

Russia's Europe, 1991–2016: inferiority to superiority

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As the Soviet Union fell apart, Russia opted for a foreign policy of cooperation with Europe and the West. The following 25 years saw an about-turn from cooperation to conflict. In 2014, having occupied the Crimean peninsula, it aided and abetted an insurgency against the central authorities in neighbouring Ukraine. In 2015, it left the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe and began a military buildup along its entire western border. In 2016, it came to the aid of its ally Syria in a way that brought it directly into conflict with western powers.

There are a number of ways of accounting for such sea-changes in foreign policy. Some studies set out to explain Russia's foreign policy by analysing the country's place in the international system, most often in geopolitical terms.¹ Clearly, one reason for Russia's about-turn is the state's difficulty in dealing with the downsizing in territory and resources that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the more marginalized place within the state system in which Russia found itself as a result. Other studies aim to demonstrate how Russian foreign policy is determined by structural domestic changes such as bureaucratic in-fighting, the motives of political leaders and so on.² Such factors are always important in understanding how specific foreign policy decisions come about. A third literature traces the influence of ideas.³ Given that actions depend on how people think about the world,

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¹ A typical example would be John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>, which reaches this conclusion by deducing from the premises set out in his *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton, 2002) with admirable logic and clarity. See also Mikael Wigell and Antto Vihma, 'Geopolitics versus geoeconomics: the case of Russia's geostrategy and its effects on the EU', *International Affairs* 92: 3, May 2016, pp. 605–28; Sten Rynning, 'The false premise of continental concert: Russia, the West and the necessary balance of power', *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2015, pp. 539–52.

² Readers of this journal have been excellently served in this regard. For recent examples, see Roy Allison, 'Russian "deniable" intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules', *International Affairs* 90: 6, Nov. 2014, pp. 1255–97; David Wedgwood Benn, 'On re-examining western attitudes to Russia', *International Affairs* 90: 6, Nov. 2014, pp. 1319–28; Andrew Monaghan, 'Putin's Russia: shaping a grand strategy?', *International Affairs* 89: 5, Sept. 2013, pp. 1221–36; Arkady Moshes, 'Russia's European policy under Medvedev: how sustainable is a new compromise?', *International Affairs* 88: 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 17–30.

³ Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* 46: 2, 1992, pp. 391–425; Stefan Auer, 'Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin: the Ukraine crisis and the return of geopolitics', *International Affairs* 91: 5, Nov. 2015, pp. 953–68.

such studies help to inform our understanding of radical change. Ideas were important to the rise of the Soviet Union, they were important to its downfall and they remain important to its successor states. Notwithstanding the importance of all three perspectives, this article takes a different approach to the problem of Russia's changing European policy. I start from the presupposition that societies and their states seek recognition in the world, and that states somehow have to relate to society's views of the grounds on which a country should seek such recognition.⁴ These grounds will be contested, and my first concern in this article is to map this contestation as it has unfolded over the last quarter-century.

Where Russia is concerned, it has from its very emergence sought not only to be recognized, but to be recognized as a Great Power.⁵ I have followed the Russian debate about Europe since Soviet times, and I have yet to come across a participant who has argued in favour of a foreign policy that would give up this goal. It is a given in the debate that Russia should be great. This observation underlies the entire argument to be developed in the article.

The argument turns on what it means for Russians that their country should be 'great'. I trace the clash between two ways of thinking about Russian greatness that came about following Mikhail Gorbachev's easing of censorship as part of his perestroika politics of the late 1980s. Russia's turn to Europe reached its maximum in 1991. At this point the state, and a whole string of other public voices, wanted Russia to be 'a normal nation-state', by which was meant a standard liberal democratic and capitalist European country. Against this westernizing or liberal representation of Europe stood what was at first a makeshift group of old communists and right-wing nationalists, who put forward an alternative representation which began to form around the idea that the quintessential Russian priority was to have a strong state. The present article will show how this latter position came to be consolidated into a fully fledged xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe. I use the term xenophobic to stress how far this strand of nationalism goes beyond a spiritual or patriotic celebration of the self by explicitly adding hostile tropes when discussing all or selected minorities and outside polities.⁶ During the

⁴ A number of approaches have pursued this broad programme, and they may all be traced back to Hegel. For an overview, see Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the other: 'the East' in European identity formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); also Sergei Prozorov, 'In and out of Europe: identity politics in Russian-European relations', in Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin, eds, *Identity and foreign policy: Baltic-Russian relations and European integration* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 133–59; Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelili, 'The external constitution of European identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-makers', *Cooperation and Conflict* 47: 1, 2012, pp. 28–48. One strand that is particularly productive regarding Russian studies is social identification theory, which postulates that when an agent cannot find recognition on a certain set of grounds, it will simply shift the ground for comparison. For an excellent example of this approach, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Shortcut to greatness: the new thinking and the revolution in Soviet foreign policy', *International Organization* 57: 1, 2003, pp. 77–109.

⁵ Anatoly Reshetnikov, 'Russia as a Great Power', PhD thesis, Central European University, forthcoming 2017; Iver B. Neumann, 'Russia's standing as a Great Power, 1492–1815', in Ted Hopf, ed., *Russia's European choices* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 11–34; Iver B. Neumann, 'Russia as a Great Power, 1815–2007', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11: 2, 2008, pp. 128–51; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian foreign policy: the return of Great Power politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 153.

⁶ Other terms, such as fundamentalist nationalists, have also been used about this group; see Margot Light, 'In search of an identity: Russian foreign policy and the end of ideology', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19: 3, 2003, pp. 42–59.

Putin years, this xenophobic nationalist position steadily gained ground, incorporating to a large degree another version of nationalism of long standing in Russia, namely spiritual nationalism. In response to the shift in societal debate set out here, but also to factors such as developments in Ukraine and rumblings of discontent among liberals in Moscow and St Petersburg, the Russian state went on to adopt a xenophobic nationalist position from 2013 onwards. The official Russian stance is now that Russia itself is 'true Europe', a conservative Great Power that guards Europe's true Christian heritage against the 'false Europe' of decadence and depravity to its West. If Russia had an inferiority complex towards Europe in 1991, a quarter-century down the road that has been inverted into a superiority complex.

The stories that a country tells about itself and others do not determine foreign policy directly. Any foreign policy action springs from a number of sources. And yet it seems clear that the repertoire of actions that lie close to hand regarding a partner in cooperation differs from those regarding an outright adversary. It is, as a Russian would say, no coincidence that, in the 1990s, dominant stories of Europe as an ideal that Russia would increase its greatness by following went hand in hand with a foreign policy of cooperation. By the same token, it is hardly surprising that today's dominant stories of Russian superiority to Europe coincide with a policy of confrontation.

