

## CONFRONTING RUSSIA'S NEW IMPERIALISM: THE DIFFERENT FATES OF UKRAINE, BELARUS, AND THE BALTIC STATES

---

**Marcel H. Van Herpen**

*Director of the Cicero Foundation*

This chapter assesses how Russia's neighbours – Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states – cope with Russia's new imperialism. Ukraine is the main target of Moscow's neo-imperialist and annexationist policies because Russia's leading political class has never accepted Ukraine's existence as an independent state. Examples of this range from statements made in speeches and interviews by Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders, as well as actions which deny Ukraine's statehood, such as rallies in Ukraine by the biker club the Night Wolves, whose leader Zaldostanov is a personal friend of Putin. The recent introduction of the name "Malorossiya" (Little Russia), the old tsarist name for Ukraine, by the separatist leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko, is an even more serious threat. It fits into the Russian strategy to gain control not only over a part of Ukraine, but over Ukraine as a whole. The use of this provocative name has been supported, if not invented, by the Kremlin, and provides a key to understanding Putin's remark that a division of Ukraine "is not necessary".

Although the geopolitical situation of the three Baltic states is much worse than Ukraine's in terms of territorial defence, the risk of Russian military adventures there is lower for two reasons: the Baltic states (despite Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia) are not considered to be part of the so-called "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*), and all three are members of NATO, which is on the ground with multinational battle groups. Belarus is a special case, because it has already returned into Moscow's orbit, being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union. As long as Lukashenka is president, he will try to maintain maximum room for manoeuvre, without being able to free himself from the Russian embrace. The Kremlin will just wait.

### **Ukraine's three revolutions**

Since 1990 the citizens of Ukraine have made three revolutions. The last two of these – the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Dignity or Maidan Revolution of 2013–2014 – are well known. This is less the case with Ukraine's first revolution, the so-called "Revolution on the Granite"

of 1990. The Revolution on the Granite was directed against the new “Union Treaty”, which was meant to continue the Soviet empire in a new form. The revolutionaries renamed the October Revolution Square *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, Freedom Square. They fought a revolution for national independence. The second revolution, the Orange Revolution of 2004, was different. Ukraine had already obtained its independence. The Orange Revolution was rather a liberal-democratic revolution. It was a protest against election fraud to prevent the election of the pro-Western presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko. But the Orange Revolution was more. It was – again – also a revolution to safeguard Ukraine’s national independence against intrigues by the Kremlin to undermine the young state and bring it back into Moscow’s orbit. The third revolution, the Dignity Revolution or Maidan Revolution of 2013/2014 was about the direction of Ukraine’s foreign policy. Against the will of the majority of the people President Viktor Yanukovich suddenly changed Ukraine’s official pro-EU course to seek membership of the Kremlin’s Eurasian Union. But there was more at stake than Ukraine’s foreign policy: it was about a fundamental choice for the future of Ukraine. This choice was to keep its independence and to get closer to the European Union or to slide back and become – again – part of the Russian empire. This geopolitical choice was not just a geographical question about where it wanted to belong: a choice between East and West. It was, first of all, a question of values. A choice for Europe meant that Ukraine wanted to continue on the road of becoming a fully-fledged liberal democracy. Massive clashes in the streets of central Kyiv – resulting in more than a hundred fatalities – forced Yanukovich to flee to Russia, which granted him asylum.

## The war in Ukraine

We know what happened later: Russia invaded and annexed the Crimea, while it fought a non-declared war in eastern Ukraine together with local proxies, which ultimately led to the occupation of Donbas and the formation of two Russian puppet regimes: the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic”. In my book *Putin’s Wars – The Rise of the New Russian Imperialism*, written and published before these events, I predicted this imminent Russian aggression, writing:

If Ukraine were to opt for deeper integration into the European Union, a Georgian scenario could not be excluded, in which the Kremlin could provoke riots in Eastern Ukraine or the Crimea, where many Russian passport holders live. This would offer Russia a pretext for intervening in Ukraine in order “to protect its nationals” and dismember the country. Unfortunately, such a scenario cannot be excluded. It is a corollary of the five principles of Russian foreign policy, formulated by President Medvedev on August 31, 2008. The fourth principle he mentioned was “protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, *wherever they may be.*” It leaves the door open for military adventures throughout Russia’s “neighborhood.” (Van Herpen, 2014:247)

