THE UKRAINIAN WAR AS CATALYST TO BRINGING RUSSIA IN FROM THE COLD INTO THE WESTERN ALLIANCE

BROOKE LEWINSKY

ABSTRACT

This essay has two primary purposes. First, it seeks to examine how Russia has employed a strategy of weakening or even rejecting the autonomy of Central and East European countries, formerly members of the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet Union, by taking advantage of their external and internal weakness to subvert their efforts to consolidate their status as independent countries. Second, it uses an ontological security lens to understand the origin of the ontological insecurity of leading Russian political elites, and more specifically, of Russian President Vladimir Putin, effectively in power for over two decades since 2000. Additionally, it helps to conceptualize how these insecurities influence their behaviours. By introducing a feminist ontological security lens, this essay provides a prescriptive narrative for a post-Putin Russia where its transition to democracy is a reaction to the disruption of existing male dominated narratives that characterise Russia's present nature. This paper analyses the case study of Ukraine so that we may better navigate towards a prescription for a post-Putin Russia where we may empower Russia's pro-European/Western foreign policy direction and ultimately avoid a new Cold War era.

Keywords: autonomy, internal and external weakness, ontological insecurity, post-Putin Russia

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its continuing military offensive aiming to dismember its neighbour has shattered Europe's 'zone of peace' that many have taken for granted. International responses to the invasion of Ukraine manifested themselves in a series of waves, beginning with an overwhelming form of moral and political support for Ukraine (Gvosdev, 2022). The subsequent response was to develop a series of bans on Russian goods and services, further closing airspace and travel and cutting off access to international financial markets (Gvosdev, 2022). These sanctions have imposed costs on Moscow that can be eased should Russia take the steps necessary to de-escalate the invasion in Ukraine. Worldwide, many countries have backed the dramatic escalation in the conflict with Russia. Germany's new Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, has significantly increased his country's defence budget (Schuetze, 2022). The USA has risked escalating the conflict further by supplying the Ukrainian army with the necessary artillery (Staff Writer with AFP, 2022). Reluctant to joining NATO for 75 years, Finland and Sweden have now both applied for membership at the same time (Brewster, 2022).

To map out both a short- and long-term strategy to address this transformative event and ensure it will not happen again in the future, we must develop a clear view as to why Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, has unleashed this war now. It is at the culmination of a two decades long consistent strategy of challenging the outcome of the Cold War and of reasserting Russia's dominance in what he calls its 'near abroad'–that is, the former territories of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the Warsaw Pact, that Russia has initiated aggressive intervention. In effect, to reverse what Putin himself called "the greatest geostrategic disaster of the 20th century" (Putin, 2005-06: 401), the Russian President has employed, ever since coming to power in 2000, a strategy of weakening or even rejecting the autonomy of Central and East European countries, formerly members of the Soviet Bloc and USSR. He has done this by taking advantage of their external and internal weaknesses

to subvert their efforts to consolidate their status as independent countries.

This paper substantiates this argument by examining the specific case of Ukraine, the country where this Russian strategy was most aggressively pursued and was most successful to date. It uses an ontological security argument as an explanatory factor to help better understand Russia's actions toward Ukraine, focusing chiefly on the ability of a feminist ontological security lens to disrupt existing ontological security theory (OST) narratives. Finally, the ontological security argument is of further assistance by prescribing an action plan for post-Putin Russia. In this paper, 'Russia' refers to the current Russian governing elite led by President Putin and his team, in power in Moscow for the past two decades. Parts II and III of this paper examine, in turn, the external and internal factors, focusing primarily on the political legitimacy crisis that has defined Ukraine's politics, that validate the above argument. Part IV analyses ontological security as the explanatory factor for Russia's actions in Ukraine, and Part V provides a prescriptive view of Western countries' grand strategy for post-Putin Russia.

PART 2: EXTERNAL FACTORS

President Putin was unable to come to terms with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Similarly, he has never been able to accept the grounds on which Ukraine became independent. To Putin, Ukrainians and Russians are still very much the same people, and they remain interconnected by a shared history and culture. Today, Putin seeks to legitimize breaking up the United States/North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) global hegemony so he may establish a multi-polar global balance of power with Russia playing a pivotal role among other superpowers. Ukraine is a necessary factor in implementing Russia's strategy due to Russia's perceived ownership of Ukraine as well as its significance to the identity of Russia. Therefore, Russia has deployed a wide variety of methods that continue to influence, both externally and internally, Ukraine's ability to operate as a fully independent country and act as an autonomous agent of the world stage.

