

# Domestic Determinants of Russia's anti-Western Campaign

## Introduction

The central argument that will be made here is that the Kremlin's narrative about the reasons for the dramatic deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the West as being external and military in nature is fundamentally flawed. *Internal* factors – the power elite's calculations about its tenure in office – will be shown to be the main explanatory variables. To the extent that external challenges and threats can be said to determine the Kremlin's foreign policy, these are held to be essentially *socio-economic* in nature. They are, the argument continues, rooted primarily in the concern of the Russian power elite that the regulatory model and socio-economic attractiveness of the West pose a threat to the legitimacy of its rule in Russia and the country's influence in its self-declared sphere of interest.<sup>1</sup>

The argument will be developed as follows:

- An *analytical basis* will be set in the first chapter. This will include clarification of the relationship between information, disinformation and narratives, and the utilization of the latter as an instrument of domestic and foreign policy, that is, its 'weaponization'. This will be related to the *Russian narrative* with its focus on the external military and security challenges and the 'defensive' reaction allegedly necessary to cope with them, will be examined.
- Chapter two demonstrates that the first major indication of the primacy of internal factors for anti-Western attitudes and policies dates back to the *Yeltsin era*. The spotlight is directed to the period from autumn 1992 to winter 1993 with the, for all practical purposes, abandonment of the Euroatlantic course and its replacement with a Russian nationalist and 'Eurasian' orientation.
- In the third chapter, the regulatory and *socio-economic quality of the Western challenge* for Russia under Putin will be dealt with. It will be shown that this challenge has been considered by the Russian power elite as a serious threat to its rule.
- The fourth chapter asks the question as to why this is the case and argues that the answer is to be found in the system of government – *the Putin System* – with its main structural elements. These are held to be undemocratic, anti-liberal and authoritarian, centralization, corruption, legal nihilism and repression of civil society.
- Fifth, however, this system was regarded by some representatives of the Russian power elite as *dysfunctional for economic modernization* and even as 'endangering the existence of the country'. Such assessments were particularly evident in 2009-2011 during Dmitry Medvedev's tenure in office as president. It seemed that Russia would not only contemplate but embark upon profound structural changes and that these

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<sup>1</sup> The ensuing examination is based on this author's article, 'Innenpolitische Determinanten der Putinschen Außenpolitik' [Domestic Determinants of Putin's Foreign Policy], *Sirius: Zeitschrift für Strategisch Analysen*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2017), pp. 33-52.

would be set in motion through ‘modernization partnerships’ with Europe and in close cooperation with the United States.

- The sixth chapter shows that Medvedev’s scathing criticism of the system Putin had built and his ‘modernisation’ campaign raised hopes and expectations of the middle class and produced a *crisis of legitimacy*.
- The seventh chapter develops the argument that, after Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, the socio-economic (inevitably also political) modernization campaign was abruptly terminated by the dominant faction of Russian power elite because it regarded the pursuit of that orientation as a threat to its rule. In the elite’s perception, it had raised concern that ‘colour revolutions’ would spread and spill over to Russia. As a result, the drive for socio-economic modernization was replaced by *national-patriotic mobilization*. That drive ultimately explains the annexation of the Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine.
- The final chapter addresses the question as to whether the current precedence of Russian internal politics over foreign policy with its weaponization of narratives and the strident anti-Western national-patriotic campaign reflects a trend that is impervious to change in the foreseeable future. In particular, it analyzes the problem of *whether economic stagnation and decline will lead to further military pressure* and military intervention abroad or, conversely, whether it will set limits to adventurism and aggression. This also raises the policy-relevant question as to whether there is *anything the West can do* to alter Russia’s current orientation. Is it appropriate and promising to conduct a diplomacy of small steps and ‘dialogue instead of confrontation’, search for common ground, revive arms control and endeavour to create ‘confidence’ in well-meaning Western intentions? Or is a counter-strategy required that sets firm limits and impresses upon the Russian leadership the costs and risks of its current foreign policy orientation?

## **1. The Russian Narrative: Weapon in the Information War**