



# Greater Russia: Is Moscow out to subvert the West?

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Published online: 15 July 2020  
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## Abstract

Russia today is presented as out to subvert the West. The chosen means are meddling in elections and sowing discord in Western societies. Russia in this imaginary looms over an unsuspecting West, undermining democracy and supporting disruptive forces. No longer couched in terms of the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism, this is a reversion to great power politics of the rawest sort. However, is this analysis correct? Is Vladimir Putin out to undermine the West to achieve his alleged goal of re-establishing some sort of post-Soviet ‘greater Russia’ imperial union in Russia’s neighbourhood, to weaken the Atlantic power system and to undermine the liberal international order? The paper challenges the view that Russia is trying to reconstitute a Soviet-type challenge to the West, and provides an analytical framework to examine the dynamics of Russian foreign policy and on that basis assesses Russia’s real rather than imaginary aspirations.

**Keywords** Russia · Subversion · Neo-revisionism · Putin · The West · Russiagate

It has become orthodoxy that Russia under an embittered and alienated Vladimir Putin is out to subvert the West. The chosen means are taken to be meddling in elections and sowing discord in Western societies. The various special operations include propelling Donald J. Trump to the White House and fixing the Brexit vote in 2016 (Snyder 2018). Putin’s Russia in this imaginary looms over an unsuspecting West, undermining democracy and supporting disruptive forces (Shekhovtsov 2017; Umland 2017). From this perspective, post-communist Russia is up to its old tricks, with the image of the Russian bear threatening the honour of a defenceless Europe dusted off from the Crimean War and the era of the great game in the late nineteenth century. No longer couched in terms of the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism, this is a reversion to great power politics of the imperial sort. It also represents the application of the weapons of the weak, since Russia by any

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definition is but a shadow of the former Soviet Union, with less than half the population and an economy at most one-tenth the size of that of the USA. Is this analysis correct? Is Putin out to undermine the West to achieve his alleged goal of re-establishing some sort of post-Soviet union in Russia's neighbourhood and to weaken the Atlantic power system so that the liberal international order is eroded from within? In other words, is Russia today a revisionist power out to create a greater Russia?

Before attempting an answer we need to define our terms. What does it mean to be a revisionist power today, and how can a strategy designed to 'subvert' be analysed and measured? Some fundamental methodological problems render study of the question inherently difficult. How can revisionism and subversion be measured? How can the specific actors involved in such actions be identified and disaggregated? At what point do normal policy differences between states become an existential challenge to an existing order? The answer will take four forms, each of which further defines the question. First, an assessment of the charge of Russian subversion and the various approaches that can be used to examine the simple but endlessly complex question: is there a new quality to Russia actions that build on Soviet era 'active measures' to denigrate and ultimately to destroy an opponent. This requires an examination of the logic of Russian motives and policy-making, including examination of the structure of the international system and the dynamics of Russian international politics, which will be presented in the second section. Third, an assessment of some of the Kremlin's subversive behaviour in recent years, examined in the light of the earlier sections. Fourth, analysis of the character of Russia's challenge assesses whether Russia today really is an insurgent and revisionist power.

## Active measures and the subversion of American democracy

Is Russia really out to subvert the West? Much of the American political establishment believe that this is the case. A comprehensive list of Russian sins is presented by Biden and Carpenter (2018), including tyranny at home, the violation of the sovereignty of neighbours, meddling in the affairs of countries on the road to NATO membership, 'soft subversion' through electoral interference in the USA and France, the manipulation of energy markets and the 'weaponisation' of corruption. In his warning not to overreact to the Chinese challenge, Zakaria (2020, p. 64) notes that its actions, such as stealing military secrets and cyber-warfare, 'are attempts to preserve what China views as its sovereignty'. However, these actions are 'nothing like Moscow's systematic efforts to disrupt and delegitimize Western democracy in Canada, the United States and Europe'. Why do Russia's actions in his view fall into an entirely different category?

One answer is that it is a question of political culture. The study of *Moscow Rules* by Giles (2019a, p. 23) argues that Russia's 'instinctive rejection of cooperative solutions is reinforced by the belief that all great nations achieve security through the creation and assertion of raw power', and this in turn means that Russia believes 'that the insecurity of others makes Russia itself more secure', predicated 'on the dubious principle that there is only a finite amount of security in the world'. Elsewhere (Giles 2019b) sums up the policy implications in ten key points, which



together do not leave much room for diplomatic manoeuvre or even engagement with such a wily adversary who ‘takes a very expansive view of what constitutes Russian territory’. Treating it as an equal by normalising relations, as during Barack Obama’s reset, ‘delivered entirely the wrong messages to Moscow’ (Giles 2019a, p. 25). There can be no common ground with such an existential foe, and any substantive engagement smacks of appeasement.

A second perspective focuses on Russophobia, which builds on the political culture notion of some inalienable and ineradicable essence to Russian behaviour. The concept of Russophobia is often used to discount what may well be legitimate criticism of Kremlin policies, but it nevertheless accurately conveys an approach that denigrates not only Russia’s leaders but the people as a whole (Mettan 2017; Tsygankov 2009). In an interview in May 2017 former Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper argued that Russians ‘are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favour, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique’ (Koenig 2017). The work of Smith (2019) complements that of Foglesong (2007) on long-standing American anxieties about Russia. Smith argues that recurrent bouts of Russophobia are prompted by what he calls the ‘Russia anxiety’, a long-term pattern of thinking and sentiments about Russia that alternate between fear, contempt and disregard for the country. The cycle began in the sixteenth century when Russia joined the nascent European international society. Anxiety that Russia threatens Western civilisation was accompanied by various versions of ‘fake history’, as in the publication in nineteenth-century France of Russia’s 14-point plan for world domination—the Testament of Peter the Great. This forgery is just one example of what Smith calls the ‘black legend’ of Russian history: the idea that aggression, expansionism and authoritarianism are inherent features of Russia’s national character. Smith aims to demonstrate that Russia is far from exceptional, and instead its behaviour is predictable and in conformity with traditional patterns of a country defending its national interests, or as Zakaria argues with reference to China, its sovereignty. The major exception was the Soviet period, but this in many ways ran against Russia’s national identity and represented an imposition based on chance and contingency. In his view, Russia today is doing no more than any other state, and its external actions are no more egregiously malevolent than any other.

A third approach looks at Soviet legacies and systemic characteristics. From this perspective, Russia has undergone an ‘unfinished revolution’ (McFaul 2001), allowing the Soviet era anti-Western and anti-democratic forces to regroup after the fall of communism. This particularly concerns the so-called *siloviki* (the security apparatus and its acolytes), as well as the transformed Soviet *apparatchiks* who became the core of Putin’s model of statist oligarchic capitalism. This ‘crony capitalism’ spreads its subversion by abusing Western legal and financial institutions for their own malign purposes (Belton 2020; Dawisha 2014). Despite the change of regime and the end of old-style ideological confrontation, the Soviet system in certain fundamental respects has reproduced itself. This is why the repertoire of tactics is sometimes described as a continuation of Soviet era ‘active measures’ (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) (Rid 2020). These are designed to undermine ‘support in the United States and overseas for policies viewed as threatening to Moscow, discrediting US intelligence and law enforcement agencies, weakening US alliances and US relations with



partners, and increasing Soviet power and influence across the globe' (Jones 2019, p. 2). The term is now used indiscriminately to encompass disinformation and cyber activities as elements of a sustained strategy undertaken by the Soviet and now the Russian security services to undermine an enemy by exploiting divisions and the vulnerabilities of competitive and open democratic societies.