The about-turn in Russia's approach to Europe over the last 25 years has precedents. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, stories of Russian superiority to liberal Europe crowded out stories of how Russia should aim to emulate Europe. This happened again after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in the 1850s, and yet again at the end of the nineteenth century. Stalin's turn away from European Marxism in favour of building socialism in one country presents itself as a new variant of the same basic theme. If my first concern in this article is to trace the about-turn, my second concern is to argue that this reversal fits a cyclical pattern in Russian history, in which periods when Russian stories depict Europe as something to emulate give way to periods when stories about European decadence and rottenness take over. This cycle seems to be driven by Russia's continuing backwardness relative to Europe in producing economic and political orders. If Russia had existed in splendid isolation, this would not have mattered. However, the state-system is a self-help structure in which powers that do not produce enough to keep up with the leaders are invariably marginalized. It follows that any power that wants to be recognized as great has to have an economic and political base that can sustain that claim. Two conclusions may be drawn. First, Russia's present superiority complex will at some point in the future change once more into an inferiority complex. Second, as long as the country does not succeed in either emulating Europe and the West or in coming up with an equally effective and so competitive social order, Russia's backwardness-driven cycle of telling stories about Europe is bound to continue.

The 1990s

Gorbachev's perestroika rekindled old Russian debates about Europe. The communist story of how Europe represented a past that the Soviet Union had left behind was no longer sustainable. In its place came a dominating state narrative about how Russia had to 'rejoin civilization' in order to sustain its greatness, but also a very different story about how Russia should sustain its greatness by being true to one of the ideals shared by tsarist and Soviet regimes alike: namely, that Russian greatness lay in rallying a state that could act swiftly, ruthlessly and decisively. In August 1991, the coup against Gorbachev was propelled by this story, and it was this story, among other things, that President Yeltsin attacked when he stormed the Congress of People's Deputies in October 1993. After Yeltsin used armed force against his own parliament, the debate slowed down and became more of a war of position between liberals on the one hand and spiritual romantic nationalists on the other, with a xenophobic nationalist position building up in the wings.

The declaration of the August 1991 coup leaders is, therefore, a good place to start the analysis. It drew significantly on a xenophobic romantic nationalist text published a month earlier under the heading 'A word to the people':

A great, unheard of disaster is happening. Our MOTHERLAND, our soil, the great state that history, nature and our renowned forefathers have trusted us with, is going under, is being destroyed, is descending into darkness and nothingness [... Shall we let the betrayers and criminals] take away our past, cut us off from the future and leave us pitifully to vegetate in the slavery and downtroddenness of our almighty neighbours?⁷

Addressing the army and sundry other institutions and groups, they asked how it was that 'those who do not love their country, those who lovingly serve their foreign masters' were allowed to go on ruining and breaking up the country, leading it into a second civil war. The document, the main author of which was Aleksandr Prokhanov, since December 1990 the founder editor of the National Bolshevik newspaper *Den*, was signed not only by xenophobic nationalists, but also by key former communists and spiritual romantic nationalists. A united nationalist story was forming around a key common element: that the Russian state had to be strong—not only in the sense that it would command and be obeyed, but also in the sense that it should be the only real power in Russia, and a Great Power in the world. For good reasons, this position was, and still is, often referred to as a statist one. Statists may be found towards either the right or the left, depending simply on the tactical matter of which political and economic models are preferred in order to reach the strategic goal of a strong state. Since what is meant is a centralized apparatus (*vertikal*) that keeps close surveillance on, and exercises direct discipline over, the state's subjects, statists differ as to how strong is strong enough.

⁷ 'A word to the people', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 23 July 1991. The article was signed by Yury Bondarev and, in Cyrillic alphabetical order, Yury Blokhin, Valentin Varennikov, Eduard Volodin, Boris Gromov, Gennady Zyuganov, Lyudmila Zykina, Vyacheslav Klykov, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Valentin Rasputin, Vassily Starodubtsev and Aleksandr Tisyakov. On the basis of textual analysis, Bondarev, Prokhanov and Rasputin have been mentioned as authors; however, Prokhanov has suggested that he himself penned most of it. See Magnus Ljunggren, 'Rysslands rödbruna författare', *Internationelle Studier* 26: 2, 1992, pp. 15–23, esp. p. 17.

From the very start, the statist story about Europe stressed Russia's superiority. As Prokhanov, a self-declared 'traditional imperialist and statist', put it, Europe 'is a fake machine, a stupid one, created by great Germany, with its motivation embedded in history'.⁸ Prokhanov's solution for Russia was to impose 'authoritarianism, which will make it possible to begin to stabilize chaos, blood and insanity, and then, through strong authoritarian power, the cultivation of democracy will slowly begin, not through the creation of insane parliaments, but corporative democratism'. When his interlocutor protested that this was the programme of Mussolini, Prokhanov shot back that it certainly was the programme of Mussolini and also of Pinochet, but that 'Mussolini did not have the possibility of reaching democracy because it all ended too quickly'. The statist position's affinity with interwar fascism was thus made explicit from the very start.

In 1991–2, the statist story was just one of a number of nationalist stories that challenged the liberal one. Before long, however, the statist story was to incorporate other nationalist stories and become consolidated into a fully fledged story not only of Russia's spiritual greatness, but also of Europe's spiritual weakness. Eventually, this story would crowd out the liberal story of how Russia's greatness lay in cooperation with an economically more advanced Europe.

The direct target of the statist story was the liberal story that emanated from the state itself. The Russian state that succeeded the Soviet Union adopted as its own a liberal position, stressing individual rights and state predictability.⁹ In his previous incarnation as Foreign Minister of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, Andrey Kozyrev had already promoted the line that Russia should join the community of civilized countries and learn from the Great Powers of Europe. This was itself a story of Russian inferiority, for the learner is by definition inferior to the teacher in the areas where they interact in those roles. The liberal story of how Russia had to rejoin a civilization it had by implication at some point left was therefore directly incompatible with the basic premise that Russia should be a Great Power. Consequently, the idea of a Russian 'return to civilization' quickly lost the tug-of-war over the state's position on its relationship with Europe. This was evident as early as January 1993, when Yeltsin remarked that while 'Russia's independent foreign policy started with the West', it was now time to 'build relations with any country, be it from the West or East, Europe, or Asia'.¹⁰ In this new environment, Kozyrev turned to face the more fundamental opponents of liberalism, namely the nationalists. He found that, with no convincing story of Russian greatness to tell, the government was being forced by statist to shift away from the liberal position and further towards the nationalist. In the latter months

⁸ *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 2 Sept. 1992.

⁹ Liberals tend to think of state strength in terms of the ability to get a maximum of things done with a minimum of force, which is a very different way of thinking about state strength. Since this tradition is strong in Europe, and since it is at the heart of what it means for a state or power to be great, the question of what makes a state strong is at the heart of Russian–European relations; see Iver B. Neumann, 'Status is cultural: Durkheimian Poles and Weberian Russians seek Great-Power status', in T. V. Paul, Deborah Larson and William Wohlforth, eds, *Status and world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 85–114.