This is the logical conclusion of a thorough analysis of the Kremlin’s policies in the past decades. The Kremlin’s implicit plans could be found in official Kremlin documents, in speeches by the Russian leaders and in interviews with opinion leaders in the Russian media. Some enlightening examples go as follows:

First of all, Russian annexationism is not new. Already on July 9 1993, the Russian Supreme Soviet – the predecessor of the present State Duma – demanded in an almost unanimous resolution the return of Sevastopol to Russia. Yeltsin would shell the parliament building some months later. But Ukrainians already expressed their fears. In 1994 three Ukrainian analysts wrote: “There is a concealed desire to begin Ukraine’s breakup, beginning with Crimea” (Haran *et alii*, 1994:212). This was confirmed by the British-Ukrainian analyst Taras Kuzio, who wrote: “Finally, a large number of Russians and political groups find it difficult to accept Ukrainian independence and Ukrainian control over the Donbas and Crimea. There is a deep and widely held belief within the Russian elite that is, of course, highly irritating to Ukrainian leaders, that Ukrainian independence is somehow temporary and therefore reunification inevitable in the future” (Kuzio, 1994:206). Kuzio added that “Sergei Stankevich [Yeltsin’s political adviser] was reported as telling foreign diplomats not to bother opening embassies in Kiev because they would soon become only consulates again anyway”. (4) Also Zbigniew Brzezinski observed the Russian revisionism, writing in 1994: “Quite symptomatic of Moscow’s continued reluctance to accept Kiev’s independence as an enduring fact was the contemptuous dismissal of it as (in the words spoken to me by a senior Russian policymaker in 1993) ‘that conditional entity called Ukraine’” (Brzezinski, 1994:130). All this happened shortly after Ukraine’s independence and one could hope that these revanchist sentiments would subside over time. However, this was not the case. On the contrary. The Russian fascist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin openly declared that “the battle for the integration of the post-Soviet space is a battle for Kiev” (Van Herpen, 2013:84). Dugin, maybe, was an extreme case. But what should we think of Vladimir Putin, who, in the spring of 2008, told US President George W. Bush that Ukraine “is not even a country” (Snegovaya, 2014).

There is also Putin’s personal support for the nationalist motorcycle gang the Night Wolves, who, since 2009, had been holding provocative rallies throughout Ukraine, waving huge Russian flags. The gang leader, Aleksandr Zaldostanov, who goes by the nickname “The Surgeon,” is Putin’s personal friend. In 2012, when Putin came to Ukraine on an official visit, he clearly showed his contempt for Ukrainian statehood and Ukraine’s president (who, at that time, was the pro-Russian Yanukovich!), riding several hours around the Crimea with Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves, keeping Yanukovich waiting for him in Kyiv. On February 28 2014, shortly before Crimea’s annexation the same Zaldostanov arrived by plane from Moscow in the Crimean capital Simferopol, declaring on his arrival: “Wherever we are, wherever the Night Wolves are, that should be considered Russia” (Shuster, 2014).

At a press conference on March 9 2014, after the occupation of Crimea and nine days before its annexation, Putin declared: “We considered, consider and will consider that Ukraine is not only our most nearby neighbor, but indeed our neighboring brother republic. Our military forces are comrades in arms, friends, many of them know each other personally. And I am certain and I want to emphasize that Ukrainian soldiers and Russian soldiers will not be on different sides of the barricades, but on the same side of the barricades”<sup>2</sup>. Also intriguing are remarks made by Putin in an address to the Duma and Federation Council on March 18 2014, the day of the annexation of Crimea, when he said: “We have always respected the territorial integrity of

2. The interview is reproduced in Baburin (2014), p. 87.

the Ukrainian state.” And he continued: “I want you to hear me, my dear friends. Do not believe those who want you to fear Russia, shouting that other regions will follow Crimea. We do not want to divide Ukraine; we do not need that.” There is, firstly, Putin’s ultimate cynicism, daring to declare, just after the Crimea’s annexation, that he had “always respected the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state.” But even more interesting is his second remark: “We do not want to divide Ukraine; we do not need that”<sup>3</sup>. This sentence, apparently used to reassure the Ukrainians that with the annexation of the Crimea the Russian land hunger had come to an end, was in fact very ambiguous. The same sentence could be read in another way: that Russia would not be satisfied with conquering only some parts of it, but wanted Ukraine as a *whole* to be incorporated into Russia or subdued as a vassal state, something which would make a division of Ukraine “not necessary.”

