

A NEW YALTA, PUTIN'S OBSESSION

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The dominant discourse of the Russian establishment is nourished by the idea of a threatened Russia claiming the right to have its borders protected by a buffer of sovereign states. Russia believes that it alone can legitimately assert its supremacy in the area, but the former Soviet republics, now independent states, cannot decide to free themselves of the postcolonial geopolitical condition imposed on them by the Kremlin.

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Dedicated to Sergei Kovalev, former dissident, first human rights ombudsman of the Russia that might have been, and to Memorial, the organisation—disbanded by the Kremlin—that shows that the Soviet system was worth ending.

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This message (material) was created and (or) by a foreign mass media outlet performing the functions of a foreign agent, and (or) a Russian legal entity performing the functions of a foreign agent." This is what would appear in the pages of the present publication, in every one of its editions, in paper or digital format, if it were declared a "foreign agent" in Russia.

The thing is, Russia is under threat: enemies proliferate within and without. Inside the country, "foreign agents" are popping up everywhere, in the pages of a newspaper, in surveys of a sociological institute, and even in individuals. The **web page** of the Russian Ministry of Justice regularly updates a list of these infiltrators, from a civic movement of diabetics to another fighting gender violence, through to the organisation Memorial, a fragile symbol of moral dignity in today's Russia.

Outside the country, the "collective West"—we, dominated by the United States—are searching for any pretext to snatch from Russia its legitimate supremacy over its post-Soviet neighbourhood. This jargon harks back to Soviet rhetoric reserved for "enemies of the people", "agents of imperialism", and puppets of the "capitalist encirclement". It was along similar lines that President Putin declared in a key **speech** in September 2013 that, "Too often in our nation's history, instead of opposition to the government we have been faced with opponents of Russia itself."

So, Russia is under threat. The arrogant West is determined not to recognise the *legitimate* interests which, associated with Russia's great power status, entitle it to control the post-Soviet space. This stance feeds

into the dominant discourse of the Russian establishment that is, one way or another, engaged in foreign affairs. It is taken for granted that Russia *has the right* to have *its* borders protected by a buffer of sovereign states which, in turn, cannot have the right to emancipate themselves from Russia.

This strip of European territory—former Soviet republics, and now independent states—constitutes, for the Kremlin, its security belt, its sphere of “vital interest”, the place where the very survival of the Russian state is at stake. However, the West not only fails to respect this existential fear but it is now also meddling in the internal affairs of these countries. In the eyes of the Kremlin, this is not a response to the desire of the societies of these countries to move closer to Europe but manoeuvring by the West to usurp Russia’s place in Europe. For Moscow, this is the very heart of the “matter of European security architecture”. In short, Russia considers that it is the only country that can legitimately act in this area, whereas former Soviet republics—that is to say, some 70 million inhabitants, not counting Central Asia—cannot decide to break free from the postcolonial geopolitical condition imposed on them by the Kremlin.

Moscow is now demanding legal guarantees of NATO’s non-expansion to the east, in keeping with a line of reasoning rooted in the sharing out of spheres of influence agreed upon in Yalta in 1945 by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It was no accident, Putin claimed in the aforementioned speech of 2013, that these were the agreements which, “taken with Russia’s very active participation, secured a lasting peace”. The logic of Putin’s current policy is rooted in this historical reference. As Fernando Claudín rigorously describes in his *The Communist Movement from Comintern to Cominform (The Crisis of the Communist International, 1970)*, Stalin’s obsession was to make Churchill and Roosevelt accept the Soviet borders established by the division agreed upon with Nazi Germany in the secret protocols of the German-Soviet pact. And, like Stalin, then, Putin wants the same.

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While Stalin’s obsession in 1945 was with Poland, for Putin, now, it is Ukraine. “The Soviet Union has a right to make efforts that there should exist in Poland a government friendly toward the Soviet Union, and [...] the Soviet government cannot agree to existence in Poland of a government hostile toward it”, Stalin **wrote** to President Truman, and irritably added, “it is not clear why, while the question on Poland is discussed it is not wanted to take into consideration the interests of the Soviet Union from the point of view of its security.” The reader who changes Poland for Ukraine and Soviet Union for Russia will have the key to interpreting what the Kremlin has been pursuing since the Ukrainian people decided

to take a different path in 2014 after the mass-based movement known as Euromaidan. It therefore “all started” in Ukraine, Putin **told** the German weekly *Die Zeit* in June 2021, because the European Community (led by Washington), “actively supported the unconstitutional armed coup” in Kyiv. In fact, Putin’s obsession with Ukraine dates back to before the Maidan protests and feeds on the theory that Russia and Ukraine are one and the same people, invoking essentialist arguments as hard data on a par with the law of gravity or the number pi.

The Kremlin tale juggles words and reality in claims where the principle of veracity is totally irrelevant: brutal repression in Belarus is called “normalisation” in Moscow, as it was in Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring was crushed by tanks in 1968; Lukashenka turns the state of Belarus into a human trafficker but Poland and Lithuania are to blame; the choice made by Ukrainians in several free elections is a coup d’état, says Moscow but a parody of a referendum legitimises the annexation of Crimea where Moscow persecutes and jails the Tartars, the real, original inhabitants of the peninsula; and the Ukrainian president comes from a Russian Jewish family but, in Moscow’s view, the Russian-speaking secessionists in Donbas are patriots who, fighting against fascism, are threatened with genocide, which is why Russia is *obliged* to deploy its troops all along the border with its neighbour. Similarly, Moscow, which has agreed in fact to become **China’s “little brother”**, is constantly complaining that the EU does not treat it as an equal when, in reality, Russia’s future citizens have it drummed into them from the cradle that their country is special, and the bottom line is that nobody really understands it. Or, as the eminent historian, Marlène Laruelle **describes it**, they are inculcated with the “tautological idea that Russia’s distinctive feature is to be Russian”.

Yet, stubborn facts show that it is Putin’s politics that is working against Russia. Neither Brussels nor Washington needs to work too hard to attract the populations of the region, supposing that was their intention, given that it is well known that enlargement is no longer fashionable. What explains increased support in these countries for the EU and NATO is the Kremlin’s aggressive policy. It is not that they idealise this option but, with all its limitations and contradictions, it is more respectful of national sovereignty and the wishes of their peoples. With the latest show of force on the border with Ukraine, the Kremlin has employed all its arts for an operation of “coercion to dialogue”, very much in line with the Russian diplomatic tradition. Although one might think it was just a manoeuvre (let’s threaten so we can sit down to talk) it is very clear who is endangering peace in Europe. Andrei Sakharov, one of Memorial’s founders, reminds us of this when he **says**, “a country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbours”.