¹⁰ As quoted in Suzanne Crow, *The making of foreign policy in Russia under Yeltsin* (Munich: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1993), p. 76.

of 1993, the issue erupted into armed confrontation. Communists and nationalists had joined hands in a National Salvation Front, often referred to as the red-browns, and ensconced themselves in the Congress of People's Deputies, first politically, then physically. Yeltsin took it upon himself to clear out parliament by armed force in October 1993. Once again, the state resorted to violence in order to redefine public political space, shooting dead a number of parliamentarians in their offices and meeting rooms, banning some newspapers and censoring others. 'There will be no more leniency to communist-fascism in Russia,' asserted Yeltsin in his televised speech to the nation on 6 October. And if the clash itself was part and parcel of the Russian debate about Europe, so were the reasons the state gave for the crack-down. After the events of October, Yeltsin's press spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov referred to European ideals in order to justify the state's actions.¹¹

This setback notwithstanding, nationalism bounced back much as it had after the attempted coup of two years previously, helped by the results of the parliamentary election in December 1993, in which statist candidates took almost half the votes cast for candidates to the *duma* or lower house. The state in Russia under Yeltsin simply was not effective enough in bringing about the required stable configuration of political space. By the end of 1993, the enthusiasm for Europe as a model which had characterized the state's position upon Yeltsin's coming to power had clearly dissipated, being replaced by an insistence on partnership on equal terms.¹² The struggle between liberal and statist positions continued unabated. Statists and nationalists of all stripes were on the offensive, and the state adjusted its position accordingly. From the mid-1990s onwards, top state officials increasingly stressed Russia's Eurasian character. When Evgeny Primakov became foreign minister in 1996, he made it his main task to do away with a western-oriented policy in favour of a multipolar orientation.¹³ 'Europe' was backgrounded in favour of 'Eurasia'. Not only was Europe's superiority gone, so was its privileged partner status.

In the second half of the 1990s, various statist and nationalist stories about Russia's greatness began to come together in an overarching story. The dovetailing of stories was partially the result of collaboration between different groups of nationalists. As an example of how this process worked (and still works), I turn to the well-documented case of the nationalist entrepreneur Aleksandr Dugin, not necessarily because he himself is particularly influential where foreign policy-making is concerned, but because his work in bringing together disparate groups and ideas is symptomatic of the streamlining of statist and nationalist stories into the overarching xenophobic nationalist story about Russian superiority *vis-à-vis* Europe that went on to marginalize the liberal story.

The list of Dugin's collaborators down the years reads like a *Who's Who* of xenophobic nationalists in Russia. He joined Pamyat, an early nationalist organiza-

¹¹ *Rossiyskie vesti*, 19 Oct. 1993. Note here the key move away from an understanding of a strong state as one that gets things done with a minimum show of force to one that acts forcefully and directly.

¹² Anne L. Clunan, *The social construction of Russia's resurgence: aspirations, identity, and security interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 60–72.

¹³ Christian Thorun, *Explaining change in Russian foreign policy: the role of ideas in post-Soviet Russia's conduct towards the west* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31–41.

tion dedicated to celebrating Russian history, as a 25-year-old in 1988. He worked with Prokhanov on the newspaper *Den* (from 1993, *Zavtra*), the key press organ of the xenophobic nationalists to this day. He also worked closely not only with Prokhanov and his friends at the Military High Command, but with the leader of the revamped Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, to the point where Shenfield concluded that he ‘probably played a significant part in formulating the nationalist communist ideology that was Zyuganov’s hallmark’.¹⁴ Dugin translated the work of European fascists, republished that of Russian Eurasianists from the interwar period and, most importantly for the Russian debate about Europe, himself wrote a string of monographs, of which the most significant in understanding his view of Europe is his *Foundations of geopolitics: Russia’s geopolitical future*.¹⁵

Dugin’s protagonists are masses, leaders and topography. Except for leaders and the thinkers who provide them with operational schemes—or theory, as Dugin calls it—individuals as such have no place in politics. The basic confrontation is between Land and Sea. Eurasia is Land; the United States and the United Kingdom are Sea. Civilizations, or super-ethnicities, are the key political entities. Like all ethnic groups, they mystically emerge out of the soil and, equally mystically, exude a quality that Dugin, following the Eurasianist Lev Gumilev, calls passionarity. Gumilev defined passionarity as the process whereby organisms absorb biochemical energy from nature,¹⁶ but behind this mystical view, what seems to be denoted is something like realized collective will. Note the voluntarist focus here. Dugin resembles interwar geopoliticians such as Rudolf Kjellén in treating polities as organic entities, but he is much more insistent than they were on the importance of will and, by the same token, on the irrelevance of material resources.

For Dugin, the Land, or Heartland, is Eurasia. It is a civilization, a super-ethnos. It follows that Land’s basic enemy—in his schema it is important to have enemies—is Sea and its ideological guise, which is Atlanticism. The Sea, that is, United States and Atlanticism, conspired to execute the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The historical task ahead of Russia at the present juncture is, consequently, to gather all of the Eurasian Heartland around the messianic Russian state and mobilize for a war on the United States and Atlanticism. This is in keeping with Russia’s historical destiny, for Russia’s passionarity remains high. Russia’s destiny is therefore to build a giant state or empire out of Eurasia. For Dugin, such an empire will be a grander Soviet Union.¹⁸

¹⁴ Stephen Shenfield, *Russian fascism: traditions, tendencies, movements* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 192.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki: geopoliticheskoe budushchee rossii* (Moscow: Arktogetya, 1999; first publ. 1997).

¹⁶ Marlène Laruelle, ‘Aleksandr Dugin: a Russian version of the European radical right?’, *The Fourth Political Theory*, 2008, p. 68, <http://www.4pt.su/en/content/aleksandr-dugin-russian-version-european-radical-right>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Sept. 2016.)

¹⁷ Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, p. 367.

¹⁸ Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, pp. 251–3. One objection to calling Eurasianists xenophobic might be that they celebrate political community where ethnic nationalists condemn it. This is a weak objection, though, for Eurasianism is an imperial ideology, where other ethnic groups are acknowledged only as underlings to Russian masters. In other capacities, they are viewed as hostiles. Just as French and English nationalism and racism were key to understanding the French and English empires, so Russian nationalism is key to understanding contemporary Russian imperialism. I disagree with the state-of-the-art volume on Russian nationalism when it states programmatically that nationalism was ‘previously dominated by “imperial” tendencies’ but is ‘now focusing more and more on ethnic issues’ (see Pål Kolstø, ‘The ethnification of Russian nationalism’, in Pål