The Communist International (Comintern) was established in March 1919 to spread the revolution globally and prompted the Palmer raids in November of that year in the USA as part of the first Red Scare. During the Cold War there were plenty of times when Moscow tried to influence US politics (Haslam 2012). In 1948 the Soviet Union backed the Progressive Party's Henry Wallace, who had been Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president but split with the Democratic Party over President Harry Truman's hawkish Cold War stance. In 1964 Soviet and Czechoslovak agencies smeared the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, as a racist and Ku Klux Klan supporter. In 1968 the Soviet Union offered an unprecedented level of support for the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey, including financial aid (which naturally was refused). In 1976 the KGB adopted 'active measures' against Democratic Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, a virulent anti-Soviet hawk. In 1980 and again in 1984 it appears that Senator Edward Kennedy sought Soviet support for his presidential campaign (Kengor 2018). In 1983 KGB agents were instructed to help defeat Reagan in his bid for re-election. The Soviet goals outlined above hold to this day in conditions of renewed Cold War, and this is why the term has regained currency (Abrams 2016). This is understandable, given the long history of Cold War conflict and renewed confrontation.

What is striking, however, is that most Soviet actions were inept and remarkably ineffective (Robinson 2019). We can also add that today such actions are also intensely counterproductive, arousing the hostility of the authorities against which they are directed and discrediting what may be legitimate policy differences with these countries. Political opponents are tarred with the brush of 'collusion' with an external enemy, as was the case during the second Red Scare in the post-war years overseen by Senator Joseph McCarthy. This is also the case, as we shall discuss below, in the 'Russiagate' collusion allegations, asserting that Trump worked with Moscow in 2016 to get himself elected (Sakwa 2021). The question then becomes: why does Russia do it? Is it part of a single and coordinated strategy of subversion using covert means, reflecting an overarching doctrine?

This is where the fourth approach, the ideational, comes in. From this perspective, the struggle between communism and capitalism has given way to the conflict between democracies and autocracies, with the latter developing a repertoire of techniques to keep democracy at bay (Hall and Ambrosio 2017). Each tries to subvert the other using a range of instruments, while advancing soft power agendas (Sherr 2013). Since at least 2004 Russia has been concerned with preventing what it calls 'colour revolutions', in which civil society is mobilised by Western agencies to achieve regime change (Horvath 2011, 2013). This was the issue addressed by Valerii Gerasimov (2013), the Chief of the Russian General Staff, in his landmark article. The lesson of the Arab spring, he argued, was that the rules of war had changed. Viable states could quickly descend into armed conflict and become victims of foreign intervention and sink into an abyss of state



collapse, civil conflict and humanitarian catastrophe. The article was a response to what was perceived to be new forms of Western ‘hybrid warfare’. He noted that ‘Frontal engagements of large formations of forces at the strategic and operational level are gradually becoming a thing of the past. Long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals’. He identified eight features of modern hybrid warfare that were applied to subvert states and to gain control of territory without resorting to conventional arms. Regime change could be achieved by the use of civil methods such as propaganda, funding and training of protest groups, and information campaigns aimed at discrediting the opponent. He stressed that the ‘very rules of war have changed’, arguing that non-military means such as the ‘use of political, economic and informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population’, can exceed ‘the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness, and ‘that the open use of forces—often under the guise of peace-keeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict’.

Gerasimov discounted the element of popular protest against corrupt and authoritarian systems in the Middle East, North Africa and post-Soviet Eurasia and instead framed these events as part of the radicalised West’s regime change strategies. Following the Russian actions in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ was applied to Russia’s use of mixed methods (propaganda, disinformation, information warfare and special forces) to achieve what came to be known as a ‘non-linear’ military operations (Fridman 2018). What Gerasimov had identified as the Western strategy against Russia was now interpreted as the blueprint for the Kremlin’s attempts to destabilise its neighbours and Western democracies.

As for motivation, this is where a fifth approach comes in, focusing on questions of identity and Russia’s search for status in a competitive international environment. From this perspective, the idealism of Mikhail Gorbachev’s ‘new political thinking’ in international relations in the late 1980s ‘offered a global mission that would enhance Soviet international status while preserving a distinctive national identity’. In this way, the Soviet Union could forge a ‘shortcut to greatness’ by winning great power status not through economic might and military power but through normative innovation and the transformation of international politics (Larson and Shevchenko 2003). This instrumental view of ideational innovation is challenged by English (2000), who stresses the long-term maturation of an intellectual revolution in Soviet thinking, which then carried over into Russian debates. As we shall see, there are many layers to Russia’s foreign policy identity, although there is a clear evolution away from an initial enthusiasm for all things European and alignment with the West towards the stronger articulation of a great power version of Russian national interests. These great power aspirations have been interpreted as a type of aspirational constructivism directed towards the identity needs of domestic audiences rather than the expression of an aggressive policy towards the historic West (Clunan 2009). Status issues are important (Krickovic and Weber 2018), but they have to be understood as part of a larger ensemble of motivations within the structure of international relations.



The final approach focuses on the structural characteristics of international politics, whose specific post-Cold War manifestation will be examined below. Briefly put, defensive neorealism argues that in an anarchic international environment states typically seek to preserve the status quo to maintain their security by preserving the balance of power (Waltz 1979, p. 121). Offensive realists focus on the maintenance of hegemony in the international system and the struggle to prevent usurpation (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 21). Revisionism assumes that the balance of power does not adequately guarantee a state's security, hence it seeks to change the balance of power; or that it assumes that the balance of power has changed enough to mount a challenge to the status quo. In Russia's case, classical neorealism of either type would accept regional hegemony, with offshore balancing an adequate mechanism to ensure that it did not mount a global challenge. However, the liberal internationalism that predominated after 1989 makes no provision for regional hegemony of any sort, hence Russia was unable to exert the sort of influence to which it felt entitled, and hence its revisionist challenge was manifested in attacks on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. This, at least, is the liberal structural perspective, and even the defensive realist position has guarded against any reassertion of Russia's great power ambitions, hence the concern to ensure that Ukraine was distanced as far as possible from any putative Russian 'sphere of influence' (Brzezinski 1994, 1997).

How are we to adjudicate between these six different presentations of Russian interests and concerns? What is the standard against which we can measure the dynamics of Russian identity formation and foreign policy? Is Putin really trying to create a 'greater Russia' by not only challenging the established powers but also by waging a covert war to shape electoral outcomes while destroying the foundations of democracy itself? Undoubtedly, certain Cold War practices of propaganda and covert influence campaigns have been revived, while some (such as deep espionage operations) never stopped, accompanied now by 'black cash' flows (untraceable and illicit payments) to sympathetic movements, cyber-enhanced intelligence operations and outright cyber-warfare. Some of this predates the Cold War and is part of traditional statecraft, some is part of revived Cold War confrontation, while some is new and takes advantage of developing social media and communication technologies. Together they reflect the logic of conflict stopping short of kinetic military action.

## Post-Cold War reconstruction of the West and the international system

What is the character of the conflict? We argue here that this is a structural feature of post-Cold War international politics. Two very different and incommensurate models of post-Cold War order were advanced after 1989 (Sakwa 2017a, pp. 12–19). The logic of *expansion* made perfect sense from the perspective of what came to be seen as the 'victors' at the end of the Cold War. The long-term adversary had not only renounced the ideology in whose name the struggle against capitalist democracy had been waged, but the country itself disintegrated. This really did look like 'the end of history', with no sustained ideological alternative to capitalist modernity on offer. From the first, the logic of expansion was



opposed by Russia, the continuer state to the Soviet Union. From Moscow's perspective, the end of the Cold War was a mutual victory—the triumph of the new political thinking that had matured in various academic institutes and think tanks (Bisley 2004; English 2000). This is why the logic of expansion was countered by the logic of *transformation*, the view that the end of the Cold War offered a unique opportunity to move beyond ideological confrontation between and within states. The idea of revolutionary socialism and class war would give way to a politics of reconciliation and all-class development. This is more than a 'shortcut to greatness' or a strategy for status advancement (although it is both of these), but a proposal for a structural transformation of the conduct of international politics. This demand lies at the base of normative developments in international law over the last century as well as in various peace and environmental movements today. There are plenty of credible realist arguments to dismiss such transformative approaches as hopelessly idealistic, but repeated financial and pathogenic shocks and the enduring threats of environmental catastrophe and nuclear annihilation provide the continuing impulse for transformative thinking (Lieven 2020).