Russia has used its sphere of influence to threaten the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine by challenging and opposing its possible alliances with the Western World, especially its stated desire to join NATO. Russia has dismissed the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine by making various public declarations cautioning the West not to expand its presence in its 'zone of privileged interests', which includes Ukraine (Cross, 2015: 153). Historical context shows that every Russian President has conveyed a lasting disapproval of the expansion of the NATO alliance, especially as NATO began to expand eastward (Cross, 2015). This central Russian strategic objective was outlined in Moscow's foreign policy concept in July 2008, where Russia referred to 'protecting' Russians living outside its borders from a so-called 'Nazification' (Tabachnik, 2020: 302) resulting from an increase in Western influence in Ukraine (Cross, 2015). This strategy laid the seeds for what later resulted in the annexation of Crimea (Cross, 2015). It is worth noting that this is not a stand-alone incident, as Russia invoked a similar approach to intervention in Georgia around the same time (Cross, 2015). Importantly, this demonstrates Putin's determination to act along multiple fronts using similar strategies to re-establish hegemony over what it considers Russia's historical sphere of influence.

Most recently, and most aggressively, Russia has ignored the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine by threatening its deepening relationship with the West by using physical force to control parts of this country and strip its legitimacy as a sovereign state. The illegal annexation of Crimea and the increased support for separatists in the eastern regions of Ukraine have deterred NATO from engaging in a formal relationship with Kyiv, as doing so could drastically escalate the ongoing conflict (Oğuz, 2015). However, with the expansion of the current conflict, NATO member states leaders, including US President Joe Biden, backed by Congress, are making substantive enhancements to NATO's forward defence force posture. This is likely to include permanently stationing troops in Eastern Europe,

which, up until now, had been on a rotational presence only due to the fear of provoking Russia. As for the current conflict, NATO has continued to dismiss the demands of Russian elites, who continue to push for an end to NATO's "open door" enlargement policy (Congressional Research Service, 2022: 2). This brings up questions surrounding NATO's existing obligations to Ukraine and NATO's support of the Ukrainian military that, up until recently, had been left to defend the country on its own. President Putin has essentially learned two vital truths during the ongoing conflict: first, that NATO remains risk-averse and will do everything to avoid antagonizing Russia, and second, that Ukraine will eventually escape from Russia's sphere of influence if not stopped in time (Anon, 2006). These two considerations show that President Putin's attack on Ukraine now is not an impulsive action but a rational and well-thought-out course of action aiming to pursue what the Russian President considers his country's vital national interest – namely, the consolidation of Russia's re-emerging status as a respected and feared global superpower.

This argument is further demonstrated by current tensions within Ukraine, as Russia invokes war in the region and continues to perform numerous war crimes to destabilize the country, degrade its legitimacy, and deter Western influence from expanding eastward. The Ukraine case study demonstrates the Russian strategy to control the external politics of Ukraine by using coercion, as well as large deployments of violence to prohibit the expansion of Western influence. This contradicts the national interest of Ukraine to act as an autonomous agent internationally and attempts to deny its efforts (as well as that of some of its Eastern European neighbours) to apply for NATO membership.

PART III: INTERNAL FACTORS

Russia adopted a double-pronged strategy to deny Ukraine's sovereignty by putting pressure on its ability to act as a sovereign actor on the international stage as well as by taking advantage of internal Ukrainian weakness to degrade its efforts to consolidate its status as an independent country.