As Andrei Tsygankov pointed out, Dugin's is a 'discourse of war'.¹⁹ Dugin's celebration of identifying enemies and waging war on them, his celebration of the strong-man model for politics, his anti-Semitism, his combination of religious mysticism with techno-optimism, his railing against American consumerism and materialism, his backing of an anti-Enlightenment conservative revolution, his explicit building on European fascist thinkers such as Julius Evola (1898–1974) and Jean Thiriart (1922–1992), and also his contacts with the extreme right in France, Greece, Serbia and elsewhere,²⁰ have led many observers to classify him as a fascist.²¹ This association is justifiable, and in fact Dugin himself embraces fascism. The name he chose for the party he launched in 1993 was the National Bolsheviks, a name that specifically denotes historically communist–fascist collaboration. The key point where views on Europe are concerned, however, is that Dugin stands in a solid fascist tradition that accords value not only to fervent nationalism on behalf of one state, but also to the building of a fascist Europe. Fascist pan-European movements thrived throughout the interwar period. The alliance between fascist Italy and Nazi Germany lasted until Mussolini's fall from power. In most if not all interwar European parties, there was a key ideological debate between those who would draw the line of the nation according to spoken language (say, High German) and those who would draw it around a wider cultural community (defined by, say, pan-Germanism or Eurasianism). The latter built a fairly strong international fascist movement. Dugin and his neo-Eurasianist movement are heirs to the latter tradition. The neo-Eurasianist or xenophobic nationalist position in Russian discourse, as resuscitated by Dugin and his associates, also rests firmly on the Russian xenophobic nationalist position as it evolved during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. As an even more distant anchor, Dugin alludes to the state's position of official nationalism as it looked from 1833 onwards, by stressing that Russian nationalism is a question of *narodnost* (people-mindedness) and *pravoslavie* (orthodoxy).²² Recall that the third concept of the official nationalism of the Russian empire as defined 190 years ago was *samoderzhavie*—autocracy. Dugin's embrace of the strong leader in general, and, as we shall see, of Putin in particular, in effect means that today's xenophobic nationalism puts itself forward as heir not only to Gumilev and older Eurasians, but also to the pan-Slavic nationalism of the late nineteenth century and the official nationalism of the early nineteenth century.

Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud, eds, *The new Russian nationalism: imperialism, ethnicity and authoritarianism 2000–15*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 1), for it is not the case historically that states and empires are discrete phenomena, and I do not think Eurasianists and other imperially orientated contemporary Russian tendencies are free of ethnic thinking.

¹⁹ Andrei Tsygankov, 'Hard-line Eurasianists and Russia's contending geopolitical perspectives', *East European Quarterly* 32: 3, 1998, p. 329.

²⁰ Laruelle, 'Aleksandr Dugin'.

²¹ John B. Dunlop, 'Aleksandr Dugin's foundations of geopolitics', *Demokratizatsiya* 12: 1, Winter 2004, p. 41; Andreas Umland, *Theorizing post-Soviet Russia's extreme right: comparative political, historical and sociological approaches* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

²² Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, p. 255. The doctrine was hatched by then Minister of Education Count Uvarov in response to what was seen as the threat of home-grown liberalism; see Neumann, *Russia and the idea of Europe* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 25–6.

To western readers unfamiliar with European interwar fascist thinking and the Russian tradition, Dugin may sound idiosyncratic. That would be a weak reading. I suggest that we rather think of Dugin and today's xenophobic nationalist representation of the enemy as the latest instalment of Russian anti-modern thinking about Europe. Europe has become a false, Americanized Europe that has to be rid of its consumerism and Atlanticism in order to re-emerge as a true Europe under Russian suzerainty.²³ Dugin's line, that Russia is true Europe because it has remained true to pre-Enlightenment and pre-modern values, is firmly rooted in Russian messianic tradition. It also succeeded in telling a story of Russia and its relationship with Europe that brought seeming continuity to the three periods of tsarist, Soviet and Putin's rule, under the rubric of the 'strong state'. Given that history is the chronological aspect of a polity's identity, such a national narrative is not only nostalgic but potentially productive, and so highly potent politically. This became increasingly clear in the 2000s, as the political debate itself became increasingly stylized, even frozen, and the xenophobic nationalist position came ever more strongly to the fore.

Putin's Russia

The 2000s saw the return of a political landscape dominated by a strong leader—President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Following the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, there was an opening to the West. This was also a time when Putin's immediate entourage included staunch liberals such as Andrey Illarionov. Nevertheless, the key development of the new millennium so far has been a further weakening of the westernizing representation in favour of an overhauled and consolidated nationalist representation, and the state's embrace of the latter position in President Putin's third election period (2012–2018).

In the autumn of 1999, when Putin was prime minister, the Russian Foreign Ministry published a 'Medium-term strategy for the Russian Federation's development of relations with the European Union (2000–2010)', in which the EU was named as Russia's strategic partner.²⁴ This did not mean that the EU was Russia's sole partner—Primakov's policy of multipolarity had done away with that; nor was it any longer an entity to be emulated as a matter of course, but rather one of many entities with which Russia had to interact. The state took up a position between a liberal representation of Europe and a nationalist one, but closer to the former.

On the eve of the new millennium, Putin published an address to the nation which presented a broad overview of Russia's place in the world. The article was dominated by the distinctive ambiguity of the 1990s between seeing Europe

²³ Inspired by Dostoevsky, I introduced the term 'true Europe' in *Russia and the idea of Europe*, whence, as noted by Viacheslav Morozov, 'V poiskakh Evropy: possiyskiy politicheskiy diskurs i okruzhayushchiy mir', *Nepriksnovenniy zapas* 4: 30, 2003, pp. 1–7, it found its way back to the Russian debate itself. See also: Dmitry Shlapentokh, 'The great friendship: geopolitical fantasies about the Russia/Europe alliance in the early Putin era (2000–2008)—the case of Alexander Dugin', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 22: 1, 2014, p. 58.

²⁴ Mankoff, *Russian foreign policy*, p. 153.

as something else and seeing it as something to be emulated in one respect or another, and the text is accordingly worth quoting at some length:

The main thing is that Soviet power did not let the country develop a flourishing society which could be developing dynamically, with free people. First and foremost, the ideological approach to the economy made our country lag increasingly behind [*otstavanie*] the developed states. It is bitter to admit that for almost seven decades we travelled down a blind alley, which took us away from the main track of civilization ... The experience of the 1990s vividly shows that ... the mechanical copying of the experiences of other states will not bring progress ... Russia will not soon, if ever, be a replica of, say, the US or Great Britain, where liberal values have deep-seated traditions. For us, the state, with its institutions and structures, always played an exclusively important role in the life of the country and its people. For the Russian [*rossiyanin*], a strong state is not an anomaly, not something with which he has to struggle, but, on the contrary, a source of and a guarantee for order, as well as the initiator and main moving force of any change. Contemporary Russian society does not mistake a strong and effective state for a totalitarian one.²⁵

This is the typical positioning of a politician: there is a nod to the liberal representation—Europe constitutes ‘the main track of civilization’—and also a nod to the xenophobic nationalist representation—Russia must have a strong state and tread its own path. By the same token, throughout the 2000s, Putin insisted in turn that Russia was a European power, and a Eurasian one.²⁶ The most striking thing about the 1999 article, however, is that in it the head of state speaks about the state he rules as having a discontinuous history. A polity—any polity—must by definition have some we-ness that is shared, at least by its elite. We-ness must indicate that a number of relevant identities are all tied together in the concept of an ‘us’ with some degree of permanence in time and space. It runs against this root metaphor of a polity’s unity in time to see former instantiations of the polity as bad.²⁷ When that nonetheless happens, as it did in Putin’s millennium article, it is evident that there is a problem, and that resources will be used to address that problem. In other words, we should expect discursive change. And indeed, such change became apparent fairly quickly. By 2005, at the beginning of his second presidential term, Putin’s representation of Russia’s relationship to Europe had evolved and gained temporal cohesion. For example, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation that year, he stressed that above all else Russia is ‘a major European power’ which had

for three centuries ... together with the other European nations—passed hand in hand through reforms of Enlightenment, the difficulties of emerging parliamentarism, municipal and judiciary branches, and the establishment of similar legal systems. Step by step, we moved together towards recognizing and extending human rights, towards

²⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Rossiya na Rubezhe Tysyacheletii’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 Dec. 1999, http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html, accessed 12 Dec. 2015.

