

The Crimean Intervention

Divisionary Use of Force in Russia's Foreign Policy?

by Michael Trinkwalder



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Trinkwalder holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Business Studies from the Friedrich Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. He has recently finished his Master in International Relations at the University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt with a dissertation on the Franco-German Relationship 1923 – 1929 in the context of Germany's foreign and domestic politics. During his studies he has worked at the Aspen Institute Germany, the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at the Johns Hopkins University and the Center for Information Services of the German Armed Forces.

COVER

Picture: Signing of the Treaty on the adoption of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia
License: [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

PUBLICATION DATE

July 2019

WISSENSCHAFT & SICHERHEIT ONLINE

WiSi Online, short for German "Wissenschaft und Sicherheit Online - Research and Security Online" is the electronic publication series of the German Academic Association for Security Studies (BSH). All WiSi Online articles are subject to a double-blind peer review. Listed under ISSN 1667-9649, WiSi Online is being published in a new edition since 2015.

IMPRINT

© Bundesverband Sicherheitspolitik an Hochschulen (BSH)

Editorial Board: Jonas Jacholke, Johannes Kummerow, Stefan Maetz, René Muschter, Philipp Thimm

Layout: Marcus Mohr, Stefan Maetz

CONTACT

<http://www.sicherheitspolitik.de/publikationen/wisi-online/>
wisi-online@sicherheitspolitik.de

The Crimean Intervention

Diversionary Use of Force in Russia's Foreign Policy?

ABSTRACT

If limiting the influence of EU and NATO on Ukraine was the primary driving force behind Putin's intervention in Crimea it would appear as if the Russian government has scored a momentous own goal. Indeed, by presenting itself as a hostile foreign power that seeks to frustrate Ukraine's western ambitions, Moscow has provided the country's politics with the unifying force that it has so far been sorely lacking. What this interpretation and arguably most explanations for Moscow's motives have in common is a strong focus on Russia's foreign policy interests. However, while Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine has arguably done little to strengthen Russia's geopolitical position, it has undoubtedly strengthened President Putin's hold on power. Accordingly, the theoretical framework of diversionary conflict might offer a more plausible explanation of Russian Foreign policy. The paper will briefly discuss the theory of diversionary action. In the following, the domestic incentive for diversionary action in Russia will be analyzed, Ukraine's suitability as a target will be considered and finally, the domestic effects of Russia's intervention will be evaluated.

KEYWORDS

Russia, Crimea, Regime Stability, Diversionary Theory

INTRODUCTION

Originally, the Maidan protest movement had been sparked by the retraction of Ukraine's association agreement with the EU, but after a brutal police crackdown, the protest quickly turned against the government of President Victor Yanukovich. What had started as a peaceful protest began to give way to violent clashes against government forces, culminating into open fighting on the streets of Kiev, eventually forcing Yanukovich to flee Ukraine in order to seek protection in Russia (Yekelchik 2015: 3). In response to the turmoil in Ukraine, groups of heavily armed and masked men, which were later revealed to be Russian special forces, began to seize key positions on the Crimean Peninsula. Following the seizure of its buildings by Russian forces the Crimean Parliament voted to hold a referendum on whether Crimea should accede to the Russian Federation. Despite strong international criticism, the referendum was held on March 16th and yielded an almost 97% majority in favor of joining the Russian Federation (Yekelchik 2015: 5).

The Russian government has long felt threatened by the expansion of NATO and more recently also the expansion of the EU as a "Trojan horse" for NATO. Therefore, Ukraine's close proximity would make its membership in NATO unacceptable to what the Kremlin perceives as its legitimate security interests (Mearsheimer 2014: 4, 7). However, if limiting the influence of EU and NATO on

Ukraine was indeed the driving force behind the Crimean intervention then it would appear as if the Russian government has scored a momentous own goal. It is true that Russia has succeeded in making the short and medium-term prospect of Ukrainian membership in either EU or NATO much less likely. Yet, for a country as troubled as Ukraine, its application process for either organization would have been long and arduous, particularly since both organizations effectively require unanimous agreement before any new member can be admitted.

Even if the new Ukrainian leadership had been willing to follow the long and arduous path of reform, it seems hard to imagine that the country's regional division would just disappear. Arguably, it seems much more likely that a Ukrainian electorate disillusioned by lack of progress on EU membership would have eventually elected a leader seeking rapprochement with Russia. This is essentially what happened after the Orange Revolution in 2004. However, by annexing Crimea and further destabilizing Eastern-Ukraine the Russian Government has effectively removed a major part of the pro-Russian population in the Donbass region and Crimea from Ukraine's political decision-making process.

However, this constitutes just one possible interpretation of Moscow's motives, alternative explanations include an imperialist desire to recapture the preeminent position Russia's had lost during the fall of the Soviet Union. A third interpretation argues that the Crimean

adventure was in fact not underpinned by any grand strategic design at all and was simply an opportunistic reaction to an unforeseen situation on the part of Putin (Treisman 2016: 47–51).