This relates to a key point at the heart of Russian post-communist self-identity—the ambition to join not the West as it exists within the accustomed binaries but a transformed West where Cold War antagonisms are structurally transcended. After 1989 the stated Russian ambition was to join the political West as it existed at the time, defined as the embodiment of the democratic ideal, the rule of law, defensible property rights, and above all the realm of freedom and independent associational life. However, because of the way that the political West evolved during the Cold War, when the larger political civilisation, termed after the Cold War the liberal international order, melded with the Atlantic power system, for a large part (but not all) of the Russia elite this became impossible. The power system at the heart of the liberal normative order endows US power with a unique character. The hegemonic aspect provided a range of international public goods, including the framework for economic globalisation. However, this was accompanied by the practices of primacy, which we can credibly describe as dominion, an ascendancy that has spawned a vast literature describing the USA as an empire (indicatively, Bacevich 2003; Johnson 2002; Mann 2005).

Russian leaders from Gorbachev to Putin insisted that the Cold War West—what in Russian parlance became known as the 'historic West'—would have to change with the end of the Cold War to become a 'greater West'. This was effectively the condition for Russia to join the expanded community, but in the end it turned out impossible for both sides to make the necessary adjustments. The greater West would not have to repudiate hegemony—that was too much even for a *demandeur* state such as Russia to ask—but Moscow's leaders did seek a change in the terms of dominion through the creation of what it insisted should be a mutually inclusive security order. Hegemony was to a degree acceptable as long as it was constrained by the system of international law grounded in the post-1945 international system, represented above all by the United Nations. Russian neo-revisionism challenges dominance in its various manifestations (empire, primacy, exceptionalism or greatness), but can live with constrained hegemony.





In sum, the fundamental post-Cold War process in the Russian view was to be mutual *transformation*, whereas the Western view envisaged a straightforward process of *enlargement*. In the context in which the main antagonist had itself repudiated the ideology on which it had based its opposition to the historical West since 1917, and which in 1991 disintegrated as a state, the Atlanticist pursuit of expansion and its accompanying logic of dominion was understandable (Wohlforth and Zubok 2017). Victory in the Cold War and the disintegration of the historic enemy (the Soviet Union) not only inhibited transformative processes in the historic West but in the absence of a counter-ideology or an opposing power system, encouraged the radicalisation of its key features (Sakwa 2018a). The original liberal world order after 1945 developed as one of the major pillars (the Soviet Union was the other) within a bipolar system and was initially a relatively modest affair, based on the UN Charter defending the territorial integrity of states (although also committed to anti-colonial national self-determination), multilateral institutions, open markets that was later formulated as the ‘four freedoms’ of labour, capital, goods and services, accompanied by a prohibition on the use of force except in self-defence. After 1989 the liberal world order, as the only surviving system with genuinely universal aspirations, assumed more ambitious characteristics, including a radical version of globalisation, democracy promotion and regime change.

The framing of the ‘historic West’ against a putative ‘greater West’ repeats the recurring Russian cultural trope of contrasting ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Europes or Wests, ‘with which Russians can seek to make common cause in domestic power struggles’ (Hahn 2020; see also Neumann 2016). As the historic West radicalised, it also enlarged. On the global scale its normative system, the liberal international order, made universalist claims, while its power system (dominion) in Europe brought NATO to Russia’s western borders and drove the European Union deep into what had traditionally been Russia’s economic and cultural sphere. This would be disruptive in the best of circumstances, but when it became part of the expansion of an Atlantic power system accompanied by the universalising practices of the liberal international order, it provoked a confrontation over Ukraine and the onset of a renewed period of confrontation that some call a New Cold War (Legvold 2016; Mastanduno 2019; Monaghan 2015). In the absence of ideational or institutional modification, let alone innovation, after 1989, there was ‘no place for Russia’ (Hill 2018, p. 8 and *passim*) in this new order.

Does this mean that Russia has become a revisionist power, out to destroy the historic West? Russia’s ambition has in fact been rather different, but in the end no less challenging: to change the practices of the power system at the core of the historic West. Once mutual transformation was no longer an option and the idea of a greater West receded (although it remains a residual feature of Russian thinking), Russia turned to neo-revisionism, a rather more modest ambition to change practices rather than systems (Sakwa 2019). This was the culmination of an extended thirty-year period of experimentation. Contrary to the view of the Russian power system as some immutable and unchangeable malign force (Lucas 2008, 2013), the first and second models outlined above, foreign policy and more broadly Russia’s engagement with the historic West since the end of the Cold War has evolved through four distinct periods. Periodisation is an important heuristic





device and in methodological terms repudiates the view that there is some enduring essence to Russian foreign policy behaviour, with 'active measures' seamlessly transferred from the Soviet Union to post-communist Russia. It is important to note that the periodisation outlined here is *layered*. In other words, each phase does not simply give way to the next, but builds on and incorporates the earlier one, while changing the emphasis and introducing new elements.

The first period in the early 1990s was characterised by an enthusiastic Westernism and embrace of liberal Atlanticism (Kozyrev 2019). In conditions of catastrophic social and economic conditions at home and assertions of US hegemony and dominion abroad (although exercised rather reluctantly in Bosnia and elsewhere at this time), this gave way to a more assertive neo-Soviet era of competitive coexistence, masterminded by the foreign minister from January 1996, Yevgeny Primakov, who between September 1998 and May 1999 was prime minister. His assertion of multipolarity, alignment with India and China (the beginning of the RIC's grouping) and foreign policy activism received a harsh rebuff in the NATO bombing of Serbia from March 1999. Putin came to power in 2000 in the belief that the two earlier strategies were excessive in different directions, and through his policy of 'new realism' tried to find a middle way between acquiescence and assertion. Gorbachev-era ideas of 'normality' were revived, and Putin insisted that Russia would be a 'normal' great power, seeking neither favours from the West nor a privileged position for itself (Sakwa 2008). This strategy of positive engagement was thrown off course by the expansive dynamic of the Atlantic power system, including the war in Iraq in 2003, NATO enlargement and the Libyan crisis of 2011. As for Russia, the commodities boom of the 2000s fuelled an unprecedented period of economic growth, accompanied by remarkably successful reforms that transformed the Russian armed forces (Renz 2018). These fed ideas of Russian resurgence and appeared to provide the material base for a more assertive politics of resistance.

When Putin returned to the Kremlin in May 2012 the new realism gave way to the fourth phase of post-communist Russian foreign policy, the strategy of neo-revisionism. Already in his infamous Munich speech in February 2007, Putin (2007) objected to the behaviour of the US-led Atlantic power system, but in substance the fundamentals of the new realist strategy continued. Now, however, neo-revisionism challenged the universal claims of the US-led liberal international order and resisted the advance of the Atlantic power system by intensifying alternative integration projects in Eurasia and accelerating the long-term 'pivot to Asia'. By now Moscow was convinced that the normative hegemonic claims of the liberal international order were only the velvet manifestation of the iron fist of American dominion at its core. Russia, and its increasingly close Chinese partner, stressed the autonomy of international governance institutions, insisting that they were not synonymous with the universal claims of the liberal international order. This, in essence, is the fundamental principle of neo-revisionism: a defence of sovereign internationalism and the autonomy of the international system bequeathed by the Yalta and Potsdam conferences of 1945. This is accompanied by a rejection of the disciplinary practices of the US-led hegemonic constellation, including democracy promotion, regime change, humanitarian intervention and nation building (what Gerasimov identified



as Western hybrid warfare) (Cunliffe 2020). In effect, this means a rejection of the practices of US-led international order, but not of the system in which it operates.

Putin defends a model of conservative (or sovereign) internationalism that maps on to a ternary understanding of the international system. On the top floor are the multilateral institutions of global governance, above all the UN (in which Russia has a privileged position as permanent member (P5) of the Security Council); on the middle floor states compete and global orders (like the US-led liberal international order) seek to impose their hegemony; while on the ground floor civil society groups and civil associations try to shape the cultural landscape of politics (such as groups trying to push responses to the climate catastrophe and nuclear threats up the global agenda). Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, condemn the liberal order for not living up to its own standards. As Lavrov (2019) argued, 'How do you reconcile the imperative of defending human rights with the bombardment of sovereign states, and the deliberate effort to destroy their statehood, which leads to the death of hundreds of thousands of people?'

