

## *Russia First: Putin's Evolving Westphalian Conceptualization of State Sovereignty*

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### **Introduction and Methodology**

What follows is a *rhetorical analysis* of statements concerning sovereignty that have been made over the years by Vladimir Putin. The authors focus on explicating the terms and concepts Putin uses to express his thoughts. Although fraught with linguistic difficulties, our goal is to produce a content analysis of translated text. Embedding our arguments more robustly within the existing scholarly literature was not our purpose. Accordingly, for the most part, we have eschewed references to studies published by historians and political scientists in favour of a communication approach.

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By far the single most frequent concept that appears in the speeches and writings of Vladimir Putin, “sovereignty” has served varying rhetorical purposes over the years that he has been in office, focusing at times on his domestic audience and at times on Russia’s place in the world order. From the standpoint of international relations, however, he has placed the primary emphasis on Russia’s resistance to external influences in a manner that closely resembles the Westphalian model—a term stemming from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War and which “legitimated the right of sovereigns to govern their peoples free of outside interference,” giving them “powers domestically and independence externally.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, at a meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Putin was asked about the meaning of the term *sovereign democracy*—an expression he seldom used of his own accord. Typically, his response was purposefully ambiguous:

I think that sovereign democracy is a debatable term. It creates some kind of confusion. Sovereignty is something that refers to the quality of our relations with the outside world, while democracy refers to our inner state, the inner substance of our society.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, sovereignty, Putin states, is a concept that refers to Russia’s relationship *within* the international community in a variety of circumstances. In due course, however, once he had returned to the presidency in 2012—and particularly after the events in early 2014—this concept might best be considered as referring to Russia’s relationship *with* the international community.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beaulac, Stéphane, “The Westphalian Model in Defining International Law: Challenging the Myth.” *Australian Journal of Legal History* 8, no. 2 (2004): pp. 181-214, 183.

<http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AJLH/2004/9.html>. Beaulac is quoting (disparagingly) from Janis, Mark W., “Sovereignty and International Law: Hobbes and Grotius.” In *Essays in Honour of Wang Tieya*, edited by Ronald St. John Macdonald (Dordrecht: Brill-Nijhoff, 1994): pp. 391-400, 391, 393.

<sup>2</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. 14 September 2007. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24537>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24537>.

<sup>3</sup> The conversion may have come about as the result of Russia’s admission into the World Trade Organization during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev—something Putin had failed to achieve during his second term in office. The issue of WTO accession was first broached in 1995 by Boris Yeltsin at a time when there was no chance Russia could qualify for membership, and it continued without resolution during Putin’s first two terms in office, primarily because he objected to the requirement that Russia apply for inclusion and actually qualify under the organization’s rules. Putin felt that Russia, as a great military power, should have been invited to join. See: Portansky, Alexei. “Russia’s Accession to the WTO: External Implications.” *Russia in Global Affairs* 2011, no. 2 (April/June). <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-accession-to-the-wto-external-implications>.

As it happens, this is but one of the transactional definitions Putin ascribes to the term “sovereignty.” In this study, we trace the development of four different conceptions of sovereignty as manifested in Putin’s rhetoric. These are:

- The classic definition of sovereignty consists of border security, independence, and unquestioned authority in one’s domestic affairs
- Cultural identity, creativity, national dignity, and strength of the citizenry and the nation
- Rejection of all international influence and intervention in the affairs of state—a Westphalian conceptualization specifically opposed to supranationalism and *bloc* identity
- Self-sufficiency economically and technologically

The corpus for this analysis consists of the widely anticipated national presentations that Putin has delivered annually while in office—Russia Day speeches, Victory Day speeches, and Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly<sup>4</sup>—plus approximately three hundred other public statements—interviews, discussions, articles, and other speeches, including his 2007 Munich speech and the 2014 Crimea speech—that have been randomly and unsystematically collected over the years. The statements quoted below are taken directly from official English translations posted on the Kremlin website<sup>5</sup>— or from other Russian sources.<sup>6</sup>

In our analysis we identify four distinct conceptualizations of the term “sovereignty.” There is much overlap chronologically among the first three of these. Therefore, analysis is organized thematically in order to maintain topical cohesion.