What all three of these explanations share is a focus on Russia's foreign policy interests. Yet, while Russia's intervention in Crimea has arguably done little to improve its geopolitical position, it has undoubtedly strengthened President Putin's hold on power. Accordingly, it could be argued that Putin has utilized the annexation of Crimea to divert attention away from Russia's internal problems and create a new patriotic consensus in favor of his rule. Thus, in the following, it will be examined if the theoretical framework of diversionary conflict offers a more plausible explanation or at least a hitherto missing perspective of Russian Foreign policy?

THEORY OF DIVERSIONARY ACTION

Many diplomats and statesmen have long treated the basic principle behind Diversionary theory as conventional wisdom in international politics: This principle being that domestically embattled leaders have an incentive to divert domestic discontent in order to bolster their political position (Sobek 2007: 29). However, its theoretical roots can only be traced back to the year 1908, with Simmel being the first to take a systematic approach towards the in-group/out-group hypothesis. He suggested that in the face of conflict with an out-group, the internal cohesion and political centralization of the in-group will increase (Simmel 1964: 93). Coser then extended this hypothesis to the subject of international relations. In a nutshell Diversionary theory argues that, for leaders threatened by domestic turmoil there is a considerable temptation to distract their population from internal strife by initiating external conflict (Coser 1956: 93–95).

Yet, what conditions must be present for diversionary action to be considered a viable course of action? First, for a leader to contemplate initiating external conflict, there must be a sufficient domestic incentive like consistently low government approval ratings, domestic unrest or a struggling economy, from which the population must be distracted (Russett 1990: 136–138). Nevertheless, not every state is an equally suitable target for diversionary action. Aside from the obvious constraints of military power and logistical capabilities, a successful diversion requires, first and foremost, the continued support of the population. Therefore, they must be convinced that the issue at stake is important enough to justify damaging otherwise important ties like trade or diplomatic relations (Levy 1998: 16).

Jung argues, that there are two types of diversionary targets that meet this criterion: greed-producing targets and fear-inducing targets. Greed-producing targets are states that occupy disputed territory or exercise hegemony despite declining in power while fear-inducing targets are states that either exhibit rapidly rising power or a

manifestly different identity (Jung 2014: 567–569). Diversionary use of force offers four principal benefits for an embattled leader. First, conflict with another country allows the government to depict the other state as a new out-group at which the population can direct its disaffection, thereby increasing government support through the “rally around the flag” effect. Second, a successful action abroad demonstrates the competence of the leader, thereby increasing his support and giving him the chance to address the causes of the public's disaffection. Third, as the name of the theory implies, external conflict allows the government to, at least temporarily, divert the public's attention away from issues that have caused disaffection. Finally, external conflict permits a leader to crack-down on any dissent, enabling the government to neutralize any outspoken opposition to its policies (Sobek 2007: 31).

So far, the majority of diversionary action literature has focused on the United States, thus diversionary theory has taken on a decidedly US-centric view (Kanat 2014: 20). However, a growing number of studies indicating that autocratic regimes may be no less likely to use diversionary tactics than democracies (Enterline/Gleditsch 2000; Pickering/Kisangani 2010; Dincecco/Chiou 2012). It is for this reason, that the examination of the Crimean intervention makes for such an intriguing case study since it features several aspects that have been notably absent in the research focused on the United States: It shines a light on the decision-making process in a personalist autocratic regime like Putin's Russia. More significantly, it has been exceedingly rare for a work on diversionary action to be directly linked to a territorial conflict (Tir 2010: 414–415). Thus, in the following chapters the implications of the disputed status of Crimea will be given special consideration.

DOMESTIC SITUATION IN RUSSIA: IS THERE A DIVERSIONARY INCENTIVE PRESENT?

This part of the paper will be concerned with the question of whether there was sufficient domestic incentive present within the Russian Federation, to make the Russian government consider diversionary conflict a viable course action. In order to address this issue, the focus will be on the state of Russia's economy in combination with the approval rating of the Russian government as indicators of domestic discontent from the period of 2008 to early 2014. After the tumultuous years under President Boris Yeltsin, there was an overwhelming desire for stability. This has led to the emergence of a new social contract between the people and the Putin administration, in return for economic prosperity and stability, the majority of the population would remain indifferent to politics (Bennetts 2016: 6).

Thus, the rapid commodity fueled growth between 2000–2008, or more precisely the rising standard of living that accompanied it was critical in legitimizing the government of Vladimir Putin: with real wages increasing by

the factor of 3.4 and real pensions increasing by the factor of 2.8 (Kudrin/Gurvich 2015: 30). Accordingly, economic prosperity is still one of the most important factors influencing President Putin's approval ratings. However, the well-being of the Russian economy remained tied to high commodity prices, with oil and gas representing the majority of Russia's export. Therefore, when commodity prices collapsed in the aftermath of the crisis of 2008, the resulting severe economic recession called the newfound social contract into question (Bradshaw/Connolly 2016: 158; Rogov 2016: 29–31). Nevertheless, oil prices soon recovered and from 2010 to 2014 Russian export revenues exceeded \$2.46 Trillion eclipsing even the previous oil boom.