### “Malorossiya”: more than just a phony catchword

In 2009, before the annexation of the Crimea, Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian analyst, declared “that not a single country in the former Soviet Union, including Russia, can say for certain that its borders are historically justified, natural and, therefore, inviolable. Many of the states that have emerged in place of the former Soviet Union are weak and some may not ultimately be viable” (Lukyanov, 2009:59). If you look around the world you will see that there is almost no country of which the borders “are historically justified” and “natural.” However, this is no reason that the existing borders are not inviolable. In fact Lukyanov opens up a Pandora’s Box by using the concept of “historically justified” and “natural” borders to justify the actions of a revisionist power which is violating international law.

The Minsk Process, which started in February 2015, has not brought an end to the war in Ukraine. The Minsk Process is in fact a house of mirrors in which the aggressor is hiding behind his puppets, the so-called local separatists. The aim of this process is for the Kremlin to keep a “frozen conflict” in eastern Ukraine. But keeping a frozen conflict is not the Kremlin’s ultimate goal. We have seen in Georgia how two frozen conflict zones after many years were transformed into “independent states.” And even this is probably only a transition toward a final incorporation of the two regions into the gargantuan Russian state. Also the frozen conflict in Donbas is far from frozen. It is in reality a festering wound. In the period between March 2014 and May 2016 over 9,000 people were killed (including civilians and combatants of both sides) and more than 21,000 injured (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Because the fighting has intensified over the last year, the actual number (in August 2017) is over 10,000 people killed. This is not a “conflict”, this is war. As in the case of Georgia, the Kremlin is able to wait for years for a window of opportunity to start a new offensive.

It is far from excluded and even plausible that the Kremlin considers the present turmoil in Washington caused by the Trump presidency as such a window of opportunity. It is telling that in July 2017 a new plan was suddenly launched by the leader of the “Donetsk People’s Republic,” Aleksandr Zakharchenko, calling for the unification of the two separatist statelets and inviting other parts of Ukraine to form “Malorossiya”<sup>4</sup>.

3. Address by the President of the Russian Federation, “Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation,” March 18, 2014. <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>

Malorossiya, which means “Little Russia”, was the old name for Ukraine in tsarist Russia. Zakharchenko declared that the plan was made “to reintegrate the country”. Malorossiya would be constituted “within the borders of present Ukraine”. We return to Putin’s remarks in 2014 that he didn’t want a partition of Ukraine and wanted to keep its unity. “Malorossiya” is the new name of this undivided Ukraine. Putin’s personal envoy to Ukraine, Vladislav Surkov, called the plan a way of “sparking a debate” within Ukraine and Putin declared during the July 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg once more: “I am absolutely convinced the interests of Ukraine and Russia, of the Ukrainian and Russian people, fully match”(Dickinson, 2017). Pavel Felgenhauer, the defence expert of the *Novaya Gazeta*, who is usually well informed, wrote that during a meeting in the Kremlin “Surkov reportedly said, “All this hype about the fantasy Malorossia state is good – it emphasizes that Donbas is fighting not to separate from Ukraine but for its territorial integrity, for all of Ukraine and not for a part (...).” Felgenhauer added that “the Kremlin does not need a “frozen conflict” in Donbas with an ever-growing price tag, when the real goal is to take and “integrate” the entirety (or most) of Ukraine” (Felgenhauer, 2017).

## Imminent danger for the Baltic states?

Recently the three Baltic states have also become increasingly nervous about a Russian threat. Two of the three, Estonia and Latvia, have significant Russian minorities. There has been speculation about the possibility of a “hybrid” scenario: the infiltration of “little green men” in the Russian-speaking provinces adjacent to the Russian frontier. (14) However, such a scenario, which was adapted to the situation in Ukraine, is not very probable in the Baltic region. There are several reasons for this. The first is that a prolonged low-intensity war fought by proxies and Russian special forces (without insignia) does not really pay off. It would only lead to enhanced Western sanctions and the intervention of a joint Western NATO force. A war in the Baltics would for the Kremlin rather be a *blitzkrieg*-style operation, an “all or nothing” gamble, leading to a quick occupation. Its objectives would be to end the separation of the exclave of Kaliningrad from mainland Russia, to conquer the Baltic sea ports of Riga and Tallinn, to “bring back” the ethnic Russian population of the Baltic states into their “homeland” Russia, and – last, but not least – to push NATO back.