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<sup>4</sup> Only the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (PAFA) is required. As Dmitry Peskov explained in 2022—a year during which Putin did not deliver this address—“That is what the Constitution prescribes—the obligation of the president to make this Address once a year.” See: Latukhina, Kira. “Peskov: No Precise Date Yet for the President’s Address.” *Russkaia gazeta*, 17 May 2022.. See also: Latukhina, Kira. “Peskov: Putin Will Definitely Deliver His Address This Year.” *Russkaia gazeta*, 26 May 2022. <https://rg.ru/2022/05/26/peskov-putin-vystupit-s-poslaniem-v-etom-godu.html>. The Victory Day and Russia Day speeches are not mandated, but they are certainly traditional. It is hard to imagine a Russian Federation president NOT commemorating Victory Day.

<sup>5</sup> All public statements attributed to Putin that are posted on the Kremlin website are official, whether or not they are mandated by law, regulation, or the Constitution. In this essay, some have been lightly edited for accuracy or fluency

<sup>6</sup> In these instances, translations have been provided by Michael Launer.

We begin our examination with the second of these conceptions—cultural identity, creativity, national dignity and the strength of the citizenry and the nation—as this was the first manifestation of Putin’s concern about Russia’s relationship to the rest of the world.

### **Sovereignty as a Matter of Culture and National Pride**

During Putin’s first two terms as president, he undoubtedly saw as a major task the need to rescue the Russian state and the nation’s citizens from the political and economic morass left to him by Boris Yeltsin. At that time, Russia was considered to be a “basket case” in the international arena.<sup>7</sup> Things were so bad that various pundits called the country “Yugoslavia with nukes”—because it might fall apart violently—or even worse, “Upper Volta with nukes.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, when Putin broached the topic of national sovereignty, he chose to emphasize national dignity, cultural values, and the moral structure of the nation.

Given that environment, Putin strove to boost the nation’s morale and to develop a national identity of which people could be proud. As acting president, before he was elected to that office in March 2000, he wrote an *Open Letter* to the Russian people, in which he declared that the nation must be based on “moral principles . . . that form the very core of patriotism,” without which “Russia would have to forget about national

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example: “Russia May Be an Energy Powerhouse, but It’s an Economic Basket Case.” Institute for Policy Innovation, 1 April 2014. [https://www.ipi.org/ipi\\_issues/detail/russia-may-be-an-energy-powerhouse-but-its-an-economic-basket-case](https://www.ipi.org/ipi_issues/detail/russia-may-be-an-energy-powerhouse-but-its-an-economic-basket-case). See also: “Associated Press: Putin’s Russia, from Basket Case to Resurgent Power.” Kyiv Post, 11 March 2018. <https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/associated-press-putins-russia-basket-case-resurgent-superpower.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase “Upper Volta with missiles” was famously coined by French President François Mitterrand in the 1980s to describe the Soviet Union’s economic situation, suggesting that despite its military capabilities, the country was economically backward. When applied to Russia, particularly in the context of the post-Soviet era, it reflects a critical view of the country’s economic and social challenges despite its military power.

<https://www.quora.com/Can-Russia-really-be-described-as-upper-Volta-with-missiles>.

See: Vondra, Alexandr, and Aureliusz M. Pędziwol. “Russia Is No Upper Volta with Nuclear Weapons.” Aspen Institute, 9 September 2023. <https://www.aspeninstitutece.org/article/2023/russia-no-upper-volta-nuclear-weapons/>.

See also, this April 10, 1999, post on H-Net Online (from the Humanities and Social Sciences Council:

<https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-russia&month=9904&week=c&msg=F7XqyP0t74jwcZbulcwa0g&user=&pw=>.

dignity and even about national sovereignty.”<sup>9</sup>

Sixteen months later, at a ceremony commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Nazi invasion that started World War II for the Soviet Union, Putin praised the *millions who had fallen*. However, he continued, reminding his audience of the significance of that sacrifice, they did the most important thing in their life—they defended the Fatherland. They upheld its sovereignty and dignity. They gave us a future. And we will never forget that.<sup>10</sup>

### **Sovereignty and dignity**

But he did not often define sovereignty during these first two terms in office. Rather, in those early years, he primarily spoke of sovereignty in general terms, not tying it to specific constructions. For instance, in 2005, speaking in the city of Kazan’ to celebrate the one thousandth anniversary of its founding—one of the bases for his *Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years* rhetoric—Putin said:

I will end my speech by remarking once again that the preservation of social, religious, and inter-ethnic peace is the cornerstone, the fundamental condition, for Russia’s successful development. Any attempt to destroy this is a challenge to our future, a threat to our sovereignty and to the national security of our country.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in 2007, during his final Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (PAFA) before relinquishing that office, Putin criticized the desire on the part of reformers to mimic Western culture:

[T]he absence of our own cultural beacons, blindly copying foreign models, will inevitably lead to us losing our national identity. As Dmitry Likhachev wrote, “State sovereignty is also defined by cultural criteria.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “An Open Letter to Voters.” 25 February 2000. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24144>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24144>. [A government statement announcing publication of the letter is available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/37997>.]