This is the neo-revisionist framework, which exposes the gulf between hegemonic principles and practices of dominion. It is revisionist to the degree that it repudiates the application of US dominion to itself, but is willing to work with that hegemony on major international issues as long as Russia's status as an autonomous diplomatic interlocutor is recognised (Lo 2015). Neo-revisionism is the natural culmination of a policy stance torn by two contradictory positions. The revisionist impulse seeks to reassert Russia into an international system in which great power diplomacy after the end of the Cold War in 1989 had given way to a hegemonic universalism that by definition repudiated the traditional instruments of great power diplomacy, such as spheres of influence, great power summitry and grand bargains. On the other side, Russia remains a conservative status quo power intent on maintaining the post-1945 international system, which grants it the supreme privilege of P5 membership as well as providing a benign framework to advance its model of sovereign internationalism. This is a model of world order favoured by China, India and many other states, wary not so much of the hegemonic implications of the liberal international order but of the power hierarchy associated with the practices of dominion. This is the framework in which Russia (and China) can engage in globalisation but repudiate the universalist ambitions of the power system with which it is associated.

With the USA under Trump withdrawing from multilateral commitments to focus on bolstering its ascendancy in the world of states (the second level), Russia (and China) inevitably stood up in defence of multilateralism, in which they have such a major stake. This is far from a revisionist position, and instead neo-revisionism defends the present international system but critiques the historical claim of the liberal international order to be identical with the multilateral order itself (Sakwa 2017a). Of course, the US-led liberal order has indelibly marked international society, but this does not entail a proprietary relationship to that society (Dunne and Reut-Smith 2017). Russia emerges as the defender of the international system as it is presently constituted, but at the same time advances an alternative (non-hierarchical) idea of how it should operate. On occasion this may entail revisionist acts, such as the annexation of Crimea, which from Moscow's perspective was a defensive reaction to a Western-supported putsch against the legitimate authorities in Kiev



(Treisman 2016), but they are not part of a consistent revisionist strategy. Both at home and abroad Russia is a status quo power. Putin railed against the West's perceived revisionism in both aspects, but the main point of resistance is the element of dominion at the heart of the Atlantic power system. In both respects there is no evidence that Russia seeks to destroy the international system as presently constituted.

This structural interpretation, in which incompatible models of international politics contest, is overwhelmingly rejected by the partisans of what can be called post-Cold War monism. From this perspective, there is only one viable order, the one generated by the USA and its allies. There can be pluralism within that order, but not between orders. This monist perspective is challenged by some recent international relations literature (Acharya 2017; Flockhart 2016) and of course by states defending a more pluralist understanding of the international system (for example, English School approaches, Buzan 2014). In practical terms the monist imperative, when couched in liberal order terms but rather less so when applied in the language of Trumpian 'greatness', renders Russia the structural equivalent of the Soviet Union, or even the dreaded image of Tsarist Russia.

This leads to a fundamental category error. Russia is not a 'revolutionary power' in the sense defined by Henry Kissinger (2013, p 2), a country that can never be reassured of its security and consequently seeks absolute security at the expense of others. Napoleonic France or Hitlerite Germany were determined to overthrow the international systems of their times to create one more suited to their needs. Russia today is a conservative power, alarmed by the way that the international system that it had helped create at the end of the Second World War became radicalised after the end of the Cold War. Critics argue that this radicalised version of liberal hegemony was 'bound to fail', since its ambitions were so expansive as to classify as delusional, and which in the end provoked domestic and external resistance (Mearsheimer 2018, 2019). Russia's neo-revisionism after 2012 sought to defend the autonomy of the multilateralism inaugurated by the victorious powers after 1945 and was ready to embrace the 'hegemonic' goals of the liberal order as presented in the Cold War years, but came to fear the revisionism implicit in the 'exceptionalist' ideology of the post-Cold War version of the liberal order, especially when it was accompanied by what was perceived as the aggressive expansion of the dominion of the unipolar Atlantic power system.

## The Kremlin and subversion

In the context of the distinction between the hegemony of the liberal international order and the dominion of the Atlantic power system, both Russia and China reaffirm their commitment to the normative principles underlying the international system as it developed after the Second World War. These include the primacy of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, the significance of international law and the centrality of the United Nations (Wilson 2019). However, both are challenger powers in two respects: first, in questioning the assertive universalism that was radicalised at the end of the Cold War, including various practices of humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion, accompanied by regime change strategies; and second,



dissatisfaction with the existing distribution of power in the international system, hence challenge American primacy and hegemonic practices. This combination of commitment to the international system but challenges to the pre-eminence of a particular order in that system is what renders the two states neo-revisionist rather than outright revisionist powers. To label them as such is a category error, with grave and dangerous policy consequences.

This error has now become enshrined doctrinally. The US *National Security Strategy* (2015) already warned that Washington ‘will continue to impose significant costs on Russia through sanctions’ and would ‘deter Russian aggression’. Trump’s proclaimed intention of improving relations with Russia provoked a storm of hostility in which Republican neo-conservatives and Democrat liberal internationalists united to stymie moves in that direction. This is why the US *National Security Strategy* (2017, p. 25), at the end of Trump’s first year in power, warned against the ‘revisionist powers of China and Russia’, ranked alongside the ‘rogue powers of Iran and North Korea’ and the ‘transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist groups’. The National Defense Strategy (2018, p. 2) also identified Russia and China as revisionist states, seeking ‘to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nation’s economic, diplomatic and security decisions’. The emergence of challengers undoubtedly came as a shock for a power and normative system that had enjoyed largely unquestioned pre-eminence. Responses to that shock range from intensified neo-conservative militarism, democratic internationalist intensification of ideological struggle to delegitimise Russia’s aspirations, as well as an increasingly vocal ‘realist’ call for a return to the diplomatic practices of pre-Cold War sovereign internationalism.

The first two responses make common cause against Russia’s perceived revisionist challenge and have mobilised a network of think tanks and strategies against Russia’s instruments of subversion. The far from exhaustive list presented here indicates the scope of Moscow’s armoury of subversion, as well as the methodological and practical problems in assessing their scale, motivation and effect. The first is support for insurgent populist movements in the West. Russia rides the wave of populist and nationalist insurgency, but it does not mean either that Russia is the main instigator or beneficiary. The Russian leadership has long complained about the ‘hermetic’ character of the Atlantic power system and thus welcomes the breach in the impregnable walls of rectitude created from within by the various national populisms of left and right. In other words, Moscow perceives national populist insurgency as a struggle for ideational pluralism within the liberal international order, but above all as allies in the struggle for geostrategic pluralism against the monism of the Atlantic power system. Russia supports some of these movements, but not to the extent of jeopardising the existing structures of the international system. Once again, the tempered challenge of neo-revisionism predominates over the insurrectionary behaviour that would characterise a genuinely revisionist power.

The Alliance for Securing Democracy identified at least 60 instances of Russia funding political campaigns beyond its borders, although many of the cases are circumstantial (Foer 2020). In his notorious interview with the *Financial Times* on the eve of the Osaka G20 summit in June 2019, Putin asserted that ‘the liberal idea’ has ‘outlived its purpose’ as publics turned against immigration, open borders and



multiculturalism, but he immediately brought in the structural context: '[Liberals] cannot simply dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over recent decades' (Barber and Foy 2019, p. 1). The Kremlin has gone out of its way to identify with right wing (and occasionally left wing) 'populists' who argue for a revision of the EU's relations with Russia, including a dismantling of the sanctions regime. Thus, in the 2017 French presidential election Putin welcomed the head of National Rally (formerly the Front National) Marine Le Pen to Moscow, a move that still attracts widespread condemnation in France. Earlier, a Russian bank had made a €9.4 million loan to her party. Even this needs to be seen in context. Putin's favoured candidate in the 2017 French presidential election was not Le Pen but the more conventional social conservative François Fillon. When the latter's campaign as the nominee of the traditional Gaullist party imploded, Moscow was left bereft of a mainstream candidate calling for a revision of the post-Cold War dominion strategy. As for the funding for Le Pen, the loan was called in prematurely, and the bank was closed down as part of the Central Bank of Russia's attempt to clean up the financial sector.