²⁶ Thorun, *Explaining change*, p. 35 *et passim* argues that top state personnel emphasized Eurasia less when Putin came to power, but produces no evidence to prop up the claim. See also Dunlop, ‘Aleksandr Dugin’s foundations’.

²⁷ A major exception is post-Second World War Germany; see Ole Wæver, ‘European security identities’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 34: 1, 1996, pp. 103–32.

universal and equal suffrage, towards understanding the need to look after the weak and the impoverished, towards women's emancipation, and other social gains. I repeat we did this together, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards.²⁸

Suddenly, Russia no longer has a discontinuous history. Its history is, rather, like a continuous march; it happens 'step by step'. A key phrase where Europe is concerned is 'we moved together'; Russia and Europe emerge on parallel tracks. Note, furthermore, that whereas in 1999 Putin stressed Russia's history of 'lagging behind' Europe, by 2005 he is presenting Russia and Europe more as two marchers taking turns in leading the field. In only five years, the representation of centuries of Russian–European relations has been thoroughly rearranged. In his famous Munich speech two more years later, Putin ended by wryly noting how European exhortations that Russia take an active role in world affairs were hardly necessary, given that 'Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy'.²⁹ Here Russia, a cover term for a temporally and politically discontinuous string of different entities, has become not only an entity with unity and continuity across an entire millennium, but also one which has always had a coherent foreign policy.

As one would expect from a leader who aims to incarnate the state that he leads, Putin's speeches evolve at the same pace as the Russian debate at large. In 2003, one of the leading self-proclaimed westernizers in Russia, Anatoly Chubays, had stated that Russia's destiny was to be an empire, but that it should be a liberal empire. This was something new for the period, for the wish to see Russia as a 'normal country'—that is, a European-style nation-state—had been a constitutive element of a westernizing representation, articulated in direct opposition to the nationalist idea that Russia had always been and should always be an exceptional and imperial Great Power. The westernizing representation was, in other words, approaching more closely to the nationalist position. This was indicative of how the bandwidth of the Russian debate about Europe had shrunk. A second characteristic of the westernizing or liberal position of the period was its failure to produce any new elements that could have compensated for the approach to nationalism and set it firmly apart from the latter.

There is, however, a crucial exception to this trend, and it has to do with statements and actions that demand free elections. Particularly after the 2008 presidential elections, Moscow and St Petersburg saw demonstrations and rallies featuring a broad range of self-proclaimed oppositional figures, but dominated by liberals. State officials repeatedly compared these activities to the events preceding so-called 'colour revolutions' in the former Soviet Union, particularly to the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine in 2004, which ushered in a liberal president. On 6 May 2012, during a mass demonstration in Bolotnaya Square, Moscow, the state

²⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobranyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii', 25 April 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/35059>; Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Finding a civilizational idea: "west", "Eurasia", and "Euro-east" in Russia's foreign policy', *Geopolitics* 12: 3, 2007, p. 385.

²⁹ Vladimir Putin, speech and following discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 Feb. 2007, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml.

decided to put a stop to these activities and staged a crack-down.³⁰ Long prison sentences were doled out; over four years later, more than two dozen people are still in prison, waiting for their sentences. Snetkov has suggested that this movement took over from terrorism as the perceived number one threat to the regime and internal security, and that the demonstrations were crucial in pushing the state further towards a nationalist position on Europe.³¹

The state also took action against outspoken nationalists, though. A special operations colonel, Vladimir Kvachkov, who held that Russia was occupied by a Jewish–Masonic conspiracy, served a three-year prison sentence for an attempt on the life of the leading liberal Anatoly Chubays in 2005. Furthermore, the state broke up a number of nationalist demonstrations, including the so-called Russian Marches of 2006. The kind of all-round state policing of the debate evident here is not only fully in keeping with Russian traditions. It is also in keeping with a general Weberian view of the state as the institution that aims to stand above clashing social forces in order to maintain societal order. The point to note, I suggest, is that state policing did not obviously favour either liberals or nationalists. The steady shift in the balance between the two cannot be ascribed to state intervention alone, but must be ascribed to the growing appeal of the xenophobic nationalist representation.

The xenophobic nationalist representation remained dynamic in at least three senses. First, it continued to gain ground in the overall debate, forcing some westernizers to adopt some of its elements in order to avoid being marginalized as the centre of the debate shifted closer to nationalism. Second, it continued to subsume spiritual nationalism, so that it remained the stronger of only two major representations, as opposed to three. Third, it was able to spawn elements that appeared to be new. I say ‘appeared’, for the two most important elements were not historically new, but rather regurgitated from older and by now half-forgotten Russian representations of Europe. These two elements are closely intertwined: they are the assertions that contemporary Europe is rotting, and that this rot implies that contemporary Europe is a false Europe. True Europe, on the other hand, is still alive, first and foremost in Russia itself, but also in the Russia-friendly European far right movement.

The representation of Europe as ‘rotten’ (*gniloy, gnilyushchiy*) came back with a vengeance from a 150-year hibernation in the second half of the 2000s. The specific practices that were alleged to demonstrate the rottenness were once again sexual in nature. In 1869, commenting on the popularity of the can-can and operettas, the populist Mikhaylovsky was reminded of Europe in the days ‘when the Popes lived in incestuous relations with their mothers and sisters, and maintained brothels’, and ‘when Roman Caesars had public weddings with men’.³² In the 2000s, this focus on homosexuality was again present,³³ accompanied by attacks on trans-

³⁰ Samuel Greene, ‘Beyond Bolotnaia: bridging old and new in Russia’s election protest movement’, *Problems of Post-Communism* 60: 2, 2013, pp. 40–52.

³¹ Aglaya Snetkov, ‘When the internal and external collide: a social constructivist reading of Russia’s security policy’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 64: 3, 2012, pp. 521–43, at p. 534.

³² James H. Billington, *Mikhailovskiy and Russian populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 77.