The Kremlin knows that the strategic situation in the Baltic region is disadvantageous for NATO. In a series of war games conducted by RAND, a US defence research agency, between the summer of 2014 and the spring of 2015, the outcome of a simulated Russian invasion of the Baltic states was that NATO could not successfully defend the territory. The longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga was 60 hours (Shlapak, Johnson, 2016). The dire strategic situation is reinforced by the relative isolation of this region. The only connection between Poland and Lithuania is the “Suwalki Gap”, a 64-mile-wide strip of land in north-eastern Poland. North of this “gap” is Kaliningrad, south of it is Belarus. This gap could easily be cut off by Russia. Some have compared it with the “Fulda Gap” in Cold War Germany, which, at that time, was also considered a vulnerable spot in the Allied defence. General Ben Hodges,

4. «Malorossiya Aleksandra Zakharchenko ne vpisalas v Minskiy protsess», RIA Novosti (July 18, 2017). <http://www.newsdnr.ru/index.php/novosti-dnr-lnr/2155-malorossiya-aleksandra-zakharchenko-ne-vpisalas-v-minskiy-protsess>

commander of US Army Europe, has warned that in the exclave of Kaliningrad there is a “significant amount of capability”, including anti-ship weapons, air defences, and electronic warfare. “They could make it very difficult for any of us to get into the Baltic Sea if we needed to in a contingency.”(16) In 2015 the Kremlin reconstituted the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army, a unit formed in the Second World War and disbanded in 1999. Composed of 500–600 tanks, 600–800 infantry fighting vehicles and 35,000 to 50,000 soldiers, the army paper *Zvezda* touted it as an army, “able to neutralize the threat from the Baltic countries” (*Zvezda*, 2016).

“Is Russia really preparing for a war with the Baltic countries?” asked Vadim Shtepa. “The overwhelming opinion in the West is that this is unlikely; but it should be noted that just three years ago, the forcible annexation of Crimea and the presence of Russian tanks in eastern Ukraine also would have sounded like nonsense” (Shtepa, 2016). Since the occupation of Crimea NATO has reinforced its defence of the Baltic states, deploying a multinational battalion in each one, as well as in Poland. These troops, though not sufficient to repel a Russian attack, have rather the function of a tripwire: in the case of Russian aggression the Kremlin risks a full-out war with the 28 members of NATO. The Kremlin will, therefore, think twice before it starts war games in the Baltic (other than the usual provocations). For Moscow the three Baltic states – different from Ukraine – also do not necessarily belong to the “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*). The population speaks non-Slavic languages and the majority is not Orthodox, but Protestant (Estonia and Latvia) or Catholic (Lithuania).

## What will happen to Belarus?

Belarus, on the contrary, is considered by the Kremlin to be an integral part of the “Russian World”. Despite its formal independence, it is completely integrated into Moscow’s structures: it is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as of the Kremlin’s lookalike mini-Warsaw Pact, the CSTO. Because it is economically dependent on Moscow, Moscow’s power in Minsk is well established. In 2003 Putin revealed his annexationist agenda, when he proposed a merger of both states and invited Belarus to join the Russian Federation as six *oblasts* (Dmitri Trenin, 2011:46). Belarusian President Lukashenka, not prepared to become Putin’s local satrap, declined the offer. Since then Lukashenka has been trying to manoeuvre between Moscow and West. However, he lacks the power to be really independent and resembles rather a canary “free” in its cage, kept in the house of a cat. In the 2013–2015 period Putin took new steps to foster the bond between the two countries, proposing to open a Russian air base in Belarus<sup>5</sup>.