The plan pursued by Russia was to forge a weak Ukrainian government with poor levels of political legitimacy. In addition, Russia used hard power to coerce policymakers into becoming more supportive of Russian interests. Hard power is defined here as coercion, force, or payment to secure one's interests (Feklyunina, 2016: 775). Evidence of this is seen in Russia's support for a pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, in Ukraine's 2004 presidential contest (Shevtsova, 2020). During the Orange Revolution, citizens engaged in widespread protests challenging election fraud throughout major Ukrainian cities and opposing the choice of Viktor Yanukovych as a presidential candidate. As Ukraine has grown cautiously distant from its eastern neighbours, Russia has expressed a sense of alarm regarding its remaining level of influence over Ukrainians, seen in effect as 'little Russians'. By backing pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych, Russia was able to prevent any threat that could jeopardize the Russian narrative of Russian-Ukrainian interconnectedness, to preserve its status as a great power, and to protect the "cradle of Russian Orthodoxy" that is Kyiv and the historical memory it evokes of Kievan Rus, generally accepted as the first 'Russian' state in Europe (Shevtsova, 2020: 139). What follows, from Putin's Russia perspective, is that without Ukraine, its own, self-constructed identity becomes fragile, deprived of its historical context, and devoid of all historical narratives, thus forcing Russia's political elites to find new methods of unifying Russian society. This affects Putin's grand strategy and timing towards Ukraine, in that a large-scale invasion, such as the one that is actively occurring now, seemed almost inevitable in retrospect. To Putin, preserving control over the Ukrainian 'territory', an essential component of Russia's historical Soviet roots, was necessary for maintaining the Russian identity. However, one must not underestimate the degree to which Russia's identity has yet to change as its military continues to capture a ravaged and lost Ukraine.

Concurrently, Russia has imposed a series of so-called 'gas wars' where it has temporarily cut off or

reduced gas supplies to Ukraine. Regardless of Ukraine's position as a transit country for Russian gas to Europe, Moscow has prioritized the "pursuit of political leverage over Kyiv" rather than its economic interests with the EU (Bozhko, 2011: 369). This was done to pressure Ukrainian policymakers to act in accordance with Russia's wishes (Shevtsova, 2020). Both of these instances demonstrate Russia's meddling in internal Ukrainian politics. This has influenced Ukraine, prior to the 2022 intervention, in that its government became an increasingly illegitimate government that was forced to give course to the demands of Russia's national interests rather than those of Ukraine itself.

A third strategy used by Russia to deny Ukraine its independence was to exaggerate significantly the threat posed to Russia by internal Ukrainian political developments, and then use these fabricated narratives as tools to mobilize public opinion against the new Ukrainian government in Russia so as to ultimately legitimize military intervention (Loshkariov and Sushentsov, 2016: 311). The new Ukrainian government elected in 2014 was perceived by Moscow as highly anti-Russian and frightened ethnic Russians living in Ukraine (Loshkariov and Sushentsov, 2016). As a result, Russia intensified its propaganda against Ukraine's government and labeled its members as "pro-Western Fascists." This had a significant impact on Ukrainians living in the east of the country, and especially in Crimea, where more substantial divisions between pro-Russian and pro-Western populations exist (Loshkariov and Sushentsov, 2016: 303). At this point of heightened Ukrainian internal weakness, Russia manipulated significant sections of its neighbour's population into seeing the annexation of Crimea as highly legitimate. This has shaped Ukrainian politics in that it has put into question the legitimacy of Ukraine as a sovereign state and prepared the ground for the current Russian full-scale invasion and resulting outright territorial annexation attempts.

PART IV: OVERCOMING RUSSIAN ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITIES

This paper deploys the analytical tool of ontological security theory (OST) to develop a grand strategy for the future of a post-Putin Russia, which must be peacefully reintegrated into a democratic 'Common European Home' (Gorbachev, 2020: 106). This section provides insights into the application of OST in International Relations, illustrates the significance of OST in interpreting the often-irrational behaviour of elites, and, lastly, demonstrates how Western states may overcome ontological insecurities within Russia in the future.

OST is concerned with the state's conception of the 'Self', which has been assumed to be constructed through a dominant autobiographical narrative. This narrative is built upon the historical experiences of the Self that are used to formulate reassuring narratives during times of increased ontological insecurity and existential anxiety (Delehanty & Steele, 2009: 3). Thus, OST is essentially built upon the notion of prioritizing the state's self-identity needs. States achieve ontological security by establishing and consolidating fixed narratives of their past.This is at the forefront for states' needs as 'ontological insecurity' is so intolerable that it must be defended against by whatever means available (Krickel-Choi, 2021: 9).