Yet, there was no return to the high economic growth rates of the early 2000s (Rogov 2016: 32). Instead, several deep-seated issues like endemic corruption, a weak rule of law and the dominance of state-owned and politically connected companies were finally making themselves felt, resulting in a significant deterioration of the investment climate. (Gloger 2015: 57). In spite of an average economic growth of only 1.5% between 2009 and 2014, (World Bank 2015), the average Russian income increased by more than a third to \$936 in the same time period. However, in order to sustain this development, the government was forced to spend much of its previously accumulated financial reserves (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014: 11). At the same time, only limited investments were made to diversify the economy or to modernize the country's aging infrastructure. Instead, the benefits of increased state investment were reaped primarily by a select few with close ties to the Kremlin (Gloger 2015: 57–59, 61).

In 2013, the World Bank was projecting merely 1.3% growth for the Russian economy (World Bank 2014: 1) and even the Russian ministry of economic development only expected a long-term economic growth of 2.5% until 2030 (Kravchenko/Rose: 2013). Accordingly, the outlook for the Russian economy at the beginning of 2014 was already looking bleak even before the escalation of the Ukraine issue resulted in economic sanctions from EU and USA and before the oil price began its rapid decline. Mirroring Russia's economic development, President Putin's approval rating has also displayed a slow downward trajectory from its peak of 86% in April of 2008 to a still respectable 65% at the end of 2013 (Levada-Center 2017). However, it is important to note that the most dramatic fall in his popularity occurred in 2011 at a time of relative economic stability. This did not indicate a decreasing significance of economic issues, but rather a rising disillusionment with government efforts to return the economy to its previous growth levels, which helped to spark the mass protests of 2011/2012. Consequently, the struggling economy was becoming more closely associated with Russian's view of Putin (Treisman 2014: 22–24). Nevertheless, despite this development indicating a

long-term vulnerability to a further deterioration of the economy, at the beginning of 2014, the domestic situation appeared far from being in critical condition. Consequently, no drastic diversionary action on part of the Russian government should have been required.

However, here Putin's personalist authoritarian style of government must be taken into consideration. Gaubatz argues that the logic of diversionary action applies particularly to democracies, due to their leaders' sensitivity to falling approval rates (Gaubatz 1991: 239). Nevertheless, the consequences of a public loss of confidence are usually far more drastic for an autocratic leader. Thus, it could be argued that autocratic leaders have a lower threshold at which point they judge domestic discontent to have reached a level critical to the survival of their regime. Consequently, it is not the objective threat level to regime stability that determines the attractiveness of diversionary action, but rather the perceived threat level that is significant.

In 2012, only 41% believed that Russia was heading in the right direction and confidence in Putin was as low as 37%. Therefore, although the majority of Russian's were unhappy with the course their country was taking and had little hope of President Putin being able to improve matters, 65% of them still approved of him and his policies. This apparent contradiction can be explained by a tendency among many Russians to absolve the President of the responsibility for the country's problems and instead put the blame on a lower level of authority. This effect is complemented by the fact that in the eyes of many Russians there is no credible alternative to Putin in Russian politics. Accordingly, while many Russian's are unhappy with the current state of the country, most of them are unwilling to trade the relative stability they currently enjoy for the uncertain prospect of a better future (Bennetts 2016: 154–156).

However, with Russia's economic problems becoming more closely associated with the person of the president, combined with a steadily declining approval rating and Russia being shaken by the largest mass protests since Boris Yeltsin left office, Putin's hold on power was arguably not as strong as it used to be. For Putin who had constructed his power base on his personal popularity, this must have represented a highly disconcerting development. In addition, judging by his rhetoric he considered the Ukraine crisis as a test-run for a similar attempt by a foreign power to stir up discontent in Russia (Bennetts 2016: 271, 311–312). If this truly reflected a genuinely held belief, Putin may have perceived his domestic vulnerability to be far more acute than his approval ratings would indicate. Therefore, the opportunity to shore up his faltering domestic support while deterring any "foreign meddling", may have simply been too good to pass up. Accordingly, when seen from this perspective, there was indeed enough of a domestic incentive present to consider diversionary action.

