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**What Are Russia's Long-Term Objectives and Theories of Victory *vis-à-vis* the Former Soviet Republics in Eastern Europe?**

**JCSP 47**

**Exercise Solo Flight**

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 – PCEMI 47  
2020 – 2022

Exercise Solo Flight – Exercice Solo Flight

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## **WHAT ARE RUSSIA'S LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES AND THEORIES OF VICTORY VIS-À-VIS THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS IN EASTERN EUROPE?**

The current Russian regime's long-term objective is to establish and maintain a sphere of control over the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe, with this control being at the exclusion of other major powers. To establish control, Russia uses diplomatic and informational campaigns to align the interests of the former Soviet republics e.g. Belarus, with its interests. Vis-a-vis the former republics who have joined NATO and EU, e.g. the Baltic states, Russia uses a combined effort of threats to their economy, and cyberwarfare backed by a potential military campaign to destabilize them. To prevent a repetition of NATO's further expansion into e.g. Ukraine, Russia did not hesitate to launch an all-out invasion. This study posits that all the above use of Russia's instruments of power is intended to address domestic political and economic issues, in order to ensure the stability of the Russian regime. To this end, the regime has no choice but to oppress the opposition, restrict free press and attempt to mitigate the effects of sanctions to make its theory of victory credible.

### **Application of the Monroe Doctrine and Control Over Russia's Near Abroad**

Out of the 14 former Soviet republics, Russia sees its particular interests lie in those in Eastern Europe, e.g. Ukraine and Belarus, as they are the peripheries of Russia's west, where EU and NATO begin. Not only these states serve as economic bridges between Russian resources and Western goods and services, but the Russian rhetoric also increasingly sees NATO's further eastward expansion to potentially include Ukraine, post the "colour revolutions", as a military threat. In addition to viewing the "colour revolutions" as being instigated by the West, the Russian elite also advocate that the Western value system and the Western path of development

are incompatible with those of the Russian orthodox church<sup>1</sup>. This value system argument centered on the traditional Russian social values of family, sexuality and religious views in the political context, versus the alleged cultural corruption of the West including gays, Pokémon, Ukrainian fascists, Jehovah's Witness and so on<sup>2</sup>, as a threat to humanity<sup>3</sup>.

Russia's view of the West and its eastward expansion evolved over the 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. While Yeltsin was strongly pro-West<sup>4</sup> with a goal of eventually integrating into it, only 16% of the external borders between Russian and the former Soviet republics were then demarcated<sup>5</sup> - at that point, even if the Russian elite saw the EU and NATO expansion with skepticism, faced with losing a quarter of its territory and almost half of the Soviet population<sup>6</sup>, the smaller, and less important, Baltic states' joining both in the 2000s was not seen as alarming. In fact, Russia's policy towards them was rather self-contradictory and inconsistent until the mid-2000s<sup>7</sup> when the Russian elite, Putin included, started to be disillusioned of the West to treat Russia as coequals in diplomatic and military affairs<sup>8</sup>. NATO and EU's further expansion into the post-Soviet Eastern Europe was seen as important a threat analogous as the US considered the Soviet's military expansion into Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Vasif Huseynow. *Soft power geopolitics: how does the diminishing utility of military power affect the Russia – West confrontation over the “Common Neighbourhood”*. Eastern Journal of European Studies, Volume 7, Issue 2, December 2016, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Rutland. *Understanding Putin's Russia and the Struggle over Ukraine*. Perspectives on Politics December 2021 Vol. 19/No. 4, 1265.

<sup>3</sup> Huseynow, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Rutland, 1267.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew, Luxmoore. *Defensive Imperialism: the Evolution of Russia's Regional Foreign Policy*. International Journal on World Peace. Vol XXXI No. 2 June 2014, 78.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Elias Götz. *Enemy at the Gates: A Neoclassical Realist - Explanation of Russia's Baltic Policy*. Foreign Policy Analysis (2019) 15, 100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Russia's long-term objective, seen from a geopolitical perspective, therefore, is a local version of the Monroe doctrine: it aims at preventing regional powers, e.g. EU, or an extra-regional power, the US, from entering Russia's backyard. Vis-à-vis Ukraine, Russia's objective is to tolerate it as an independent state to the extent of Belarus; failure of achieving which, an alternative would be a forced neutrality in the form of a second Finland<sup>9</sup>. Given the three Baltic states' integration into the EU, especially within NATO, and their relative lack of importance to Russia, the latter's tactics are to continually attempt to destabilize them by maintaining military, economic and informational pressure.