<sup>10</sup> Victory Day Speech. 22 June 2001. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21271>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21271>.

<sup>11</sup> Speech Commemorating the One-Thousand-Year Anniversary of the Founding of Kazan’. 26 August 2005. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23140>. Official English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23140>.

<sup>12</sup> PAFA. 26 April 2007. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203>.

In 2013, having returned to the presidency a year earlier, Putin emphasized the need for Russia to develop a “national idea” based on spiritual values, rather than “market rules” imposed “from outside,” underscoring his growing resistance to ideas that were initially developed elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> He further asserted:

[Every country] has to have military, technological, and economic strength, but nevertheless the main thing that will determine success is the quality of citizens, the quality of society: their intellectual, spiritual and moral strength.<sup>14</sup>

### **Sovereignty as the Sanctity of Borders**

The most straightforward and most universally recognized definition of state sovereignty is based on the inviolability of one’s borders and the security of one’s citizens. Although Putin talks about “sovereignty and territorial integrity” in his very first Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly on 8 July 2000, shortly after his inauguration, and in his 2001 Victory Day speech, he is much more concerned during his first two terms as president with his characterization of sovereignty as a matter of culture and patriotism.

However, in 2007, prior to leaving the presidency, Putin sat for an interview with *Time Magazine*, which was naming him its *Man of the Year*. Directly addressing the American public, he expressed a more classical notion of sovereignty:

Government should be strong enough to guarantee [the nation’s] sovereignty, security, and defense capabilities. It should be strong enough to protect the country’s territorial integrity, but it should also be sensitive to regional and municipal issues and to the needs of individuals.<sup>15</sup>

Further, at a *Major Press Conference* in February 2008 with reporters from around the globe, he broached this theme (in response to a question) one last time before leaving the presidency:

You need to understand that we are committed to respecting the

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<sup>13</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. 919 September, 2013. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19243>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19243>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Time Magazine* Interview. 12 December 2007. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24735>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24735>. [The interview took place a week earlier, on 5 December 2007.]

fundamental principles of international law, which are based on state sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>16</sup>

In December 2013, nineteen months after his return as president, Putin again raised the issue of Russia's sovereignty in his annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly:

We do not claim to be any sort of superpower seeking global or regional hegemony; we do not encroach on anyone's interests, impose our patronage onto anyone, or try to teach others how to live their lives. But we will strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving for respect, national sovereignty, and recognizing every nation's independence and distinctive character.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, this statement must be understood in context: In 2008, immediately after Dmitry Medvedev assumed the presidency in Moscow, Russian troops took over control of two provinces in the Republic of Georgia—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—ostensibly in the defense of Russian citizens there after the Russian foreign ministry had issued Russian passports to approximately eighty five percent of the residents in these provinces.<sup>18</sup>

In July 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the deployment of Russian soldiers to the Donbas, Putin cynically expanded on his position regarding a nation's sovereignty:

Firm guarantees of indivisible security, stability, respect for sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs should become the basis that we can use to build a common space for economic and humanitarian cooperation that would spread from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean—I have already spoken of this as a single space from Lisbon

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<sup>16</sup> Major Press Conference. 14 February 2008. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835>. Official English version: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835>.

<sup>17</sup> PAFA. 12 December 2013. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>. Official English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.