UKRAINE SUITABILITY AS A TARGET OF DIVERSIONARY ACTION

Although the domestic situation is the primary driving factor behind diversionary action, there are also external factors that constrain leaders in their choice of target. Levy observes that, from a military standpoint, neighboring states would appear to be the easiest targets for diversionary conflict. However, while neighboring countries make for more convenient targets, their proximity generally induces extensive economic, cultural and diplomatic ties (Levy 1998: 149). This observation also seems to hold true for the case of Ukraine. In 2013, the year before the occupation and annexation of Crimea, Ukraine had been Russia's fifth largest export destination (The Observatory of Economic Complexity 2013). Furthermore, aside from a brief period after the first world war Ukraine and Russia had been part of the same country for hundreds of years. Thus, the strong cultural and historical connection between the two nations can hardly be overstated (Molchanov 2002: 79, 211, 213). Consequently, Ukraine would appear to be a particularly ill-suited target for diversionary action. In the following, the question of whether Ukraine can be classified as a fear-inducing state with respect to its identity and or as a greed-producing state regarding the territorial conflict over Crimea will be addressed. There has been an increased interest in identity as a cause of interstate conflict. Identity can be defined in many different ways including among others cultural, ethnic, religious and ideological identity. Different identities can generate significant biases for in-groups against out-groups, these biases can then be exploited for the initiation of conflict (Jung 2014: 568).

For the present case, the focus will be on ethnic and cultural identity as the cause of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. At first glance, utilizing differing identity as a justification of the Crimean Intervention seems to be destined for failure. After all, there is probably no country with which Russia has closer historical or cultural ties than Ukraine, with one-third of the Ukrainian population considering Russian its mother tongue and more than half using it in their daily lives (Molchanov 2002: 213). Prior to the Maidan revolution, there is little indication that ordinary Russians considered Ukraine's cultural or ethnic identity as so manifestly different, to be threatening. Therefore, for Ukraine to fulfill the criteria of a fear-inducing state, the perception of a threatening Ukrainian identity would have to have emerged in the course of the ensuing crisis between Ukraine and Russia. In order to assess whether this is the case, the major influence of the media on Russian public opinion during that time must be considered.

For the majority of Russians television is still the primary source of information. Although large parts of the Russian media landscape are either state-controlled or belong to supporters of the current government, most citizens trust the Russian media and believe it to be an ob-

jective source of information (Ray/Esipova 2014). Beginning in February 2014, the overwhelming majority of Russian state-controlled media was almost exclusively devoted to the topic of Ukraine. The primary purpose of this intensive coverage was to frame the Maidan as a radically ethnic rather than a democratic revolution. By using terms like "Kiev Junta", "Bandera Fascists" and "punitive operation", the Russian media created a narrative of a fascist government standing in the tradition of Ukrainian collaborators during the second world war (Rogov 2016: 36).

This task was simplified by the fact that support for the Maidan movement was strongest in the western part of the country, while native Russian speakers are primarily concentrated in Eastern-Ukraine. Thus, the Russian media portrayed the threat posed by the "Kiev Junta" as not principally directed against the Russian people, but rather against ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Eastern-Ukraine. Therefore, the Kremlin justified its intervention in Crimea with the need to protect ethnic Russians from the excesses of the "radical" new Ukrainian government (Walker 2015: 4).

As a consequence of this media campaign, the Ukrainian state and government are seen very negatively in Russia. This specific focus on Ukraine did not only increase the support of the existing Russian political audience but also helped to mobilize a contingent of the citizens that had previously been indifferent to politics or lost interest in the official news (Rogov 2016: 39). Accordingly, it seems that rather than being hindered by its close ties to Ukraine, the Russian government has skillfully used them to legitimize the Crimean intervention in the eyes of the Russian people. Nevertheless, even though ordinary Russians believe Ukrainians to be misled by western or nationalist propaganda, the majority still maintained a broadly favorable view of them at the time of the Crimean intervention (Onuch 2016: 38). Indeed, despite the unresolved conflict in Eastern Ukraine, this sentiment has actually grown in strength with 82% of Russians holding either a generally positive or even a very positive view of Ukrainians (Levada-Center 2019c). Accordingly, despite their hostility for the Ukrainian government Russians do not perceive the Ukrainian "identity" as inherently threatening.

Instead, Russian attitudes towards its neighbor tend to be characterized by a pronounced sense of superiority. In the patronizing official Russian narrative, Ukraine is often portrayed as Russia's "little brother." Indeed, for centuries the territory that is now Ukraine was referred to as "Little Russia" and Ukrainians in turn as "Little Russians." Historically, each time "non-conformist" Ukrainians had sought to deviate from this role, the narrative of brotherhood is replaced by one of Ukraine and Ukrainians as a "negative other." Thus, the negative portrayal of Ukrainian nationalism has deep historical roots on which Moscow's contemporary propaganda campaign could build upon (Riabchuk 2016: 76–82; Kushnir 2018: 3

-5). Consequently, while most Russians maintained a generally positive view of the Ukrainian people, the country of Ukraine can still be classified as, or more appropriately was turned into, a fear-inducing state at the time of the intervention.

Similar to the matter of identity, the territorial conflict over Crimea had also been quietly simmering below the surface ever since Ukraine became independent (Molchanov 2002: 218). Although, Crimea holds considerable economic value with projections showing that its natural gas and oil reserves could boost Russia's GDP by 1.42%, (Barry 2014: 2) the "greed" invoked by territory must not necessarily be economic in nature. In fact, in most cases objective value has little to do with the intense reaction people tend to exhibit in regard to disputed territory. In the eyes of the public, territorial matters are seen as so central to the matter of national survival and the human perception of identity that otherwise important considerations like impact on the economy or longstanding ties tend to quickly become incidental. This common territorial interest is shared throughout all social strata and allows a leader to forge society as a whole into an enormous in-group. Conversely, the state that controls territory that "rightfully" belongs to the leader's country becomes the corresponding out-group. Thus, using territorial diversion is very attractive for any leader that wants to overcome societal divisions (Tir 2010: 416–417).