Consequently, ontological insecurity is provoked within states whose self-constructed experiences or perceived memories of the past suddenly become challenged (Rumelili, 2018). History is necessarily remembered and experienced differently from one group to another. Therefore, national communities must develop a degree of reflexivity so they may disrupt constructed grand narratives that often dictate much of their lives (Donnelly & Steele, 2019). This paper argues, as do Delehanty and Steele (2009), that a competing feminist narrative can help societies to rewrite the dominant norm that is masculinity, and instead integrate forms of empathy and storytelling, which are more characteristic of the socially constructed female identity, that may help to alleviate existing ontological insecurities. Using OST, it becomes abundantly clear how challenges to states' biographical narrative by the Other can

stimulate as much anxiety in a ruling elite, such as that led in Russia by President Putin, as an actual physical threat, such as war.

This relatively new approach to International Relations aims to understand the emotions of ruling elites and citizens and to explain why leading politicians often act irrationally, even when it is against their state's rational best interest. This paper views Vladimir Putin's trauma in 1989 in Berlin as a young KGB officer witnessing first-hand the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the eventual collapse of the USSR has fueled the current Russian President's ontological insecurity with respect to the West's intentions to destroy Russia. This explains in part his grand strategy regarding Russia's 'near abroad' in general and Ukraine in particular. Russia's policies towards its 'near abroad' aim to reclaim influence over the Central and Eastern European areas where many of the former USSR and Warsaw Pact states are located, once they re-gained de jure or de facto independence following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc during the 1989-1991 era (Way, 201: 693). Exercising repeated intervention in these neighbouring countries' politics since the 1990s, Russia has taken an active role in preparing and implementing the above strategy by encouraging leaders of the 'near abroad's' autocratic behaviours and continually intervening in the politics of neighbouring states (Way, 2015: 691). This is primarily attributed to Russia's, or specifically President Putin's, ontological insecurity regarding the West's attempts to promote democracy internationally, which became especially prominent following the end of the Cold War (Way, 2015). President Putin was humiliated and disappointed by Russia's incapacity to step into the USSR's role as a global superpower following the collapse of the USSR. He is quoted as having mentioned his aversion to Russia's sliding status as a major international actor as the global political order continued to shift after the dissolution of the USSR, and further endangered his hope to return Russia to its past glory (Grant, 2022). Therefore, the ontological insecurities which motivate the actions of

the Russian political elite led by President Putin are essentially a reflection of the humiliation of witnessing the Eastern Bloc crumble to dust between 1989 and 1991. Today, his actions are part of a Russian strategy to rebuild a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, with Russia at the forefront of a renewed global political, economic, and military global superpower.

Ontological insecurities can be overcome by adopting a deliberative, reflexive position and engaging with the perceived Other, where competing narratives, such as feminist accounts of a state's sense of Self and time, can be rethought (Hom & Steele, 2020). This is particularly difficult in the case of Russia, as President Putin maintains exclusive control over the country's mass media and social communication networks. However, in post-Putin Russia, the liberal democracies of the Transatlantic Community would be wise to deliberately implement methods of relieving the ontological insecurities currently cultivated by President Putin. It is of utmost importance that these Western allies consider this reality when developing a grand strategy for a post-Putin Russia, as neglecting to do so would be to continue to treat Russia as an enemy, and further push it into an ever-closer alliance with China - another major authoritarian global power. This would encourage an alliance of autocracies headed by two great superpowers and ultimately jeopardize the progress of democratic governance not only within Europe but across the world.

PART V: PREPARING FOR THE POST- PUTIN ERA

President Putin uses ontological insecurity arguments to create perceived identity and security threats against the Russian people, which he then invokes to justify his aggression against Ukraine. These arguments constitute Russia's current dominant narrative connecting its self-understanding about how its past history, present challenges and future fate are inextricably linked. This narrative is used by others to understand the

Russian President's actions even when they seem to go against Russia's rational and reasonable state interests and to predict his future moves.

However, a state's ontological security is not static. Rather, it is diverse and combines a multitude of possible narratives which may inform a state's conception of the Self, until it reinvents its master narrative (Delehanty & Steele, 2009). The internal construction process of a state's identity is likely to dismiss narratives that are deemed too feminine. Confining these marginalized narratives is deemed necessary in order to ensure the continuance of the dominant narrative, lest they threaten a state's identity. Femininity has thus been historically denied its place in becoming a dominant narrative among states as it is socially constructed as "weak, passive, naïve, irrational, illogical, gentle, and is to lack social and political agency" (Delehanty & Steele, 2009: 7).