But if a grand strategy is the art of reconciling means and ends<sup>10</sup>, Russia's aforementioned objective contains a number of logical self-contradictions. First and foremost, it is safe to conclude that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of the Russian people's rejection of the USSR's domestic political oppression and economic inequalities; building a new Russia, they turned towards a democratic system and the possible capitalist plenty – in this sense, Russia' initial goal was not different from that of the Baltic states or what Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova aspire to today. This goal would have led Russia onto a path of integration with the West as opposed to confrontation. Secondly, the Western values of pluralistic societies and the protection of minorities, racial, religious or sexual etc., are based on lessons learned from past oppressions in the forms of colonialism, the Civil Rights Movement, WWII, USSR etc.; as opposed to being a form of cultural decadence - these values coexist with one's free choice of similar values as embraced by the orthodox church. The real differences are hardly fundamental and certainly not unreconcilable. Thirdly, Russia, while a geographical giant, has a smaller GDP

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<sup>9</sup> Oleksii Izhak. *The Threats and Challenges of a Multipolar World: A Ukraine Crisis Case Study*. Connection Quarterly Journal 15, no 1 (2016), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Tad A Schnauffer II. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West." *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (2017), 22.

than that of Canada, and is dwarfed by that of Japan, Germany, China and the US<sup>11</sup>. Not only the perceived Western threat is not a real threat unless Russia opted back into a form of the Soviet authoritarianism, pursuing its geopolitical objective is clearly not reconciling with its means - a military adventure such as that in Ukraine will significantly diminish Russia's economic and military power. Indeed, in a multipolar world, this war put Russia's status as a great power for peace into serious question. Why would Putin then pursue such an objective, seemingly at all costs?

### **Autocratic Regime, Nationalism and Stability**

The true reason behind the logical inconsistency in Russia's long-term objective lies in the current state of its regime: it evolved, during the past 2 decades, with Putin gradually consolidating power into his autocracy. Under this autocratic regime, no democratic institutions can hold the executive power to account; those in power and their associates engage in a systemic economic corruption with impunity.

In the 1990s, not only the Soviet Union as a political entity collapsed, so did its economy. By the end of 1992, the inflation of the consumer index reached 1,500%;<sup>12</sup> subsequently, Russia's economy went through a problematic period marked with painful but halting attempts to privatize and to stabilize, including using an economic "shock therapy", but many measures were unsuccessful<sup>13</sup>. Due to the economic failures in 1998, Yeltsin's approval rating tanked to 2%<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> World Bank. *2020 GDP by country (US\$)*. Russia at \$1.48 Trillion, Canada \$1.64 Trillion, Germany \$3.85 Trillion, Japan \$5.06 Trillion, China \$14.72 Trillion and the US \$20.95 Trillion. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

<sup>12</sup> Chatham House. *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia*, 13 May 2021. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-13-liberal-market-reform-1990s-was-bad-russia>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Luxmoore, 80.

When Putin first came into power in the 2000s, his administration's reforms started to claim wealth from the entrepreneur oligarchs back to the hands of the nomenklatura; one example was Putin's expropriating almost all the oil and gas companies<sup>15</sup>. Still, prior to 2014, Putin's popularity tracked Russia economic performance<sup>16</sup>: his approval rating dropped from 79% in 2010 to the low 60% in 2013 due to economic malaise and people's displeasure because of his switching jobs twice with Medvedev<sup>17</sup>; he also faced discontent from two fronts in which the relatively successful urban class feared his taking a conservative turn, while the left complained about the lack of social programs<sup>18</sup>.