Post-Soviet Russia offers a fertile ground for such a strategy. After the initial shock over the collapse of the USSR had passed, Russia's "post-imperial pain" has led to a dangerous confluence of reemerged Russian nationalism, nostalgia for past greatness and revanchism (Herpen Van 2015: 49–50). This has created a climate in which ultra-nationalist positions have increasingly entered into the mainstream of Russian politics, for instance in 2010 one of the most influential groups within the governing United Russia party had called for a revision of Russia's current borders (Herpen Van 2015: 109, 116–117).

Due to its close association with the very idea of Russian national identity, Ukraine has become a focal point of these revanchist ambitions. Unlike many other of the former Soviet Republics, Ukraine and Russia are seemingly not separated by immense differences regarding race, religion and in many cases, not even the language that is used in daily life (Molchanov 2002 108, 113). Thus, many Russians still regard Ukraine as an indivisible part of the greater Russian world. According to a KIIS survey that was conducted in 2014, 32% of all Russians believed Ukraine and Russia should be unified into a single state (Kiev International Institute of Sociology 2014). This mood is echoed by the political elite, with leading politicians and even Putin himself questioning Ukraine's right to exist as an independent country (Herpen Van 2015: 239–240). Although, a more recent survey by the Levada Center seems to suggest that Russians have somewhat soured on the idea with only 17% still sup-

porting unification, as of February 2019 a majority still supports an open border without any visa requirements or customs barrier (Levada-Center 2019c).

However, while many Russians are still on the fence regarding Ukraine's independence, in regard to Crimea, with its majority population of ethnic Russians, these mixed feelings are largely absent. Crimea had only been "transferred" to Ukrainian administration in 1954, but since both countries remained part of the Soviet Union this changed little in practical terms. However, even when Ukraine's independence was still in the making a campaign to return Crimea to Russia had already been launched. Although the issue eventually disappeared from the forefront of public attention, the status of Crimea has remained a point of contention ever since (Hansen 2015: 144–147). Nevertheless, even back in 2001, a survey indicated that only 27% of Russians were willing to relinquish Russia's claim on Crimea (Pearce/Yuchshenko 2018: 95–96).

Considering, its importance as a symbol of resistance against foreign aggression in Russia's national mythology and its ethnic Russian majority (Yekelchuk 2015: p. 4) Crimea was an easy target for a territorial diversion. However, the Kremlin did not just rely on latent resentment over the status of Crimea to secure the support of the Russian people. Instead, Russian state-controlled media launched a large-scale propaganda campaign to delegitimize the Maidan movement and portray the Russian intervention in Crimea as the only possible course of action (Pasitselska 2017: 597–607). Consequently, Ukraine can be classified as both a greed-producing as well as a fear-inducing state at the time of the Russian intervention and can thus be considered a suitable target for diversionary action.

DOMESTIC EFFECTS OF RUSSIA'S INTERVENTION IN CRIMEA: SUCCESSFUL DIVERSION?

The previous chapters have already established that there was a diversionary incentive present in Russia and that Ukraine represented a suitable target for a diversionary conflict. In the following the domestic effects of the intervention on Russia in general and Russian politics, in particular, will be addressed.

It is undeniable that the Crimean intervention has led to a "rally around the flag effect" with President Putin's approval ratings rising to 86% in June of 2014 (Levada-Center 2017). As far as rally effects are concerned this does not constitute a particularly large increase in support. Yet, what is noteworthy about this rally effect is not its size, but its durability. For instance, in response to the 9/11 attack George W. Bush's approval rating soared from 51% to a staggering 90% however, little more than a year later he had already lost three-quarter of his rally effect gains (Gallup Organization 2009). Conversely, Vladimir Putin's approval rating did not once dip below 80% in the four years following the annexation of Crimea (Levada-Center 2019a). This resilience can be attributed

in part to the lasting effect the annexation of Crimea has had on Russian public opinion. While, rally effects have proven themselves to be usually rather short-lived diminishing over time as the perception of being under threat fades, public support for the annexation of Crimea has remained consistently high (Levada-Center 2019b). However, there is more to the resilience of the Crimea rally effect than just its territorial nature. Another crucial factor in its durability is the asymmetry of information available to the general public in a democracy and an autocracy. In a democracy like the United States, a free media environment makes it exceedingly difficult for the government to permanently control the public debate which in turn accelerates the decay of the rally effect. Conversely, the highly controlled information space of Putin's Russia not only makes the public more susceptible to diversionary action but also ensures that the Kremlin's narrative on the Crimean intervention continues to go virtually unchallenged (Stone 2016: 80–81). Yet, Rogov contends that Putin's high approval ratings might be significantly overstating its popularity. In 2014, only 38% of polled Russians felt that they could talk freely about government policy. Moreover, in the context of the massive state-sponsored media campaign and increasing repression, critics of Putin might be considerably less willing to speak out against the overwhelming "climate of opinion", thereby distorting sociological surveys on this subject (Rogov 2016: 46, 49). Nevertheless, a survey conducted in 2015 that accounts for these biases, suggests that most of the support for Putin is, in fact, genuine (Frye et al. 2017: 11).