By adopting or promoting a feminist ontological security approach, Russian opposition politicians could effectively "challenge, subvert and transform the dominant autobiographical narrative" of Russia, which has predominantly followed a male-gendered ontological insecurity narrative (Delehanty & Steele, 2009: 9). Optimal opportunities for contestation are found in moments of national crisis (Delehanty & Steele, 2009: 10) – in Russia's case, like the current conflict in Ukraine. By challenging a state's 'national purpose' in moments of national crisis, regime opponents expect to see a response that seeks to justify engaging in moral action. More specifically, they may utilize these justifications to "highlight contradictions in the use of certain values", and ultimately delegitimize a state's response to claimed existential threats (Delehanty & Steele, 2009: 10). This provides the space necessary for discussing marginalized narratives in a manner that is actually able to shift the state's dominant autobiographical narrative into becoming more feminine: care instead of rejection; compassion instead of conflict; cooperation instead of repression.

In Russia's case, a key foreign policy alternative that has been marginalised in recent decades but is authentically Russian and deeply embedded in this country's history is portraying Russia as a European society destined to take its rightful place in the European family of nations, based on principles of equality, mutual respect, shared values, and cooperation. This stream, which aligns well with the more feminine narrative of ontological security described above, was favored by both Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in the late 1980s and 1990s and even taken by President Vladimir Putin early in his first administration (Gorbachev, 2020).

However, during this period Russia was riddled by terrorism and experienced economic decline as well as a devastating collapse in living standards and was therefore unable to confidently pursue this pro-European foreign policy direction (Gorbachev, 2020: 106). Externally, the United States and its European allies did not have the foresight to assist Russia to recover politically and economically and treated it as a defeated adversary rather than as an equal partner. As a result, President Putin fell back on two other traditional Russian foreign policy streams, that of Great Russian nationalist imperialism and Soviet authoritarian revolutionary expansionism. These streams had been effectively deployed by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to defeat Nazi Germany and establish the USSR as one of the two global superpowers in the mid-20th century. Putin took this doctrine of revolutionary imperialism and adapted it for his own purposes–namely, to establish and maintain control over Russia internally and recover its place as a major international actor that could not be ignored, on the global stage (Zubok and Pleshakov, 1999).

As the Putin era nears its end, power struggles within the Kremlin as to Russia's future direction – as a unique orthodox Christian messianic power, as a pragmatic geopolitical great power, or as a member of what Gorbachev once called 'our Common European Home' will inevitably take place. It is in the interest of Western leaders not to repeat the mistakes of the late 20th century and treat Russia as an enemy to be opposed, shunned, and isolated because of its actions in Ukraine. This would result in a reinforced

authoritarian bloc including China, Russia, and Iran, among others, that would deeply destabilise the Rules-Based Liberal international Order created and maintained by the Western powers. Instead, Western leaders could assist in the ultimate success of the pro-European faction to re-establish control over Russia's levers of power, end the Ukrainian aggression strategy, and encourage Russia to join Europe as a free, democratic, and increasingly prosperous nation. This paper argues that they can do so by accepting and engaging with Russia's more feminine narrative of its own ontological security, that aligns well with the pro-European foreign policy stream still alive within Russia's governing elites. Western countries could thus use the current Ukrainian crisis to rectify past mistakes and bring Russia 'in from the cold' as a respected and equal European and global partner rather than as a feared and marginalised enemy.

By offering post-Putin Russia the option to join the New Europe conceived in the November 1990 Charter of Paris (Gorbachev, 2017) as well as the wider Transatlantic Community as an equal partner, the West would effectively alleviate Russian anxieties and overcome the fostered ontological insecurities within Russian society for those Russian citizens and elites who exhibit them. Additionally, it would empower the pro-European/Western Russian faction and ultimately overcome the dominant autobiographical narratives of the other two foreign policy streams that have been effectively merged under Putin's leadership – national imperialism and revolutionary authoritarianism. Lastly, it would ensure that Russia, going forward, would not be effectively pushed geo-politically and ideologically into a close alliance with China, but rather with the West. This is of utmost importance if we are to avoid an alliance of autocracies and a return to 19th century Great Power politics at a global level.

