of these contexts, it has been prepared to use military power. The Russian proverb "The future is always the same, it's the past that keeps changing" is an important indication that history and identity can be rebuilt and reshaped at regular intervals, and provide a tool for Russian regimes in their attempts to maintain power.

Russia has not made "peace" with its imperial past and therefore its neighbours, Europe and the West in general, have difficulties in interpreting Russian actions. Russia behaves today more like a conventional 19th-century imperial power than a 21st-century modern nation- state. It is this contradiction which is integral to Russia, and which gives the country its restless soul.

27 Jeremy Smith, 'Responsibility and Neighbourhood in Russian Strategic Culture', in *Strategic Culture in Russia's Neighborhood*, ed. Miklossy and Smith, 16–17.

Table 1. Internal structural disunity, risk-taking, Russia's restless soul and their connections to Russian hybrid threat activity.

	Internal structural disunity – outsourcing	Internal structural disunity – force structures	Risk-taking	Russia's restless soul
Effects	Makes attribution challenging.	Plays with different "borders" – civil-military, friend-enemy, war-peace.	Makes Russia unpredictable.	Difficulties in understanding what type of actor Russia is – difficulties in policy formulation.
Style	Deliberately cutting the direct link to the regime. There will always be a middleman to blame.	Activity that uses state resources; support for education initiatives; providing weapons and poison to be used outside of Russia's borders. This type of activity is conducted for destabilization purposes in the style of a campaign or an operation.	• Exploiting opportunities. For priming purposes, both interference and influence activities are needed. • Reckless action, which translates into terrorist acts like poisonings and blowing up weapon storage facilities.	• Strong need for narrative creation and information control. • Disregard for the arguments and views of others (negotiated reality).
Success	This works rather well both internally and externally. Internally, Putin the leader can act as if he was oblivious to what was going on and then defend his actions to the public. Externally, it makes attribution challenging.	Mostly success as a spoiler, and stirring things up. Gives rise to the question of whether it has been used as a decoy.	Mixed record – this depends on how well the priming phase is executed. Difficult to counter since it is embedded in the Russian understanding of influence. Both resilience and deterrence are needed.	• Has succeeded in finding "friends" to some extent outside of Russia's borders. Can be effective when connected to outsourcing. • Worked relatively well inside Russia until the war in Ukraine.
Domains affected	Social, cultural, political, economy, cyber, public administration, legal	Cultural, military, intelligence, cyber, legal	All 13[28]	Information, diplomacy, cultural, social and political

28 The 13 domains of hybrid threats are: infrastructure, cyber, space, economy, military/defence, culture, social/societal, public administration, legal, intelligence, diplomacy, political, and information. See Georgios Giannopoulos, Hanna Smith & Marianthi Theocharidou, 'The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model – Public Version', The European Commission and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 26 November 2020, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/the-landscape-of-hybrid-threats-a-conceptual-model/.

Conclusions

Russia will remain a threat to Europe as long as it is governed by an authoritarian or, even worse, a totalitarian system. Russia will also remain a challenge for Europe even if it embarks once again on a democratization process, when the next change of regime occurs. In other words, the "Russia question" will continue to be on Europe's and the West's agenda in the future as well. Indicators that should be monitored are internal structural disunity, risk-taking, and Russia's restless soul. These three factors will remain even if the regime or the leader change. The West should not be unnerved by Russia and Russia should not be allowed to divide the democratic community. Authoritarian states are more unpredictable than democratic states. On the one hand, the system may appear stable and durable, but on the other hand, the perceived stability can be transformed overnight into instability and a regime change. The EU and NATO communities should be prepared for both.

Future forms of cooperation with Russia should be treated with caution. When the war in Ukraine comes to an end, it will be possible to rethink the EU's and NATO's relationship with Russia. To this end, the European security architecture should be considered from the perspective of both the EU and NATO. If Russia is effectively seeking a new iron curtain to divide Europe, are we willing to grant Russia that? If the EU and NATO communities close their borders, this may be precisely what Russia is seeking. Past misinterpretations and misperceptions should be avoided. Russia should not be allowed to define the European security agenda. It is up to the EU and NATO communities to define this agenda, and also to propose different scenarios for how they are prepared to cooperate with Russia, post-Putin and in the future.

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