The fact that the Russian people measured their leaders' performance by how they managed the economy, shows a degree of democratic scrutiny and free expression. More importantly, should the same economy-focused scrutiny continue to drive election cycles, the Kremlin leadership would have no choice but to deepen market-oriented economic reforms, although to diversify its sectors where 70% of its revenue comes from hydrocarbons<sup>19</sup>, or to raise Russia's per capita GDP from \$10,126, are challenging tasks. When analyzing Russia's economic system, however, the Putin Restoration<sup>20</sup> that re-established the power-money connection between the political elite, especially putting wealth in the hands of the former KGB nomenklatura, did little to address these concerns. The reality is that the intended economic reforms to an open market economy were incomplete. The old communist elite were replaced by

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<sup>15</sup> Aviezer Tucker. *Restoration and convergence: Russia and China since 1989*. In *The Global 1989: Continuity and Change in World Politics*, edited by George Lawson, Chris Armbruster, and Michael Cox. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Rutland, 1264.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel A. Greene and Graeme Robertson. *Affect and Autocracy: Emotions and Attitudes in Russia after Crimea*. *Perspectives on Politics* March 2022 Vol. 20/No. 1, 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Luxmoore, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Tucker, 171-172.

the new elite class; the new nomenklatura then gained a greater concentration of wealth in their hands than in the Soviet era. In the process, a systemic corruption similar to that in the USSR formed where the entire ecosystem hinges on giving and taking bribes, selling lucrative state resources and buying them...the accumulated wealth then goes to the top. This is the reason why Western sanctions to seize oligarch's bank accounts, real estate and mega yachts, including one valued at \$700m linked to Putin himself<sup>21</sup>, proved to be immediately fruitful. In fact, since 2000, the Russian political-economic stratification and systemic corruption increasingly resembled that of the Soviet Union before its collapse<sup>22</sup>.

Like its economic reforms, Russia's political democratization was equally incomplete. While the one-party Communist rule ended in 1991 and elections were held, the institutions that checked on and balanced those in power were weak, weakened or eliminated altogether. The current Russian state has weak oppositions and civil society<sup>23</sup>; opposition leaders were weakened, literally, when e.g. Navalny was poisoned and subsequently imprisoned. The judiciary lacks independence and does not provide constraints to the executive power – it toes the same party line. The limited free press in the forms of independent and foreign media was restricted since 2014 and more significantly restricted after the Ukrainian war started<sup>24</sup>. Criticizing the government on social media, especially the invasion, became dangerous. Finally, the constitutional executive term limit was amended in 2021 to allow Putin, who has ruled over

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<sup>21</sup> BBC. Italy orders seizure of yacht linked to Putin. 6 May 2022. Accessed 9 May 2022.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/61357256>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Rutland, 1266.

<sup>24</sup> CTV News. Russia mulls more media restrictions amid war in Ukraine. 6 April 2022. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/russia-mulls-more-media-restrictions-amid-war-in-ukraine-1.5850858>



two decades already, two more terms until 2036<sup>25</sup>. These complete the cycle that restored the same level of protection for the absolute autocratic power, as well as the money connected to that power, as they used to be in the Soviet Union.

If it were the Russian people who were behind the collapse of the Soviet Union, today they face the same political-economic reality: their standard of living improved from the Soviet era and has been elevated from the lows of the 1990s, but their income disparity with the wealthy widened. With the Western sanctions, the Russian economy has already contracted, and that contraction will worsen over time with more and more visible impacts on ordinary citizens' day-to-day lives; the limited freedoms in a democratic society that allow people to peacefully change governments and to seek redress of grievances were eroded to a point that the state is again ruled by authoritarians who, in turn, arbitrarily determine how long they stay in power and how they use that power. If the majority of the Russian people rejected the Soviet oppression and economic corruption, today, the silenced, yet exacerbating conflict between the Russian elite and the Russian people can be the cause of the regime's own undoing.

### **Theory of Success**

The Russian state's objective therefore is an inward-looking one: it aims at preserving its survivability – as the threat to its survival comes from the ordinary Russian people. To achieve this end, it needs to prevent strong opposition and civil society from constantly on the regime's power, it cannot tolerate a free press that exposes government corruption and inefficiencies, it also needs to control the social media messaging which served as anchors of popular movements

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<sup>25</sup> CBS. Putin signs law allowing him to serve 2 more terms as Russia's president. 5 April 2021. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-president-russia-signs-law-allowing-2-more-presidential-terms/>

during the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions. The regime cannot afford to go back to election cycles where the candidates' popularity tracked their economic performance. In summary, there is a fundamental underlying incompatibility in today's Russia between a market economy and an autocratic regime that, if unmitigated, will lead to rifts and another regime collapse.