³³ For an example from 2007, see ‘Kakaya-to v derzhave Datskoi gnil’?, *GlobalRus*, no. 6, Nov. 2007, <http://www.globalrus.ru/opinions/784449/news/>; and from 2 April 2008, see ‘Gomoseksualizm pokhoz na Rak

sexualism, paedophilia, incest and other practices which heralded the 'Decline of Europe', as an *Izvestia* headline of 11 October had it.³⁴ The Russian Orthodox Church has been particularly active in arguing that only by fighting the emerging European norms that accept homosexuality and same-sex marriages can 'Russian civilization contribute to building a peaceful and civilized life on the planet', as the then Metropolitan Kirill put it in 2006.³⁵ Indeed, the Patriarch himself chose this as a main theme when he spoke to the Council of Europe the following year.³⁶ President Putin took up this representation in 2013 when he stated that Euro-Atlantic countries were undergoing a 'moral crisis' by 'implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with belief in Satan', and this theme has since been part of the state's representation of Europe.³⁷ Once again, as the balance in the debate between liberal and xenophobic nationalist views tilted towards the latter, the state followed suit.

The entire point of the metaphor of rottenness is that there is no future other than decomposition. What, then, may come of a rotten Europe? Logically, there can only be one answer: Europe has to be restored and renewed. Rotten, decadent Europe is a Europe that has left its true character behind. It is a false Europe. What, then, can be more logical than that Russia, with its social conservatism, is actually the last true European nation standing, and will bring restoration to false western Europe? This idea of superiority, which was the entire basis of Bolshevik views of Europe (true, vital proletarian Europe was chasing out false, rotten bourgeois Europe), now came to the fore once again. Gleb Pavlovsky argued that Russia is a 'better European than Europe itself'.³⁸ Dmitry Rogozin, then Ambassador to NATO, wrote in the nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* that 'Russia indeed is also Europe, without "gay" rule, pederast marriages, punk mass culture and the lackeying to the United States. We are indeed the true Europeans.'³⁹ To Rogozin, the final proof of Europe's decadence seems to be that Europeans see Russians not as European, but as something from outer space, as 'cosmonauts'.⁴⁰

If we ask how this metaphor of Europe as 'rotten' was resuscitated, we once again run into the main xenophobic nationalist, Aleksandr Dugin. In a 1994 book

Obshchestva?', <https://otvet.mail.ru/question/12765280>.

³⁴ See 'Zakat Evropy', *Izvestia*, 11 Oct. 2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/329597>. For a full discussion, see Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, 'The decline of Gayropa? How Russia intends to save the world', *Eurozine*, 5 Feb. 2014, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-02-05-riabova-en.html>.

³⁵ 'Ustanavlivat' ugovolnoe nakazanie za evtanaziyu—nepravil'no, zayavil mitropolit Kirill', *Izvestiya*, 4 April 2006, <http://izvestia.ru/news/375872>.

³⁶ 'Patriarkh vseya Rusi [Aleksiy II] prizval PACE ne pooshchryat gomoseksualizm', *Izvestiya*, 2 Oct. 2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/410121>.

³⁷ Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 Sept. 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>; see also Andrew Monaghan, 'A "new Cold War"? Abusing history, misunderstanding Russia', research paper, Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme, May 2015, p. 5, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150522ColdWarRussiaMonaghan.pdf.

³⁸ Gleb Pavlovsky, 'Rossiya vse eshche ishchet svoy rol' v mire', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 31 May 2004; see also Tsygankov, 'Finding a civilizational idea', p. 394.

³⁹ Vittorio Strada, 'Posle imperii: staraya i novaya Rossiya', *Vtoraya Nayigatsia: almanach*, no. 10 (Khar'kov: Prava Liudiny, 2010), <http://library.khpg.org/files/docs/1293605762.pdf>. See also *Zavtra*, "'Est' i drugaya Evropa", 16 Oct. 2014, <http://zavtra.ru/content/view/est-i-drugaya-evropa>; Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, *Identities and foreign policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: the other Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 112–14.

⁴⁰ Dmitry Rogozin, *Yastreby mira: Dnevnik russkogo posla* (Moscow: Al'pina non-fikshn, 2010), p. 397.

aply titled *The conservative revolution*, he argued that ‘the liberalization of sex, pornography, feminism, homosexuality, and the fashion for Freudianism and psychoanalysis are part of the process of forced Westernization of the world. This “era of gynocracy” heralds the “castration” of men and, along with it, the disappearance of traditional society.’⁴¹

As noted in the previous section, the xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe was forged into a coherent picture from various bits and pieces, most of them gathered from fascist and communist traditions, by Dugin and others in the turbulent 1990s.⁴² Under Putin, as exemplified by the official adoption of the representation of Russia as ‘true Europe’, it became ever more dominant. In 2012–2013, the state resolved its steady slide towards xenophobic nationalism by embracing this position wholeheartedly. One consequence of this was a further radicalization of the xenophobic nationalist representation of Europe. Key carriers of this representation came out with a critique of the state for not being decisive enough in its support of what was to all intents and purposes a war. The state did not respond to these calls, but in February 2016 Russia’s Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, stated that Russia and the West might be sliding into ‘a new Cold War’.⁴³

Societal debates do not determine foreign policy moves, but the general tenor of policy debates has the effect of making certain moves easier to legitimate than others. It cannot be argued that the societal shift towards xenophobic nationalism somehow caused Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, its remilitarization, its lingering support for Ukrainian separatists, the 2016 intervention in Syria or any other specific action in the recent marked shift away from cooperation and towards confrontation with Europe and the West. By the same token, Andrei Tsygankov may well be right in saying that ‘although Putin’s rhetoric is indeed increasingly nationalist, it is designed more to reach out to traditional critics of the state, than to faithfully follow their recommendation’.⁴⁴ We have no way of knowing. What we do know is that xenophobic nationalism and a confrontational foreign policy are mutually reinforcing. In keeping with this mutual support, 2014 was also the year when the basic xenophobic rejection of Europe was articulated by a state organ for the first time since the end of the Cold War. On 10 January 2014, the newspaper *Izvestiya* published the entire text of the Ministry of Culture’s basic draft for an overall Russian cultural policy. The document stressed Russia’s uniqueness and vitality and, evoking Russian thinkers such as Danilevsky and Gumilev, but also Arnold Toynbee and Samuel Huntington, contrasted it with Europe by stating that Russia ‘must be seen as a unique and autonomous civili-

⁴¹ Laruelle, ‘Aleksandr Dugin’, p. 134.

⁴² An authority on Russian nationalism such as Verkhovsky even identifies the national ‘mainstream’ as ‘typically oriented towards various neo-fascist ideas and racist violence’. See Alexander Verkhovsky, ‘Radical nationalists from the start of Medvedev’s presidency to the war in Donbass: true till death?’, in Kolstø and Blakkisrud, eds, *The new Russian nationalism*, p. 76.

⁴³ As reported worldwide, e.g. ‘Russian PM Medvedev says new Cold War is on’, BBC News, 13 Feb. 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35569094>.