In addition, while the Crimean intervention may have given President Putin the time to address the domestic issues that made the intervention necessary, it might well have deprived him of the means to do so. Russia is in desperate need of foreign investments to modernize its economy in order to make it less dependent on the export of commodities. Yet, the economic sanctions that Russia has been put under by both the USA and EU have cut off many conduits of foreign funding. Thereby further exacerbating the structural problems of the Russian economy (Gurieiev 2016: 19). Likewise, while unemployment numbers have remained remarkably stable despite Russia entering into recession, this only came to pass due to massive government pressure on business owners not to lay off redundant workers. Yet, this came at the cost of wage cuts of on average 10% in 2015 alone, which has contributed to the highest number of Russians living below the poverty line in nearly a decade (The Guardian 2016; Miller 2018). Thus, while the patriotic upsurge caused by the incorporation of Crimea has proven to be much more durable than previous rally effects, it was only a matter of time until Russia's precarious economic situation would make itself felt again.

However, in the meantime, the Crimean intervention has confronted Russia's opposition with a conundrum: Condemn the annexation and lose what little popular sup-

port they have or support it and lose international standing. In the end, most of Russia's opposition decided to welcome the annexation – just like the overwhelming majority of the Russian people. Nevertheless, repression of political dissent has still increased drastically (Bennetts 2016: 266–268). Over the course of Putin's rule, opposing him and his policies had become increasingly dangerous with opposition politicians being subject to harassment, beatings and frequently also imprisonment. Conditions had already become significantly more repressive in response to the protests in 2011/2012.

However, in the aftermath of the Crimean annexation, the Russian government was no longer content with only targeting political dissidents themselves, instead, the Kremlin had also begun to target their relatives as well (Gel'man 2015: 3–4). Additionally, the media campaign against the opposition has also taken on an entirely new quality. For instance, in the fall of 2014 thirty-one high profile, Russian citizens that had in any way spoken out against the seizure of Crimea or Russia's war in Ukraine were denounced as "national traitors" on live national television by the state-controlled NTV channel. Just one month later the very same channel even offered itself as a platform for explicit death threats against opposition politicians (Bennetts 2016: 272–273).

This campaign has created a climate in which violence against dissidents and opposition politicians has become acceptable. Yet this is no longer limited to beatings and on February 27 of 2015, the opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was murdered virtually at the walls of the Kremlin. In the end, it makes little difference if Nemtsov was killed by the government as some believe or if he only fell victim to an atmosphere of hatred. The message is crystal clear, anyone who dares to oppose Putin is fair game (Gel'man 2015: 4). In summary, rather than using the incorporation of Crimea as a mere distraction President Putin has skillfully utilized the resulting rally effect to make his position virtually unassailable – at least temporarily.

SUCCESSFUL DIVERSION AT WHAT COST?

When it comes to foreign policy decision making, it is never easy to identify a single driving force, having said that President Putin had incentive, a suitable target and has reaped the benefits of a successful diversion. Therefore, diversionary theory seems to offer a plausible explanation of the motive behind Russia's intervention in Crimea.

At least from a domestic perspective, President Putin's Crimean diversion could for a long time be regarded as a resounding success. Yet, at what cost? The "fraternal" relationship between Russia and Ukraine has been thoroughly severed. According to the United Nations, 13,000 have died and up to 30,000 have been wounded in the war in Eastern-Ukraine with the Minsk ceasefires only slowing the pace of the killing (Unian 2019). Thus, for the foreseeable future rapprochement between the two

countries seems unlikely. Additionally, the Kremlin's involvement in Eastern-Ukraine has never been as unambiguously popular as the bloodless annexation of Crimea and even at the height of the crisis, only 21% of the Russian population expressed their support for the annexation of the Donbass region. Russia's involvement remains purely unofficial, by the estimate of the "Cargo 200" project up to 4,400 Russian servicemen and "volunteers" have already died in the fighting (Gru 200 Project 2019). Although there are no official figures, the fact that Putin decided to make Russian military casualties a state secret in May of 2015 implies substantial Russian losses (BBC 2015).

Furthermore, Russia's feeble economic growth is coming back to haunt Moscow. In 2011/2012 Russia saw the largest mass protests of the Putin era, yet the fight for freedom or democracy failed to inspire a critical mass of protestors. However, since 2014, the number of Russians living below the poverty line has grown at a staggering rate (Trudolyubov 2016). Thus, the next mass protests might be caused by Russians' declining living standards. While this represents a rather mundane issue compared to the more abstract ideals of the 2011/2012 protests it also of-

fers a much greater potential for mass mobilization.