In October 2015 four hundred protesters gathered in Minsk, yelling: “The Russian base is occupation” (Reuters, 2015). Lukashenka refused Putin’s proposal, but had to come up with proposals to improve the Belarusian contribution to the Single Air Defense System of Russia and Belarus. He seemed to prevail when the Kremlin agreed to sell Belarus four of its most modern Su-35 fighter jets (Bohdan, 2016). But this will certainly not be the end of the affair. In August 2017 rumours circulated that the Zapad 2017 manoeuvre, also taking place on the territory of Belarus, had the hidden objective of forcing Lukashenka’s hand and “leaving some Russian troops

5. Belarus has already some light Russian military facilities on its soil: a radar station in Gantsevichi and a naval communications center near Vileyka. A Russian airbase would add an element of a different caliber and cement the Russian-Belarusian strategic partnership even further.

behind" in Belarus (*Delovaya Gazeta*, 2017). However, this fear seems not to be justified: it would unnecessarily complicate the Kremlin's relationship with Belarus and Moscow can wait.

## References

Baburin, Sergey. *Krym naveki s Rossiey – Istoriko-pravovoe obosnovanie vossoedineniya respubliki Krym i goroda Sevastopol s Rossiyskoy Federatsiey*. Moscow: Knizhnyy Mir, 2014, p. 87.

Bohdan, Siarhei. "Thwarting plans for a Russian airbase, Minsk strengthens its air force," *Belarus Digest* (October 12, 2016). <https://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-for-a-russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force/>

Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "The Great Transformation," *Politichna Dymka/Political Thought*, no. 3 (1994).

*Delovaya Gazeta*. "Litva budet otslezhivat vyvod voennykh RF s territorii Belarusi", August 25, 2017. <http://bdg.by/news/politics/litva-budet-otslezhivat-vyvod-voennyh-rf-s-territorii-belarusi>

Dickinson, Peter. "Putin Still in Denial over the Loss of Ukraine," *Atlantic Council*, August 8, 2017.

Felgenhauer, Pavel. "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Could Be Escalating". *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, no. 96 (July 20, 2017).

Haran, Oleksiy; Koval. Yaroslav and Shevchuk, Andriy. "Ukraine and Crimea in Russia's Geopolitical Concepts". *Politichna Dymka/Political Thought*, no. 3 (1994).

*Human Rights Watch*. "World Report, Ukraine-Events of 2016," <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/pais-chapters/ukraine>

Kuzio, Taras. "Ukraine and Its 'Near Abroad,'" *Politichna Dymka/Political Thought*, no. 3 (1994).

Lukyanov, Fyodor. "Rethinking Security in 'Greater Europe,'" in: Krastev, Ivan; Leonard, Mark and Wilson, Andrew (eds.), *What Does Russia Think?*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009.

Motyl, Alexander. "Would NATO Defend Narva?" *New Atlanticist* (September 8, 2008). <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/would-nato-defend-narva>

*Reuters*. "Belarus says does not need a Russian military base: report," October, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-air-base-idUSKCN0S020J20151006>

*RIA Novosti*. "Malorossiia Aleksandra Zakharchenko ne vpisalas v Minskiy protsess, July 18, 2017. <http://www.newsdnr.ru/index.php/novosti-dnr-lnr/2155-malorossiia-aleksandra-zakharchenko-ne-vpisalas-v-minskij-protsess>

Shlapak, David A. and Johnson, Michael. "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics". Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html).

Shtepa, Vadim. "Russian First Guards Tank Army as an Instrument of Hybrid War Against Baltic States". *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, vol. 13, no. 112 (June 22, 2016). [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45534&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=74db6cd10438fc6dcf6b9dd9068be21f](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45534&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=74db6cd10438fc6dcf6b9dd9068be21f)

Shuster, Simon. "Russia Ups the Ante in Crimea by Sending in the 'Night Wolves'". *Time* (February 28, 2014).

Snegovaya, Maria. "Ukraine's Crisis is Not the West's Fault". *The Moscow Times* (September 15, 2014).

Trenin, Dmitri. *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*. Washington DC and Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011.

Van Herpen, Marcel H. *Putin's Wars – The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Van Herpen, Marcel H. *Putinism - The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Weisgerber, Marcus. "Russia Could Block Access to Baltic Sea, US General Says". *Defense One* (December 9, 2015). <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2016/06/07/us-air-force-supports-major-exercises-europe-all-month/85561954/>

*Zvezda*. "Novye Rossiyskie divizii stanut molotom, kotoryy slomit lyubuyu oboronu – eksperty". (The new Russian divisions become the hammer with which to break any defense), May 11, 2016.