To support this prescriptive narrative and claims regarding the feasibility of the feminine approach, the evidence must support the presence of challengers to the existing dominant

autobiographical narrative. Polling data put out in January of 2021 by the International Centre for Defence and Security found that Russians are progressively leaning towards a more peaceful foreign policy following increased displeasure with their current government. At the time, Vladimir Putin's personal approval rating was seen to have dropped from 59% to 31.7% over two years (Kirillova, 2021). While this does not prove an increase in pro-Western sentiment directly, it does suggest that there is room for an ideological shift in the attitudes of Russians in the post-Putin era. Evidently, there exists a segment of Russian citizens who are weary of the militaristic and nationalistic views that drive Russia's confrontational foreign policy and as a result, have expressed a greater desire for a policy that keeps security and social justice in a position of prominence (Kirillova, 2021). A policy of this sort would demand a shift in the state's dominant autobiographical narrative into becoming more feminine. By doing so, there is a chance that the existing ontological insecurities may be alleviated. With the more recent events of Russia's invasion of Ukraine along with Russia's conscription, the social aspirations of Russians have likely shifted further away from achieving "greatness" and more towards the demand for a more ordinary way of life.

A necessary consideration of this outcome is the level of influence these 'challengers' to the dominant autobiographical narrative have and to what extent they may utilise their influence to spur change in post-Putin Russia. In planning for the post-Putin transition, a group of exiled Russians has co-founded The Russian Action Committee which strives to properly compensate Ukraine for the destruction and devastation that has befallen it following Putin's aggressive invasion (Kasparov & Khodorkovsky, 2023). In addition to this, it hopes to hold all war criminals accountable. Its most ambitious, but also most relevant goal in achieving the above objective, is its aspiration to transform Russia from a dictatorship to a parliamentary federal republic. Evidently, there exists a portion of residents, living in exile, who are openly opposed to Putin's "illegitimate

and confrontational regime" (Kasparov & Khodorkovsky, 2023). In the immediate aftermath of Putin's exit from the political scene, this group plans to capitalize on the aspirations of residents for a more normal life with "human rights and freedoms over abstract state interests" (Kasparov & Khodorkovsky, 2023). In conjunction with an economic reintegration into the West, it is plausible that Russia surmounts its fascist tendencies so it may achieve its demand for peace and freedom. The alternative action for Russia in the post-Putin era is to become a follower of China, consequently phasing out attitudes that support a feminine autobiographical narrative. Nevertheless, attitudes that support a feminist approach to foreign policy seem to trump the latter; making it a feasible outcome.

VI: CONCLUSION

This paper has utilized an OST analysis to better understand the actions of the current Russian political elite, led by President Vladimir Putin, who has effectively employed a strategy of weakening or rejecting the autonomy of Central and East European countries who were formerly members of the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet Union. By leveraging the external and internal weaknesses of other countries, Russia has effectively subverted earlier efforts of garnering independence in the post-Soviet space. By deploying an ontological security-based lens, this paper is able to better discern how Russian elites and their supporters construe and decipher their own past. Likewise, it has engaged in a more in-depth and deliberate examination of the Russian political elite's present behaviour based on the ontological insecurities generated by their constructed narrative of their own past. These two aspects provide the knowledge necessary to develop and articulate a prescription for a post-Putin Russia where Western countries must navigate the future with care and skill so as to avoid another destructive global Cold War. In other words, it aims to contribute to the debates pointing the way towards Russia's transformation from a current adversary to a future ally of the West.

Since the transition from corrupt authoritarianism to democratic liberalism is already well underway in Kyiv, Ukraine constitutes an exceptional case study with regards to the application and use of OST. It helps us to better understand how Russian elites have interpreted their own past in that it clearly shows the ontological insecurities generated from the dissolution of the USSR and the resulting growing influence of the West over parts of Central and East Europe, which have been deemed by Moscow to be part of Russia's natural 'sphere of influence'. Furthermore, being aware of these Russian ontological insecurities provides insight as to why political elites behave the way they do. This is especially true in times of crisis when an internally constructed identity is most heavily relied upon. The insights provided by OST help us navigate towards a prescription for a post-Putin Russia because such a regime change has already effectively occurred in Ukraine. Moreover, it is exactly because of this reason that President Putin fears that today's Ukraine is providing an example for tomorrow's Russia. Therefore, he cannot allow Ukraine to remain a fully independent actor, inexorably slipping out of Russia's sphere of influence.

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