<sup>18</sup> "In 2002, the Kremlin began granting Russian citizenship to residents of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That policy that helped raise the number of Russian passport holders there from about 20 percent to more than 85 percent of the population." See: "Putin Says He May Expand Russian Citizenship Decree to Include All Ukrainians." RFE/RL, 27 April 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-says-he-may-expand-controversial-russian-citizenship-decree-to-include-all-ukrainians/29907196.html?lflags=mailer>.



to Vladivostok.<sup>19 20</sup>

Putin creates his own rhetorical exigence,<sup>21</sup> this time by issuing Russian passports to non-citizens in other sovereign—though contiguous—countries simply because they are Russian speakers, then intervening to *protect* them.<sup>22</sup> After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, former Soviet citizens who now found themselves in the diaspora, had three options: return to the newly created Russian Federation—which many did *en masse*; apply for citizenship where they lived—which typically required renouncing their previous citizenship and learning the dominant language of the new country;<sup>23</sup> or remaining where they were, but living as expatriates of a non-existent country—essentially as stateless persons. Despite Putin’s claims to the contrary, dual citizenship was generally not an option in the Newly Independent States.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the insistence on *non-interference* in the *internal affairs* of other nations—no matter how cynical given the state of affairs in Ukraine—applies only when the West, in his opinion, interferes in Russia’s internal affairs or—as in the case of the 2004 Orange

<sup>19</sup> This is a reference to Putin’s grand idea of integrated security over a single “Eurasianist” continent, an idea promoted most forcefully in Russia by Lev Gumilev. See: Bassin, Mark. *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Conference of Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives. 1 July 2014.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131>. Official English version:

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131>.

<sup>21</sup> Regarding the concept of “rhetorical exigence,” see: Bitzer, Lloyd F. “The Rhetorical Situation.” In *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition*, edited by Walter R. Fisher, 247-260. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1974. [Originally published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1968): pp. 1-14.]

<sup>22</sup> The first to issue Russian passports [to Estonians and Ukrainians] was Yeltsin’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, in 1994. In this regard, see: Launer, Michael K., Marilyn J. Young, and David Cratis Williams. *The Montreal Review*, April 2025. “Putin, Compatriots, and Fellow Citizens.”

[https://www.themontrealreview.com/Articles/Putin\\_Compatriots\\_and\\_Fellow\\_Countrymen.php](https://www.themontrealreview.com/Articles/Putin_Compatriots_and_Fellow_Countrymen.php).

The policy was decried in the West as reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s actions in the Sudetenland. See: Lapidus, Gail W. “A Comment on ‘Russia and the Russian Diasporas.’” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1996): pp. 285–287.

<sup>23</sup> Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine do not allow dual citizenship, nor did Georgia prior to 2018. Latvia and Lithuania do not allow dual citizenship either, but make an exception for members of their diaspora, who can apply for dual citizenship if their home country allows this. In Belarus, the only persons who can hold dual citizenship are minors under the age of eighteen who live in Belarus and have a parent who is a citizen of another country. Of all the nations in the near abroad, only Moldova allows dual citizenship with no restrictions.

<sup>24</sup> “Putin Says He May Expand Russian Citizenship Decree To Include All Ukrainians,” RFE/RL, April 27, 2019.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-says-he-may-expand-controversial-russian-citizenship-decree-to-include-all-ukrainians/29907196.html?lflags=mailer>. See: “The Ministry of Internal Affairs Has Begun Issuing Russian Passports to People Living in the DNR and LNR,” Meduza, 14 June 2019.

<https://meduza.io/news/2019/06/14/mvd-rossii-nachalo-vydavat-rossiyskie-pasporta-zhitelyam-dnr-i-lnr>.



Revolution in Ukraine—when election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe decide that the presidential election in Ukraine has been rigged in favor of Russia’s preferred candidate and call for a second vote conducted under international oversight.

Putin amplified these remarks, justifying his interventions, in his 2014 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly:

This year we faced trials that only a mature and united nation—a truly sovereign and strong state—can withstand. Russia has proven by its actions that it can protect its compatriots and defend truth and fairness.<sup>25</sup>

Although Putin touches upon this subject briefly in his 2016 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, this aspect of sovereignty essentially disappears from his rhetoric for several years, reappearing once in 2020,<sup>26</sup> but disappearing again until the start of the full-scale war in 2022.

Ten weeks into the war, Putin addressed the nation, declaring that Russia had precipitated a preemptive strike at anticipated aggression by NATO:

Russia launched a preemptive strike at the aggression. It was a forced, timely and the only correct decision. A decision by a sovereign, strong, and independent country.<sup>27</sup>

The decision was justified, to Putin’s way of thinking, by the build-up of military forces on the Ukrainian side of the border, ignoring the fact that Russia had already amassed a strike force of nearly 200,000 troops and materiel on its side of the border—including blood supplies that could be needed only in the event of hostilities.<sup>28</sup> In a further assertion of blame, Putin asserted:

Another punitive operation in Donbas, *an invasion of our historic lands,*

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<sup>25</sup> PAFA. December 4, 2014. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>. Official English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>.