⁴⁴ Andrei Tsygankov, ‘Vladimir Putin’s last stand: the sources of Russia’s Ukraine policy’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31: 4, 2015, p. 295.

zation which belongs neither to “the West” (“Europe”), nor to “the East”. The position may be summed up in a pithy formulation: “Russia is not Europe”.⁴⁵

It should be noted, however, that the state did not get the last word on this key formulation. In a statement signed by all 27 members of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Culture’s draft was said not only to be below student level, but to be positively false.⁴⁶ As a result of the critique, the phrase ‘Russia is not Europe’ was removed from the document. The Russian debate on Europe goes on.

As has been the case since its inception, the Russian debate about Europe is a debate about what Russia itself should be. Viatcheslav Morozov sums up well what it means at the present juncture to say that Europe is one of Russia’s ‘constitutive outsides’ when he writes about the domestic repercussions of the state’s adoption of the xenophobic nationalism position since 2012–2013:

The Kremlin’s entire conservative turn comes down to nothing more than an offensive against ‘the fifth column’. This label lumps together all ‘freaks’—the Pussy Riot punk band, NGOs, intellectuals, scholars supported by foreign funding [homosexuals, feminists]. They are all stamped as Western collaborators, whose main goal is to undermine Russian traditional values. At the same time, the values that are being championed tend to recede in the background, while center stage gets occupied by the epic fight against forces of evil; for pro-government forces, of whatever stripe, the national interest is reduced to anti-Westernism.⁴⁷

Since this European outside is held to be inferior in the present, there is a rush to demonstrate that it was also inferior in the past. In today’s Russia, history is being rewritten on a massive scale, in school textbooks, exhibitions and monuments. As it was in Soviet times, it has once again become a commonplace to argue that most things European commenced in Russia. To pick but one example, Egor Kholmogorov recently argued that ‘Russian national consciousness is not younger, but older than the German, French or English one. It is the oldest of all European modern nations.’⁴⁸ In terms of foreign policy, the immediate consequence of this shift was confrontation with neighbouring Ukraine and an openly confrontational policy against the West.

In 1991, the liberal story about Russia and its relationship to Europe ruled the roost. The statist text ‘A word to the people’, with which this analysis began, told one of a number of other and competing stories. Twenty-five years later, statism has evolved into a xenophobic nationalism that dominates the societal debate, and liberals have been marginalized. To give just one example, in 2015 the former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, imprisoned from 2003 to 2013 and now living in

⁴⁵ Russian Ministry of Culture, ‘Materialy i predlozheniya k proektu osnov gosudarstvennostoy kul’turnoy politiki’, printed in *Izvestiya*, 10 Jan. 2014, <http://izvestia.ru/news/569016>, p. 3.

⁴⁶ ‘Zayavlenie chlenov Uchenogo Soveta Instituta Filosofii PAN o kontseptsii osnov kul’turnoy politike’, April 2014, http://iph.ras.ru/cult_polit.htm. I thank Sverre Rustad for directing me to this source.

⁴⁷ Viatcheslav Morozov, ‘What is the meaning of “national” in the Russian debate about the national interest?’, policy memo, Ponars, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russian-debate-about-national-interest>.

⁴⁸ Egor Kholmogorov, ‘Rossiya—rodina mamontov i patriotov’, *Russkiy dozor*, 10 April 2016, <http://rusdozor.ru/2016/04/10/rossiya-rodina-mamontov-i-patriotov-egor-xolmogorov/>.

exile, argued that the number one priority for Russia should be to get its economy in order and that the 'inevitable' way to do this would be to integrate Russia with the 'Euro-Atlantic world'. If Russia would not 'go west', then it would sink deeper and deeper into economic and political isolation. Rather than turning to authoritarianism, Russia should aim to join NATO and the EU.⁴⁹ As will readily be seen, this was basically the state's position in the early 1990s, and in the autumn of 1999 this basically liberal stance would still have been one of the two major representations in the debate.

At the present juncture, however, it has become a marginalized view. Igor Strelkov, a *nom de guerre* for Igor Vsevolodovich Girkin, who had in-depth field experience in various theatres of military action and is a mainstay of the Novorossiia movement that works for the expansion of Russian state territory, identified Khodorkovsky as a key fifth columnist.⁵⁰ Khodorkovsky's attempt to 'help the West once again to destroy what Putin began to rebuild in the 2000s' will not succeed, Strelkov wrote, for 'God is with us, the Russians!'⁵¹ That seemed to close the debate. It is not that liberals are all but gone from Russia. Within the state apparatus, a liberal party still argues along the same broad lines as Khodorkovsky. Where the societal debate is concerned, however, xenophobic nationalism rules the roost.

Back to the future

What is striking about the debate on Europe since the fall of the Soviet Union is its centrality to Russian political life at large, and the invariance of its positions.

When polities exist in proximity to one another, they vie for overlapping social space. That spells an imperative to keep up, or go bust. In evolutionary theory, it is referred to as the Red Queen Syndrome: one has to run in order to stay in the same place.⁵² This explains why, over the centuries, Europe has been what we may call Russia's main Other: Europe kept producing new ways of arranging polities, and Russia could not afford simply to neglect this fact. It was forced to respond by the very nature of the state system.

If this explains the invariance in focus on Europe, it does not explain the invariance in positions. An added factor that goes a long way towards the latter is a constant within the overall Russian debate itself: namely, the conviction that Russia has to be a Great Power, or it will be nothing.⁵³ What has been at stake in the debate for all participants is not only how to keep up with general European developments, but how to do so in a way that will secure Russia's standing as a Great Power. There has been no consensus regarding what it means to be a great and glorious polity: nationalist positions favour a strong, commanding leader who is obeyed simply

⁴⁹ Mikhail Khodorkovsky, 'Go West: kak vyvesti Rossiyu iz tupika', *PBK*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/16/06/2015/557fcfd9a79477ac18d95bc>.

⁵⁰ Igor Strelkov, "Krugom izmena, trusost' i obman": Igor Strelkov polemiziruet s Mikhailom Khodorkovskim', *Sviobodnaya pressa*, 21 Oct. 2014, <http://svpressa.ru/blogs/article/101665/>.

⁵¹ Strelkov, "Krugom izmena", p. 11.

⁵² Matt Ridley, *The red queen: sex and the evolution of human nature* (London: Penguin, 1984).

⁵³ See n. 5 above.

because he is the leader, and westernizers favour a deliberative system where fair and free elections function as the crucial legitimating mechanism. The Russian debate has also had difficulties embracing either of the two subject positions that have been held out to new entrants to the European-centred state system, namely those of apprentice and barbarian at the gate.⁵⁴ Rather, these two subject positions have marked the unstable bookends of the debate. Statements to the fact that Russia would have to learn from or even go to school with Europe, become a normal country, (re)join civilization and so on have jarred with the underlying premise that Russia must be great or it will be nothing, for Great Powers do not go to school. On the contrary, they lay down the line and teach others. By the same token, embracing a position as barbarian—that is, as inferior in the eyes of European Great Powers—has largely been out of the question, for such a position rules out recognition as an equal by the leading powers of Europe. As a result of the inherent instability of these two extreme positions, the debate has largely played itself out in the space between them. This goes a long way towards explaining the relative invariance in positions on Europe over the centuries.