Indeed, with the average monthly Russian wage now having fallen to just \$630, which is below even its 2008 level, it now seems as if the patriotic surge of Crimea is finally beginning to wear off. While popular support for the Crimean annexation remains largely undiminished, its beneficial effect on Putin's approval ratings is being increasingly superseded by concerns about weak economic growth and stagnating living standards (Inozemtsev 2019). Previously, Russia's many problems were blamed on government in general with the President remaining unaffected by popular discontent. However, this time it appears as if Russia's problems are now being increasingly associated with the person of Putin. As a consequence of a number of recent unpopular government measures like the raising of the pension age, the President's approval rating has already fallen to its pre-Crimea level (Levada-Center 2019a). Consequently, Putin would be well advised to focus less on chasing after Russia's lost great power status and more on alleviating the economic hardship of many ordinary Russians. After all, not even the sorely tested Russian people can live on patriotism alone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARRY, Michael P. (2014): 'The Loss of Crimea How Much Does Ukraine Lose, and How Much Does Russia Gain, a Computable General Equilibrium Model', in: *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict* 2 (1), pp. 103–119.
- BBC (2015): 'Putin declares Russian troop deaths in peacetime a secret', in: BBC, 28 May. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32913929> [01.05.2019].
- BENNETTS, Marc (2016): *I'm Going to Ruin Their Lives - Inside Putin's War on Russia's Opposition* (London: One-world Publications).
- BERTELSMANN-STIFTUNG (2014): *BTI 2014 Russia Country Report* (Gütersloh).
- BRADSHAW, Michael/CONNOLLY, Richards (2016): 'Barrels and bullets: The geostrategic significance of Russia's oil and gas exports', in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72 (3), pp. 156–164.
- COSER, Lewis A. (1956): *The Function of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press).
- DINCECCO, Mark/CHIOU, Jing-Yuan (2012): *Foreign Scapegoating and Protest Coordination in Autocracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan; Taipei: National University of Taipei).
- ENTERLINE, Andrew J./GLEDITSCH, Kristian S. (2000): 'Threats, Opportunity, and Force: Repression and Diversion of Domestic Pressure 1948-1982', in: *International Interactions* 26 (1), pp. 21–53.
- FRYE, Timothy et al. (2017): 'Is Putin's popularity real?', in: *Post-Soviet Affairs* 2855 (March), pp. 1–15.
- GALLUP ORGANIZATION (2009): *Presidential Approval Ratings George W. Bush*. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx> [01.05.2019].
- GAUBATZ, Kurt T. (1991): 'Electoral Cycles and War', in: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (2), pp. 212–244.
- GEL'MAN, Vladimir (2015): 'Calculus of Dissent: How the Kremlin Is Countering Its Rivals' in: *Russian Analytical Digest* (166), pp. 2–5.
- GLOGER, Katja (2015): *Putins Welt*, 2nd edition (Berlin: Berlin Verlag).
- GRU 200 PROJECT (2019): *Cargo 200 Casualty list*. <http://gruz200.zzz.com.ua/> [01.05.2019].
- GURIEV, Sergei (2016): 'Russia's Constrained Economy', in: *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3), pp. 18–22.
- HANSEN, Flemming S. (2015): 'Framing yourself into a corner: Russia, Crimea, and the minimal action space', in: *European Security* 24 (1), pp. 141–158.
- HERPEN Van, Marcel H. (2015): *Putin's Wars The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, 2nd edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield).
- INOZEMTSEV, Vladislav. (2019): 'The Looming Russian Recession', *Moscow Times*, 29 January. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/29/the-looming-russian-recession-op-ed-a64318> [01.05.2019].
- JUNG, Sung C. (2014): 'Foreign Targets and Diversionary Conflict', in: *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (3), pp. 566–578.
- KANAT, Kilic B. (2014): 'Diversionary Foreign Policy in Authoritarian States', in: *Journal of Strategic Security* 7 (1), pp. 16–32.
- KIEV International Institute of Sociology (2014): *How Relations Between Ukraine And Russia Should Look Like*. <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=8> [01.05.2019].
- KRAVCHENKO, Stepan/Rose, Scott (2013): 'Russia Forecasts Losing Ground in Global Economy by 2030', *Bloomberg*, 7 November. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-11-07/russia-forecasts-losing-ground-in-global-economy-by-2030> [01.05.2019].
- KUDRIN, Alexey/Gurvich, Evsey (2015): 'A new growth model for the Russian economy', in: *Russian Journal of Economics*, 1 (1), pp. 30–54.
- KUSHNIR, Ostap (2018): 'From "Brothers" to Enemies: The Future of the Ukrainian-Russian Relationship', in: *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper* 18 (1), pp. 1–14.
- LEVADA-CENTER (2017): *Putin's approval rating*. <http://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/> [01.05.2019].
- LEVADA-CENTER (2019a): *Approval Ratings*. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/04/11/approval-ratings-7/> [01.05.2019].