As for Italy, the leader of the Lega (formerly Lega Nord) party, Matteo Salvini, was one of the strongest advocates of resetting relations with Russia as he entered government following the March 2018 elections as part of the coalition with the Five Star Movement. The relationship was no more than a 'marriage of convenience', with Moscow only engaged to the extent that it could advance the goal of weakening the EU's sanctions regime (Makarychev and Terry 2020). In a subsequent scandal, one of Salvini's closest associates and the president of Lombardy Russia, Gianluca Savoini, was taped talking in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow about an illicit scheme to funnel funds through oil sales to support the League's electoral campaigns (Nardelli 2019). On his visit to the Vatican in July 2019 Putin met with the national populists, or otherwise put, the geopolitical revisionists. This was his third meeting with Pope Francis, and Putin sounded more Catholic than the Pope: 'Sometimes I get the feeling that these liberal circles are beginning to use certain elements and problems of the Catholic Church as a tool for destroying the Church itself' (Horowitz 2019).

The substantive issue remains. National populists in the West repudiate much of the social liberalism that has now become mainstream, but most also reject the geopolitical orthodoxy that in their view has provoked the Second Cold War with Russia. On that basis there is clearly common cause between the populist insurgency in Europe and the Kremlin. For defenders of the liberal order, this commonality turns the populists into a Moscow-inspired fifth column. The old division between capitalist democracy and communism after the Cold War has given way to a new binary, between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The fundamental divide shifts on to new ground, which can variously be seen as one between patriotism and cosmopolitanism, which is a variant of the tension between revived nationalist movements opposed to the erosion of state efficacy by neoliberalism within the framework of globalisation. Many share concerns about the influx of refugees and fear even greater flows of migrants in the future, which in their view will erode the civic and cultural bonds of Western societies. National populists challenge cosmopolitan liberalism (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018) and thus align with the cultural conservatism



that characterises the neo-revisionist period in Russian foreign policy (Robinson 2017). In this new political spectrum, Russia emerges as an ally of the patriots and the anti-globalisers and is condemned for funding and variously supporting the anti-liberal insurgency in the West. Whole institutes (such as the Political Capital Institute in Hungary headed by Péter Krekó and the Henry Jackson Society in London) are devoted to exposing these links and the various alleged illicit cash flows and networks. There are certainly plenty of lurid tales and examples of European politicians who have been supported by factions in Russia without being transparent about these links.

However, the common anti-liberal platform with Moscow is only part of the story. The geopolitical factor is no less important, with both left and right populists rejecting elements of US dominion in the Atlantic security system, and question the wisdom of the inexorable drive to the East that inevitably alienates Russia. Here they make common cause with international relations realists as well as pragmatists like George Kennan, who in 1998 warned of the deleterious effects on European security of Moscow's inevitable response to NATO enlargement (Friedman 1998). Today these groups are in the vanguard in calling for an end to the sanctions regime, which in their view misses the point—that Russia's actions in Ukraine and elsewhere after 2014 was a response to the provocative actions of the Atlantic power system in the first place. In other words, anti-liberalism is only one dimension of the putative alliance between national populism in Europe and Moscow. Geopolitical revisionism is perhaps the most important one, and thus national populist movements incur the wrath of the national security establishments. In the UK this led to the creation of the Integrity Initiative and its various European and American affiliates, sponsored by the shadowy so-called Institute of Statecraft, funded by the British state.

There is a third dimension—in addition to geopolitical revisionism and anti-cosmopolitanism—in the putative alignment of national populism with Moscow, and that is the question of pluralism. Post-Cold War liberalism entered a paradoxical turn that in the end forswore the fundamental principles on which it is based—tolerance and pluralism (Horsfield 2017). In a situation where the liberal idea faced no serious domestic or geopolitical opposition, it became radicalised and thus eroded its own values. The US-led liberal international order, as suggested above, posed as synonymous with order itself. There could be no legitimate outside to its own expansive ambitions. The counterpart to universalism is monism, which eroded the coherence of liberalism in domestic and foreign policy (Sakwa 2017b, 2018b). This helps explain why relations with the EU deteriorated so drastically after 2004. The influx of East European countries accentuated monism by embracing the security guarantees offered by American dominion. Extreme partisans of this view have little time for the hegemonic normative agenda and view the EU as just part of the Atlantic alliance system, and not necessarily the most important one. They radically repudiate Gorbachevian ideas about a common European home or a greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok and condemn those who suggest rapprochement with Moscow as 'Trojan horses' (Orenstein and Keleman 2017), the name of a series of Atlantic Council reports exposing Russian contacts in the West. For them, security guarantees from Washington are the priority. Thus, pan-continental ideas gave way to an intensified Atlanticism, and dominion prevailed over hegemony.





One manifestation of this was the Polish-inspired Eastern Partnership, which in the end became an instrument for the expansion of the EU's geopolitical influence in its neighbourhood, provoking the Ukraine crisis in 2014 (Mearsheimer 2014). The European Neighbourhood Policy thereafter became more differentiated and thus accepted the pluralism that it had earlier been in danger of repudiating.

In short, geopolitical revisionist forces are at play in Europe and the USA, and Russian neo-revisionism makes common cause with them to the degree that they offer more pluralist perspectives on international politics and challenge the monist dominion of the Atlantic power system, but the degree to which Moscow supports let alone sponsors this challenge to the post-Cold War order is questionable. This links to a second form of Russian subversion, namely collusion with anti-establishment figures. The most spectacular case of this is the charge that Moscow colluded with Trump to steal the 2016 presidential election. After nearly two years of work, in March 2019 the Robert Mueller Special Counsel Report into Russiagate boldly asserted that 'The Russian government interfered in the 2016 election in sweeping and systematic fashion' (Mueller 2019, Vol. 1, p. 1). However, it then rather lamely conceded that 'the investigation did not establish that members of the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities' (Mueller 2019, Vol. 1, pp. 5 and 173). Once again reinforcing the geopolitical concerns underlying charges of Russian subversion, the instigators of Russiagate became the heart of the 'resistance' to the president. Alongside credible concerns about his impact on American democratic institutions, they also opposed the rapprochement with Russia that Trump had proclaimed as one of his campaign goals. In his major foreign policy speech delivered at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington on 27 April 2016, Trump argued that 'I believe an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia—from a position of strength—is possible. ... Common sense says this cycle of hostility must end. Some say the Russians won't be reasonable. I intend to find out'. Trump promised that America would get 'out of the nation-building business and instead [focus] on creating stability in the world' (Transcript 2016). This represented a radical rethinking of foreign policy priorities, and although some of the themes had sounded before, together they challenged the foundations of the post-Cold War international order. They also suited Russia, since the expansive Atlantic system had increasingly become a matter of concern in the Kremlin. This geopolitical coincidence of interests intersected with domestic US political conflicts to create Russiagate, which stymied putative moves towards a new *détente*.

The third subversive strategy imputed to Russia is cyber-warfare in various forms. There are plenty of cases of Russian hacking, including the attack on the German parliament in 2015, which the German chancellor Angela Merkel condemned as 'outrageous', noting that it impeded her attempts 'to have a better relationship with Russia' (Bennhold 2020). She had been equally outraged when she discovered that her office had been bugged by the NSA. In France, 2 days before the second-round presidential vote on 7 May 2017 20,000 campaign emails from the Emmanuel Macron campaign were uploaded to Pastebin, a file-sharing site, and then posted on 4chan, an anonymous message board. The Macron team denounced Russia for a 'high level attack', but even the Atlantic Council reported that the relevant French





security agency ‘declared that no conclusive evidence pointed to Russian groups’, and ‘that the simplicity of the attacks pointed toward an actor with lower capabilities’ (Galante and Ee 2018, p. 12). The regulation of hostile cyber activity is crucial, especially when accurate attribution is so difficult and ‘false flag’ attacks so easy.