The solution Putin and the Kremlin's cultural elite devised, was a socially constructed nationalism-based discourse – this is the regime's internal theory of success. Russian researchers such as Sharafutdinova<sup>26</sup> outlined two cornerstones of this construct: the Soviet exceptionalism and the ensuing victimhood in the 1990s. Increasingly, since invading Ukraine in particular, Russian and Belarusian propaganda connects their present to the Soviet victory over Hitler, to Soviet people's heroism and sacrifices which were showcased at annual victory parades with displays of Soviet artifacts. Sharafutdinova argued the ordinary Russian's search for a lost identity due to the sudden disappearance of the USSR and its replacement by the corrupt oligarch class<sup>27</sup>, resulted in Putin's popularity: he crystallized this collective identity, and his show of resolve and decisiveness mirrors how the society sees itself and what the society needs.

But 30 years ago, the same pride and sacrifices by the Soviet people did not prevent them from causing the inevitable demise of the Communist regime; they also saw through the portrayed flaws of American imperialism something that the Soviet Union could never offer – liberty and the pursuit of individual prosperity. They understood the partiality of the CPSU's propaganda that historic victories were no more than an adrenaline shot that cannot conjugate with the daily realities of shortages of everything and the disparity between their living standard

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<sup>26</sup> Rutland, 1265.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

and that of the nomenklatura. If the older generations who lived in the Soviet Union has a cynical view of that era, it is hard to imagine how the younger generations, who benefitted from access to the West, would resonate with propaganda about the Soviet past. Even for the older generation, an emotional connection with the past eventually has to be measured with their present, and those who advocate a return to the USSR is a minority and is unrealistic. Reminiscences of the victorious Soviet Motherland itself is insufficient.

To serve a political purpose, the key to define nationalism is the presence of the other. This other has to be connected with Russia's identity politics, such as being a threat to its survival, the oppression of Russophones in the former Soviet republics or erasing memories of the Soviet sacrifices (e.g. in the Baltics). NATO is portrayed as the conspiratorial quarterback of an encirclement and an impending military attack. To portray the ethnic oppression and challenge to the Soviet history in Eastern Europe, Ukraine and the Baltic states were described as fascistic, with the Ukrainian government being overrun by Nazis. By Nazis, Russian propaganda points to neo-Nazi elements in the Ukrainian society, that the alleged Nazi-run Ukrainian government is absolute evil, tantamount to Hitler. The Russian people's attention then can be effectively diverted from the domestic economic and political problems; instead, through a persistent influencing activity campaign, they focus on external threats.

But fundamentally, nationalistic sentiments are an emotion, and an emotional view is rarely backed by a rational analysis or facts. Prior to the annexation of Crimea, NATO had no plans to deploy combat troops to the east of the Alliance<sup>28</sup>; Russia shares only 6% of its border with NATO countries, encirclement was clearly not in the plans, let alone economic

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<sup>28</sup> NATO. *NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance*. 22 Mar 2022. Accessed 09 May 2022. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm)

strangulation given the EU's significant dependence on Russian energy, and that Western businesses' heavy investments in the Russian market. When it comes to Nazism and fascism in Ukraine, a propaganda campaign Russia started in 2014, a group of 150 historians who study genocide and the Holocaust demented that theory as simply untrue, since the Ukrainian governments are not run by Nazis<sup>29</sup>. In fact, the definitions of Nazism<sup>30</sup> and Fascism<sup>31</sup> both describe much better the current state of the Russian regime than that in Kyiv.