- LEVADA-CENTER (2019b): Crimea: Five years. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/04/11/crimea-five-years/> [01.05.2019].
- LEVADA-CENTER (2019c): Russia-Ukraine Relations. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/03/28/russia-ukraine-relations-4/> [01.05.2019].
- LEVY, J. S. (1998): 'The Causes of War and the Conditions for Peace', in: *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1), pp. 139–165.
- MEARSHEIMER, John J. (2014): 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', in: *Foreign Affairs* 93(5), pp. 77–89.
- MILLER, C. (2018): 'The Surprising Success of Putinomics: Behind Putin's Formula for Holding Onto Power', in: *Foreign Affairs*.
- MOLCHANOV, Mikhail A. (2002): *Political Culture and National Identity in Russian-Ukrainian Relations*. Edited by S. Mestrovic. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press).
- ONUICH, Olga (2016): 'Brothers Grimm or Brothers Karamazov: The Myth and Reality of How Russians and Ukrainians view the other', in: Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A./Sakwa, R. (eds) *Ukraine and Russia People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, 2nd edition (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing), pp. 35–56.
- PASITSSELSKA, Olga (2017): 'Ukrainian crisis through the lens of Russian media: Construction of ideological discourse', in: *Discourse and Communication* 11 (6), pp. 591–609.
- PEARCE, James C./YUCHSHENKO, Anastassiya (2018): 'Defending Russia, Securitising the Future: How the Past Shaped Russia's Political Discourse Regarding Crimea', in: *Europolity. Continuity and Change in European Governance* 12 (1), pp. 85–106.
- PICKERING, Jeffrey/KISANGANI, Emizet F. (2010): 'Diversionary despots? comparing autocracies' propensities to use and to benefit from military force', in: *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (2), pp. 477–493.
- RAY, Julie/ESIPOVA, Neli (2014): *Russians Rely on State Media for News of Ukraine, Crimea*, Gallup Organization. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/174086/russians-rely-state-media-news-ukraine-crimea.aspx> [01.05.2019].
- RIABCHUK, Mykola (2016): 'Ukrainians as Russia's negative "other": History comes full circle', in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49 (1), pp. 75–85.
- ROGOV, Kirill (2016): 'Crimean Syndrome', in: *Russian Politics & Law* 54 (1), pp. 28–54.
- RUSSETT, Bruce (1990): 'Economic decline, electoral pressure, and the initiation of interstate conflict', in: Gochman, C. S./Sabrosky, A. N. (eds) *Prisoners of War?* (Lanham: Lexington Books), pp. 123–140.
- SIMMEL, George (1964): *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (New York: Free Press).
- SOBEK, David (2007): 'Rallying Around the Podesta: Testing Diversionary Theory Across Time', in: *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (1), pp. 29–45.
- STONE, Braden C. (2016): *Diversionary Conflict Dynamics within Autocratic States: Economic Development and the Incentive to divert*. (Athen: University of Georgia).
- THE GUARDIAN (2016): 'Millions more Russians living in poverty as economic crisis bites', *The Guardian*, 22 March. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/22/millions-more-russians-living-in-poverty-as-economic-crisis-bites> [01.05.2019].
- THE OBSERVATORY OF ECONOMIC COMPLEXITY (2013): *Where does Russia export to?*, *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*. http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/rus/show/all/2013/ [01.05.2019].
- TIR, Jaroslav (2010): 'Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict', in: *The Journal of Politics* 72 (2), pp. 413–425.
- TREISMAN, Daniel (2014): *Putin's popularity: Why did support for the Kremlin plunge, then stabilize?* 1. (Los Angeles: University of California).
- TREISMAN, Daniel (2016): 'Why Putin Took Crimea from Ukraine: The Gambler in the Kremlin', in: *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3), pp. 47–57.
- TRUDOLYUBOV, Maxim (2016): 'For Russians, Bleak Realities at Home', *New York Times*, 27 December. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/27/opinion/for-russians-bleak-realities-at-home.html?_r=0 [01.05.2019].
- UNIAN (2019): 'RFE/RL: Death toll up to 13,000 in Ukraine conflict, says UN rights office', UNIAN, 27 February. <https://www.unian.info/war/10461771-rfe-rl-death-toll-up-to-13-000-in-ukraine-conflict-says-un-rights-office.html> [01.05.2019].
- WALKER, Vivian S. (2015): *State Narratives in Complex Media Environments: The Case of Ukraine*. Washington D.C.

WORLD BANK (2014): Russian Economic Report 31: Confidence Crisis Exposes Economic Weakness. New York.

WORLD BANK (2015): Annual GDP Growth Russian Federation. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2015&locations=RU&start=2004> [01.05.2019].

YEKELCHYK, Serhy (2015): The Conflict in Ukraine (New York: Oxford University Press).