This applies to the key Russiagate charge that Russian military intelligence (the GRU) ‘hacked’ into the server of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Democratic Campaign Congressional Committee (DCCC) and released embarrassing materials to WikiLeaks, the web-based investigative site founded by Julian Assange in 2006. The publication of the emails was allegedly coordinated in some way with the Trump team. The material revealed that the DNC opposed the campaign of the independent left-leaning senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders, to ensure Clinton’s nomination. The hackers also gained access to the emails of Clinton’s campaign director, John Podesta, following a successful spearphishing email sent on 19 March 2016. The 50,000 Podesta emails exposed Clinton’s ties with Wall Street bankers, high speaking fees and apparent hypocrisy in condemning privilege while enjoying its benefits. The Russian hackers undoubtedly sought to mine political intelligence, but whether they intended specifically to help Trump is more questionable. The Mueller report detailed the specific GRU cyber-warfare units which hacked the Clinton campaign and the DNC and then released the emails through Russian-sponsored cut-outs, Guccifer 2.0 and DCLeaks, as well as WikiLeaks. These were ‘designed and timed to interfere with the 2016 US presidential election and undermine the Clinton Campaign’ (Mueller 2019, Vol. 1, p. 36).

Strikingly, the FBI or Mueller never conducted forensic examinations of their own and instead relied on CrowdStrike, a private contractor hired by the Democrats to examine their servers. The material was then published, according to the report, through DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0, ‘fictitious online personas’ created by the GRU, and later through WikiLeaks. Mueller argues that Guccifer 2.0 was the source of the emails and that he was a persona managed by Russian operators (Mueller 2019, Vol. 1, p. 47). Mueller alleges that Assange worked for or conspired with Russian agencies, but Assange states unequivocally that the Russian government was not the source of the emails, and (surprisingly), he was never questioned by Mueller. The Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group argues that the DNC emails were physically downloaded and then transferred (by unknown persons) to WikiLeaks rather than being extruded via an electronic download (Binney and McGovern 2017). In Congressional testimony in December 2017 CrowdStrike president Shawn Henry (2017) admitted that he could not confirm that material had actually been exfiltrated from the DNC servers.

The fourth major subversive strategy is disinformation as well as media manipulation. The Internet Research Agency (IRA) based in St Petersburg deployed sock puppet accounts (trolls) and their automated versions (bots) to influence public debate by sharing accounts and voicing divisive opinions. These allegedly shaped voter preferences and depressed turnout among some key constituencies, above all people of colour, in the 2016 US election. The US Intelligence Community Assessment (2017, p. 1) on 6 January 2017 accused Russia of trying to undermine American democracy and charged with ‘high confidence’ that Putin personally ordered ‘an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election, the consistent



goals of which were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency'. The ICA was issued in the name of 17 intelligence agencies, although later it became clear that it had been prepared by a 'hand-picked' group selected by Office of the DNI head, James Clapper (Full Transcript 2017). The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2020, Vol. 4, p. 6) in April 2020 issued its fourth report in its Russia investigation arguing that 'the ICA presents a coherent and well-constructed basis for the case of unprecedented Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election', a view that is at odds with most commentary on what is usually considered a slipshod and poorly sourced document (for a summary of critiques, see McCarthy 2019, 2020; Gessen 2017).

The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 prompted a new wave of criticism of Russia's disinformation efforts. The Strategic Communications and Analysis division of the European External Action Service, colloquially known as EUvsDisinfo, identified a 'trilateral convergence of disinformation narratives' being promoted by China, Iran and Russia (Jozwiak 2020). The work of EUvsDisinfo work was examined by the Reframing Russia group at the University of Manchester (Hutchings and Tolz 2020). They examined the specific stories that had been identified as disinformation, and took a broader look at reportage of the pandemic on Russian television, in particular on Channel 1. They found that 'there was little sign here of the coordinated pro-Kremlin "conspiracy theory propaganda" flagged by EUvsDisinfo'. They went further to note that its misrepresentation of Russian Covid-19 coverage was 'troubling' in two respects. First, through 'omission', with sentences taken out of context and 'rephrased in the form of summaries and headlines which make them sound particularly outrageous'. The second way is through 'blatant distortion'. For example, EUvsDisinfo claimed that Sputnik Latvia stated that 'Covid-19 had been designed specifically to kill elderly people', whereas in fact the article had ridiculed such conspiracy theories and highlighted 'their idiocy'. Reframing Russia questioned EUvsDisinfo's methodology, assuming that 'random websites without any traceable links to Russian state structures' were analogous to state-funded media agencies, and that all were part of a coordinated Kremlin-run campaign. It even included 'conspiriological, far-right websites which are actually critical of Putin'. They conclude that 'EUvsDisinfo's headlines and summaries border on disinformation'. Examination of the source material 'cited by EUvsDisinfo demonstrates that the Russian state is, in fact, not targeting Western countries with an organised campaign around the current public health crisis'. They ask how a situation was created in which 'an EU-funded body set up to fight disinformation ends up producing it'. Reframing Russia advances two hypotheses to explain how things could be got so wrong. The first is 'a profound misunderstanding of how the media in neo-authoritarian systems such as Russia's work', with not everything managed by the Kremlin. Second, 'The outsourcing of services by state institutions to third parties without a proper assessment of their qualifications to do the required work'. In the case of EUvsDisinfo, research is outsourced to some 400 volunteers, who are 'operating in a post-Soviet space saturated ... by anti-Russian attitudes'.

It is in this context that a burgeoning literature examines possible responses. An article in *Foreign Policy* in July 2019 argued that 'Moscow now acts regularly



against US interests with impunity'. The question, in the view of the author, was how to rebuild deterrence—'how to get Putin to start fearing the United States again'. The problem was defined in broad terms: 'how to convince Putin that he can't afford to keep trying to disrupt the global order and undermine the United States, the West, and democracy itself'. The charge list was a long one:

Over the last decade, Putin has provoked Washington again and again: by invading Georgia, annexing Crimea, attacking Ukraine, assassinating opponents at home and abroad, and interfering in elections throughout the West. In each case the underwhelming US response helped convince Putin that he could get away with more such behaviour.

To 'get Putin to start respecting the United States again' such measures as toughening sanctions, strengthening military alliances, and conducting more assertive diplomacy were recommended (Geltser 2019). Simpson and Fritsch (2019), former *Wall Street Journal* writers who founded Fusion GPS, the agency that in 2016 hired Christopher Steele to prepare the infamous dossier on Trump's links with Russia, insisted that Britain needed its own Mueller report to investigate Russia's role in the Brexit vote. They argued that such an enquiry was 'essential to halt Russia's attack on Britain's democracy' (Simpson and Fritsch 2019). The Kremlin Watch Program (2019) of the Prague-based European Values Center for Security Policy suggested 20 measures to counter 'hostile Russian interference'.

A Pentagon assessment in June 2019 argued that the USA was ill-equipped to counter 'the increasingly brazen political warfare Russia is waging to undermine democracies' (Bender 2019). A 150-page study prepared for the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that the USA was still underestimating the scope of Russia's aggression, including the use of propaganda and disinformation to sway public opinion in Europe and across the globe. The study also warned against the growing alignment of Russia and China, which were opposed to America's system of international alliances and shared a proclivity for 'authoritarian stability'. The authors argued that domestic disarray impeded the USA's ability to respond (Department of Defense 2019). Natalia Arno, the head of the Free Russia Foundation, agreed with the report's finding and argued that 'Russia is attacking Western institutions in ways more shrewd and strategically discreet than many realize' (Bender 2019). The Pentagon report recommended that the State Department should take the lead in devising more aggressive 'influence operations', including sowing division between Russia and China. The study analysed what it called 'gray zone' activities, the attempt by Putin's regime to undermine democratic nations, in particular those on Russia's periphery, through 'hybrid' measures, falling short of direct military action. However, although warning of Moscow's alignment with Beijing, the report recommended cooperation with Russia in key areas such as strategic nuclear weapons. One of the authors, John Arquilla of the Naval Postgraduate School, argued that Ronald Reagan's offer in the 1980s to share research on ballistic missile defence (BMD) should be revisited. The report suggested that while elites and the people broadly supported Putin's foreign policy and the striving for great power status, this was liable to weaken when faced by socio-economic problems.