And yet there has been some variation. How are we to explain that? If the key underlying factor that drives the debate is socially understood backwardness, then it becomes important just how backward Russians have understood their country to be, and to what degree this has been understood as a handicap or an advantage.⁵⁵ The more intensely the backwardness is felt as a social fact, the stronger is the urge to catch up with the West. Exceptionally, attempts have even been planned to overtake the West (the 1930s being the primary example). An added factor is that the backwardness is experienced differently by different groups in the polity. It is not the case that those who are better informed about European developments are more acutely aware of the challenge of backwardness. All innovation in representations of Europe—whether as something to emulate or something to recoil from—has been done by elites. It does hold true, though, that the less well informed about developments in the West are more dismissive of the need to take into consideration what is happening there. The result of this has been spelled out most eloquently by Yuri Lotman.⁵⁶ Elites in Russia and other countries that find themselves in a structurally backward position within the state system will periodically try to play catch-up. These attempts will be met with reactions from nationalist elites, who will have an easy time mustering broad support from non-elite populations for resisting change in the name of local traditions. The most pertinent example of this may be found in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but the logic is the same in the Russian case. This logic will also make for a pattern in how the state represents the West. In periods when the state embraces a westernizing position, it has tended to look to elites

⁵⁴ See Neumann, *Uses of the other*; Martin Malia, *Russia under western eyes: from the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2000).

⁵⁵ Alexander Gerschenkron, 'Economic development in Russian intellectual history of the nineteenth century', in *Economic backwardness in historical perspective. A book of essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

⁵⁶ Yuri Lotman, *Culture and explosion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009; first publ. 1997).

for support, while in periods when it has embraced a nationalist position, it has looked to non-elite groups. A clear-cut example of this logic can be observed in recent years: whereas at the end of the twentieth century, the Russian state looked primarily to big-city elites, in the twenty-first century, it has so far relied increasingly on non-elite support.

Choosing non-elite groups as a support base comes at a cost, for elites are by definition the groups that implement change and so provide the impetus for political dynamism and economic growth. If backwardness spells an imperative for social change, and social change means emulating the West, then closing down elite activity is a guarantee that backwardness will continue, and probably become even more marked. Here we have yet another mechanism that has made for variation. At regular intervals—in the twentieth century only, we have the Stalypin reforms of the 1900s, the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, the Lieberman reforms of the 1960s, the perestroika of the 1980s and the reforms of the 1990s—the state has attempted to play catch-up with the West by easing restrictions on economic production. Put differently, it has edged closer to the way of thinking about politics that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century, namely that the state has to see to it that society produces as much as possible by opening up opportunities for civil society to organize itself.

The basic problem with such a strategy is that opening up space for new economic agents may also enable new political agents to emerge, for economic power is easily translated into political power.⁵⁷ Since a key tenet of Russian discourse has been that Russia should be a Great Power, and since ‘great’ has been understood as paternalistic, in the sense of being able to lay down the law to other agents, a pluralistic political situation has consistently been seen as a direct threat to the strong state.⁵⁸ This anti-liberal tenet has not only set Russian political thinking apart from the broad European tradition; it has also been a key factor in curbing attempts at economic reform. Every time the state has attempted to liberalize economic life, the process has worked as intended, in the sense that new economic agents have emerged. As these agents have invariably tried to convert their economic resources into political power, however, the state has then panicked, and closed down the reform.⁵⁹ As a result, Russian backwardness has continued. The latest example of this logic to date came in the 1990s, as the state endowed the so-called oligarchs. As these oligarchs proceeded not only to innovate, as was intended by the state, but also to dominate political life, the state brought them to heel. As long as emerging groups of innovators have a narrow social base, this can be fairly easily done, and can even be popular. The problem is that the economic backwardness that reform and innovation are intended to curb invariably returns when innovation comes to a halt. Thus, as long as the state cannot tolerate independent bases of power and the social power of these bases remains too weak for them to be perpetuated, the basic structural challenge that Europe and the West pose to Russia remains the same.

⁵⁷ Easily, but not necessarily, as the Chinese experience since 1979 clearly demonstrates.

⁵⁸ Lenin referred to this as *kto-kogo*; who commands whom.

⁵⁹ Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev phenomenon: a historical interpretation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

Conclusion

I began this article by tracing the course of the Russian societal debate about Europe over the past quarter-century. I found that this debate has gone from being dominated by a liberal story of how Russia should find greatness by taking its place among the leading democratic states of Europe to being dominated by a xenophobic nationalist story of how Russia itself is actually 'true Europe' to western Europe's 'false, Americanized and rotten Europe'. In the past couple of years, this has also been the Russian state's story about its relationship with Europe. I went on to argue that this about-turn is part of a cyclical pattern in Russian history, and that there are clear structural reasons why the Russian debate about Europe is characterized by invariance. There are also clear structural reasons for the variations that nonetheless exist. These reasons spell out a cyclical pattern, where periods of westernization alternate with periods of nationalist celebration of nativist models for political and economic life. Einstein once defined madness as doing the same thing under the same conditions and thinking that the result would be different. As long as the structural reasons that spell a context of backwardness hold—that is, as long as Russia looks primarily to western powers for recognition as a Great Power, and as long as some new, alternative way of ordering economic and/or political life does not emerge from within Russia itself—we must expect the cyclical pattern of the Russian debate about Europe to continue.

Although China, and to a lesser degree India, are emerging as alternative Great Powers from which to seek recognition as a Great Power, the point at which such recognition would remove the need for Russia to have the recognition of western powers to maintain its Great Power status remains a long way off. There are no signs whatsoever that historically new models for overall political and economic life are taking shape in Russia. A prediction seems warranted. The state's position will, before long, change in the direction of westernization; Russia's self-understanding as a Great Power demands it. As long as Russia insists on being a Great Power, this will therefore come to pass.

The question to ask, though, is whether the next bout of westernization will break the cyclical pattern. The analysis set out here yields a clear answer to this question. The cycle will be broken only if at least one of four social factors changes. Two of these possible changes are internal and modular: the state sees pluralism as a direct threat to itself, and there exists no independent social element that can withstand the state's attempts to curb its emergent standing as a self-sustaining power base partially independent of the state. Two are external and also entangled with one another: Russia has to relate first and foremost to western Great Powers rather than non-western ones; and there does not emerge a new international social standard for what a Great Power should be. If one or more of these factors do not change, then the Russian debate about Europe and the West will remain central to Russian political life. It will also retain its cyclical alternation between periods of westernization and periods like the present one, when Russia represents Europe as false Europe, and Russia itself as true Europe.