The regime's messaging campaign is carefully choreographed: it propagates relativism and disinformation, both in Russia and abroad, including in the West, to challenge the truth. The consensus among researchers is that, prior to the invasion, the regime's messaging has been relatively successful<sup>32</sup>. By relativism, the propaganda continually questions whether there is truth, and whether the version of facts from the West is reliable. RT's moto is to "question more"<sup>33</sup>. The state-controlled media also intentionally release several versions of a story, to create disinformation. In practice, the Russian state exercised close platform control that not only RT and Sputnik are state-controlled outlets, NGOs in the information domain are in fact tools of the state as well<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> The Jewish Journal. *Statement on the War in Ukraine by Scholars of Genocide, Nazism and World War II*. Accessed 09 May 2022. <https://jewishjournal.com/news/worldwide/345515/statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine-by-scholars-of-genocide-nazism-and-world-war-ii/>

<sup>30</sup> Nazism: the body of political and economic doctrines held and put into effect by the Nazis in Germany from 1933 to 1945 including the totalitarian principle of government, predominance of especially Germanic groups assumed to be racially superior, and supremacy of the führer. Accessed 09 May 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>

<sup>31</sup> Fascism: a political philosophy, movement, or regime (such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition. Accessed 09 May 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>

<sup>32</sup> T. S. Allen and A. J. Moore. *Victory without Casualties: Russia's Information Operations*. Parameters 48(1) Spring 2018, 70.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

But as the war wears on, the sanctions deepen and Russia's isolation exacerbates, the key messages may be questioned. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is into its third month, this military campaign clearly lost its initiative at the outset, as it failed to capture large cities including Kyiv to achieve the same effect as US rapid capture of Bagdad in 2003. The current pivot to the East and South is clearly a compromise, but Putin insisted in March 2022 that everything was going according to plan<sup>35</sup>. At the Victory Day speech however, Putin did not mention Ukraine once, did not call for a general mobilization and did not outline an ending to the war<sup>36</sup>; these can be seen as a sign that a protracted war without a clear exit strategy started to undermine the theory of success on de-Nazifying Ukraine. More ostensible is Russia's economic troubles because of the sanctions. According to its Central Bank, the Russian gross GDP has shrunk 8% already, while prices for consumer goods rose 18-23% as of May 2022, that this trend would continue next year<sup>37</sup>. As the upcoming election in 2024 approaches, viewed in the context of unrelenting Western sanctions that will last at least in the mid-term future, the Russian people will increasingly question the regime's theory of success.

## Conclusion

At the time of this study, Russia has abandoned the plan to install a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv, instead, it reoriented to annex the Ukrainian territories in the South and East to connect Russia proper with Crimea; it may entertain a possible compromise to accept Ukraine as a second Finland. Timely, Finland announced its immediate plan to join NATO<sup>38</sup> as a consequence

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<sup>35</sup> Al Jazeera. *Russia's Putin says Ukraine advance going to plan*. 3 Mar 2022. Accessed 9 May 2022.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/putin-says-ukraine-advance-going-to-plan-as-war-enters-week-two>

<sup>36</sup> Al Jazeera. *Putin's Victory Day speech far from triumphant: Analysts*. 9 May 2022. Accessed 9 May 2022.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/9/putins-victory-day-speech-far-from-triumphant-analysts>

<sup>37</sup> Fortune. *Russia faces its biggest economic collapse since Putin rose to power*. 2 May 2022. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://fortune.com/2022/05/02/russia-faces-its-biggest-economic-collapse-since-putin-rose-to-power/>

<sup>38</sup> CBC. *Putin wanted less NATO on his border. Finland and maybe Sweden will give him more*. 12 May 2022. Accessed 13 May 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/putin-nato-finland-sweden-1.6451154>

of Russia's invasion of Ukraine - Ukraine may become the only neutral country between Russia and NATO in Europe. While Russian information campaigns targeted the frictions within the NATO Alliance, during the previous US administration in particular, President Biden has restored the view that US strategic centre of gravity is its global alliances, this invasion significantly strengthened NATO's resolve against Russian aggression. Russia's long-term objective faces the realistic challenges that its short-term economic resilience may eventually falter, its current sphere of control being constrained and will be under further and coordinated pressure from the West, and more importantly, the Russian people may demand a completion of the market and political reforms which they wanted, resulting in a modern and democratic form of government that they intended in 1991.

The struggles between pluralism and monism, openness and control, holding those in power to account and autocratic impunity are what the current Russian regime tries to divert the Russian people from. In pursuing its expressed long-term objective in the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe, and the corresponding theory of success, there can be two scenarios that lead to the same conclusion. Russia engages in a direct confrontation with NATO that will further undermine regional stability and Russian economy, or the internal forces in Russia challenge the regime in the same way as in 1991. Russia would eventually resume its path towards a true democracy.

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