Inevitably, forces seeking to break the liberal hegemony at home will make common cause with an external power that is also interested in breaking that expansive hegemony. Russia looks for friends wherever it can find them, and seeks a way out of the impasse of the post-Cold War security order. However, it is important to stress the limits to that alignment. If Russia were a genuinely revisionist power, then it would make sense to ally with any force destructive of the old order; but as argued above, Russia is a neo-revisionist power—concerned with changing the monist practices of post-Cold War liberalism, but not with changing the international system in its entirety. This means that Russia is quite happy to work within existing structures as long as monism can be kept in check. The struggle against ‘fake news’ and ‘Russian disinformation’ threatens the pluralism at the heart of traditional liberalism. That is why the investigation into the alleged collusion between the Trump camp and Russia in the 2016 presidential election was more damaging than the putative original offence. When policy differences and divergences in value preferences are delegitimated and couched in binary Cold War terms, then the Atlantic power system is in danger of becoming dangerously hermetic. Immunity to new ideas, even if they come from a traditional adversary, weakens resistance to domestic degradation.

### **Russia: challenger or insurrectionary?**

We are now in a position to assess whether Putin really is out to subvert the West, as suggested by the US intelligence community, much recent commentary and numerous strategic and doctrinal statements. The ‘black legend’ charge underlies the Russiagate allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US and other elections. Such accusations are based on the view that a fundamental gulf has opened between the worldviews of the Russian leadership and the Western community. There are some grounds to argue that this is the case, although this needs to be placed into the broader framework of the evolution of Russian foreign policy since the end of the communist era and into the theoretical context of how Russia sees the international system, as described earlier. Above all, as the historic West moved into an era of expansive ‘hegemonism’, Russia (and China) were inevitably categorised as hostile nations. They had the motive and heft to fight back. Lavrov (2019) condemned the way that the ‘rules-based order’ substituted for international law, while the expanded institutions of dominion encircled both countries. Challengers to the radicalised liberal world order become subversive by definition.

Russia is a challenger power but it is not insurrectionary. In other words, it is far from the Soviet position of seeking to advance the ideology of revolutionary socialism, of which ‘active measures’ were one of the most specific manifestations. Further, Russia is not a revisionist power out to destroy the foundations of the international system as it has taken shape since 1945, but it is neo-revisionist, challenging the practices of the US-led Atlantic order within that system. As a conservative status quo Russia finds itself challenged by the radicalisation of the historic West that it had hoped to transform at the end of the Cold War. Concurrently, Russia’s identity as a great power means that it resists the dominion element. It could live with the more modest liberal hegemony of the Cold War years (and in fact, one of the



layers of Russia's foreign policy identity still wants to join it), but the combination of radicalised hegemonic universalism and the expansive logic of the power system rendered dominion unacceptable. Russia condemns the Atlantic system for its revolutionary radicalism, manifested in what it perceives to be Western revisionism. Russia thus finds itself divided from the historic West on a range of policy issues, but not ultimately by commitment to the post-1945 international system. This is why Moscow welcomed Trump's post-Atlanticist declarations, since he offered an alternative to the neo-conservative militarism and democratic interventionism of the post-Cold War era. Shackled by Russiagate, Trump was not able to deliver much and in fact the sanctions regime and other forms of neo-containment were intensified. In this context, six observations can help us examine the problem of greater Russia and subversion.

First, it is misleading to see direct continuity between the USSR and Russia. Russia no longer embodies an alternative ideology and is in fact a status quo power in both ideational and territorial terms. Russia is also comparatively far less powerful. If at its peak in the early 1970s Soviet GDP reached 58 per cent that of the USA, today Russia's at most is ten per cent of America's. Russia's defence spending in 2019 was the fourth largest in the world, but at \$65 billion this is less than a tenth of the USA at \$732 billion (38 per cent of total global military spending) and less than a quarter of China's \$261 billion (SIPRI 2020). Cold War patterns have been restored, but the dynamics of this confrontation are very different even though some of the procedural rituals of mutual excoriation have returned (Monaghan 2015). However, Russia does claim to represent an alternative to the historical West in three ways: as the defender of conservative sovereign internationalism, where states interact on the basis of interests, although norms are far from repudiated; as a socially conservative civilisation state with societal dynamics of its own (Coker 2019; Tsygankov 2016); and as a European power with a stake in creating some pan-continental framework, while at the same time advocating the establishment of some sort of greater Eurasian unity.

All three open up lines of fracture that Russia seeks to exploit as a challenger but not as an insurrectionary power. In particular, at the civilisational level the identification of the West with the Atlantic system is challenged. This is a process that is advancing in any case within the Atlantic system, with the EU Global Strategy (2016) talking of 'strategic autonomy'. The election of Trump later that year prompted Merkel (2018), to argue that Europe could no longer rely on the USA to protect it. The French president Emmanuel Macron (2019) argued that the corollary of the growing Atlantic divide was rapprochement with Russia. Critics argue that Russia exploits this division and seeks to widen it, and in structural terms they are right. Any breach in the monist wall will be welcomed by any leader in Moscow. It is along this line that charges of Russian subversion lie.

Second, unlike the former Soviet Union where policy was coordinated by the Central Committee and Politburo, today Russia is far from monolithic. The layered phases mean that elements of at least four types of Russian engagement with the West coexist and operate at the same time, although with different intensity. As noted, these range from Atlanticist engagement, competitive coexistence, new realism to neo-revisionism. Commentary on contemporary Russia assumes that it



behaves like a unitary actor, with Putin serving as the unique demi-urge with nothing better to do than ceaselessly monitor and manipulate global malign activities. This is indeed a manifestation of Western ‘narcissism’, and as Paul Robinson (2020) asks ‘where does all this nonsense about Putin wanting to destroy democracy come from? It certainly doesn’t come from anything he’s ever said’. Russia is a vast and complex country with a vigorous public sphere with plenty of relatively autonomous interests and actors. Institutionalised political pluralism is constrained, but not all roads lead to the Kremlin (Sakwa 2020). For example, the national populist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, has hosted six conferences of far-right politicians since 1992, many attracted by the anti-Western language deployed by much of the Russian elite. They provide an alternative narrative that often coincides with the Kremlin’s positions, but this does mean that there is an unbreakable alliance between the two (Moldovanov 2019). As the Reframing Russia team argue, not every outlandish comment in Russia’s public sphere can be attributed to the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation department. Equally, we may add, not every oligarch is ‘Putin’s crony’, bent on advancing the Kremlin’s malign agenda. This attribution and alignment fallacy is why, among other reasons, sanctions against alleged regime-associated individuals will not achieve the desired effect of changing Russian policy, since they are based on a flawed understanding of how Russia works, as well as the category error noted above about the structural sources of Russian foreign policy.

Third, Russian behaviour is located in the matrix of the changing dynamics of the Atlantic power system, the liberal international order and global power shifts (Karaganov (ed.) 2020). Russia is certainly alienated from a particular system that claims to be universal, as well as concerned about the advance of a power system to its borders. The liberal international order may well have been ‘doomed to fail’ because the key policies on which it is based are deeply flawed (Mearsheimer 2019). Spreading liberal democracy around the globe was benign in intent but disastrous in consequence (Walt 2019). The illusions generated by exaggerated claims of exceptionalism meant that the US ‘squandered’ Cold War victory (Bacevich 2020). Russia’s reaction is just one to an order whose response to the end of the Cold War was to exaggerate the dominion factor and thus undermined its normative hegemony.

Fourth, Russia has returned as a power critical not only of the Atlantic hegemony but also of the values on which it is based. At the St Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in June 2019 Putin talked of the failure of the ‘Euro-Atlantic’ economic model and argued that ‘the existing model of economic relations is still in crisis and this crisis is of a comprehensive nature’ (Putin 2019b). Here and on other occasions he condemned the Atlantic powers’ use of sanctions as a form of economic warfare. On the eve of SPIEF on 6 June, Putin and China’s leader, Xi Jinping, announced the upgrade of their relationship to a ‘Comprehensive Partnership of Coordination for a New Era’, accompanied by a joint statement on global strategic stability (Xinhua 2019). There is a tension between the expansive liberal hegemony and countries and social movements who question the identification of liberalism with order itself. Liberalism ultimately generates antinomies, which are not mere correctible aberrations but systemic flaws of the liberal paradigm itself. These above all concern the question of taming the power





of capital and dealing with inequality and citizen marginalisation. Moscow does not identify itself with these radical critiques, and its criticisms ultimately have a superficial and reversible character. Russia does not stand outside the contradictions of contemporary liberalism, having entered its own liberal era at the end of the Cold War in 1989. That layer in its identity is far from nugatory. Russia's experience of liberalism is distinctive, characterising the 1990s as a time of liberal excess, yet the Putin system is permeated with neoliberal ideas and even liberal aspirations. His critics in Russia from the left and right condemn the antinomies of the system, whereas Putin simply points out the power and cultural contradictions of post-Cold War liberalism.

Fifth, the struggle for geopolitical pluralism after the neo-revisionist turn in 2012 is accompanied by a programme of cultural conservatism, opening the door to alignment with Europe's national populists. In condemning what he took to be the rampant social liberalism, accompanied by Merkel's 'welcome culture' in 2015 vis-à-vis the influx of refugees, Putin (2019a) sought to bolster support among social conservatives in Europe. As political and social liberals united against Putinite Russia, it appeared that the impasse could only be broken by bolstering conservative (if not outright reactionary) movements in Europe. A European change of heart would allow a rapprochement without Russia having to change its domestic or foreign policies: 'It would be 1989 in reverse. This time it would not be Russia but Europe to go through a traumatic conversion to foreign ideas' (Mações 2019). Russia would be rescued from isolation and policy-makers could once again turn to the creation of a 'greater Europe', reducing Russia's dependence on China and strengthening its position vis-à-vis the USA. This is the foundational argument about Russia being out to subvert the West, and there is some truth in it—but not in the linear way it is usually interpreted. The alignment is situational and the geopolitics takes precedence over ideological alignment.

Sixth, as the Russiagate affair demonstrates, Russia acts as the scapegoat for problems generated by domestic contradictions. In that case, Russian 'meddling' helped explain how the most improbable of candidates was able to win against an experienced politician, Hillary Clinton, with a long record of public service, to pull off 'the greatest political upset in American history' (Green 2017, p. 236). This impeded the Democratic Party from coming to terms with its own shortcomings, and the country from addressing its ills. This perhaps is the greatest subversive effect achieved by Russia. As far as we know, this was not achieved deliberately, although there is the view that Russia fed information 'to have the West believe what the Kremlin wants the West to believe' (McCarthy 2019, p. 166). Even more cunningly, perhaps they were feeding misinformation to Steele to provoke a counter-intelligence investigation that would incapacitate the Trump presidency and set the Democrats off on a wild goose chase that prevented them from reforming and reconnecting with the real concerns of the American people. If the latter is the case, then the operation was a brilliant success. The struggle against presumed Russian 'active measures' does more damage to Western political institutions and the legitimacy of Western normative hegemony than the putative subversive activity itself. The security services and spy agencies of course continue to battle it out behind the scenes, but McCarthyism is as destructive today as it was in the 1950s.





## Conclusion

Russia has returned as an international conservative power, but it is not a revisionist one, and even less is it out to subvert the West. Russia certainly looks for allies where it can find them, especially if they advocate the lifting of sanctions. When Macron (2019) argued that it was time to bring Russia out of the cold, arguing that ‘We cannot rebuild Europe without rebuilding a connection with Russia’, his comments were welcomed in Moscow, although tempered by a justifiable scepticism. The Putin elite had earlier welcomed Trump’s election, but in practice relations deteriorated further. The foreign policy establishment is deeply sceptical that the EU will be able to act with ‘strategic autonomy’. Above all, Russo-Western relations have entered into a statecraft ‘security dilemma’:

Currently, we are again faced with a situation in which mutual intentions are assessed by Washington and Moscow as subversive, while each side considers the statecraft employed by the other side as effective enough to achieve its malign goals. At the same time, each side is more sceptical about its own statecraft and appears (or pretends) to be scrambling to catch up (Troitskiy 2019).

In the nineteenth century, Russia became the ‘gendarme’ of Europe, and while Putin repudiates the country assuming such a role again, Russia has undoubtedly returned as an international conservative power. Maintenance of a specifically historically determined definition of the status quo is the essence of its neo-revisionism: a defence of traditional ideas of state sovereignty and of an internationalism structured by commitment to the structures of the international system as it took shape after 1945. Russia resents its perceived exclusion from the institutions of Atlantic dominion (above all NATO); but is not out to destroy the international system in which this competition is waged. Thus, Anton Shekhovtsov (2017) is mistaken to argue that Russia’s links to right-wing national populist movements are rooted in philosophical anti-Westernism and an instinct to subvert the liberal democratic consensus in the West. In fact, the alignment is situational and contingent on the impasse in Russo-Western relations and thus is susceptible to modification if the situation changes. Moscow’s readiness to embrace Trump in 2016 when he repeatedly argued that it made sense to ‘get on’ with Russia indicates that Western overtures for improved relations would find the Kremlin ready to reciprocate. In 2017 the Kremlin sent Washington various ideas on how to move out of the impasse in US-Russian relations, but given the ‘Russiagate’ allegations, the White House was in no position to respond. The same applies when in 2019 Russia was invited to resume full voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which the Kremlin embraced even though powerful domestic neo-traditionalist and Eurasianist voices counselled against.

Russia is not out to subvert the West but seeks to change it. For the defenders of monist enlargement, this is just as bad. Resistance at home and abroad to the post-Cold War Western order has exposed unexpected fragilities and insecurities, hence the turn to the language of ‘resilience’ (for example, EU Global Strategy



2016). Given its strategy of resistance, Russia in turn becomes the object against which resilience is tested, becoming one of Federica Mogherini's 'five principles' (2016), creating yet another barrier to normal diplomatic relations. In fact, the structural model outlined in this paper suggests that Russia does not seek to create a greater Russia through subversion let alone physical enlargement, although all leaders since the end of the Cold have tried to make the country a great power. This raises the fundamental and still unresolved question: is Russia still interested in joining a transformed West? Or has it realised that the only way to retain great power status and sovereign decision-making is to remain outside the West? Joining the transformed West meant the attempt to create a 'greater Europe', what Gorbachev had earlier termed the common European home. For defenders of the existing West, this is perceived as threatening its existing values, norms and freedoms, and perhaps more importantly, also the existing hierarchy of international power; but for Russia, it is a way out of the perceived geopolitical impasse and offers a common developmental strategy.

The West is faced by a choice 'between containment and engagement on mutually agreed terms' (Trenin 2016, p. 110). Incompatible understanding of the political character of the historical epoch provokes an intense barrage of propaganda from all sides, with mutual allegations of political subversion and interference. The interaction of hegemony and dominion on the one side and multiple layers of identity on the other provides fertile ground for incomprehension and the attribution of sinister motives, provoking the statecraft 'security dilemma' identified above. Russia maintains a neo-revisionist critique, but this does not mean repudiating improved relations with a post-dominion West. The country increasingly pivoted to the East and strengthened its alignment with China, but this does not mean that Russia seeks an irrevocable break with the West (Monaghan 2019). This is why it seeks improved relations with the EU and the USA if a satisfactory formula for restored contact can be found. Moscow's support for insurgent populist movements in Europe and disruptive forces in America will always be tempered by larger strategic concerns and are certainly not unequivocal. The greater Russia envisaged by the Kremlin elite is one whose sovereignty is defended and whose great power status is recognised, but it is not one that seeks more territory or to subvert the West and sow discord. The West can be trusted to do that without Russia's help. The West's response to Russia's neo-revisionism has been neo-containment and counter-subversion strategies, but if the analysis proposed in this article has any validity, then new forms of engagement may be a more productive course.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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