<sup>26</sup> PAFA. January 15, 2020. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.

<sup>27</sup> Victory Day Speech. 9 May 2022. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366>.

<sup>28</sup> Stewart, Phil. “EXCLUSIVE: Russia Moves Blood Supplies Near Ukraine, Adding to U.S. Concern, Officials Say.” Reuters, 29 January 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-russia-moves-blood-supplies-near-ukraine-adding-us-concern-officials-2022-01-28/>.

including Crimea, was openly in the making. . . . The NATO bloc launched an active military build-up on the territories adjacent to us. (emphasis added)<sup>29</sup>

That Kiev was to blame for the hostilities in the Donbas was stated explicitly by Putin on 21 February 2022, in his speech recognizing the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics<sup>30</sup>—two days before the start of Russia's full-scale attack against Ukraine. As justification for whatever actions Russia might take, he claimed that Ukraine had moved its own troops and heavy artillery into the area (specifically Kharkov):

The ruling elites in Kiev... are not interested in a peaceful resolution. On the contrary, they are again trying to organize a blitzkrieg in the Donbas, as already happened in 2014 and 2015.<sup>31</sup>

Nearly a year into the war, in January 2023, Prime Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Moscow's position that that it had not carried out attacks in Ukraine against civilian infrastructure, and that any such damage is attributable to Kiev's regular practice of deploying heavy weapons and air defense systems in residential areas.<sup>32</sup>

In his 2023 Victory Day speech Putin declared that it was Russia that was under attack:

Today, our civilization is at a crucial turning point. A real war is being waged against our country again, but we have countered international terrorism and will defend the people of Donbas and safeguard our security.<sup>33</sup>

The aggressors, it would seem, are "neo-Nazi scum assembled from around the world."<sup>34</sup>

In the four speeches that Putin makes immediately preceding the full-scale invasion against Ukraine, he accuses NATO of pushing Kiev to attack Russia. Curiously,

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<sup>29</sup> Victory Day Speech. 9 May 2022.

<sup>30</sup> "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Russia and West on Verge of 'Real War' – Lavrov." RT, 23 January 2023. <https://www.rt.com/russia/570357-russia-west-real-war>.

<sup>33</sup> Victory Day Speech. 9 May 2023. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

however, NATO is not mentioned even once in the two Security Council meetings held February 25 and March 3, after the war had begun.<sup>35</sup> In fact, except for Putin's blistering speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (see below),<sup>36</sup> NATO expansion did not appear as a salient point of contention in Russia's political discourse until 2018, when hostilities in the Donbas had entered their fifth year. Perhaps surprisingly, NATO was barely mentioned at all by Putin in any of his Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly until that time, nor did the alliance figure as a serious adversary in the various statements regarding Russia's strategic defense conceptual design, nor in the equivalent foreign policy declarations, prior to that time.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Westphalian Conceptualization of Sovereignty**

On 10 February 2007, Putin delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he excoriated the United States for wanting to rule a *unipolar* world, with Western European nations passively doing the bidding of their "hegemon." He also sharply criticized NATO for moving nuclear missiles into countries that had previously been part of the Warsaw Pact, formerly the Soviet Union's buffer zone protecting it from a possible land war with the West.<sup>38</sup> This outburst was met by anger from members of the US delegation: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was quoted as saying that "one Cold War was quite enough."<sup>39</sup> In Russia itself, the normally reticent press met the speech with mixed commentary.<sup>40</sup> And Putin's Defense Minister, Sergei Ivanov, flatly stated that Russia had no enemies:

There are no countries with which our relationships are seriously damaged.

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<sup>35</sup> Young, Marilyn J. "The Rhetoric of Grievance: From the Munich Speech to Full-Scale War in Ukraine." Chapter 24 in David Cratis Williams, Marilyn J. Young, and Michael K. Launer, *The Rhetorical Rise and Demise of "Democracy" in Russian Political Discourse – Volume Four: The Demise of "Democracy" after Putin's Return to Power*, pp. 431-460. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Munich Security Conference Speech. 10 February 2007. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>. [This speech may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ58Yv6kP44>.]

<sup>37</sup> Launer, Michael K. "Letter to the Editor." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, June 5, 2024 [23:2], 1–9. <https://jmss.org/article/view/79420>.

<sup>38</sup> Munich Security Conference Speech.

<sup>39</sup> "Gates: 'One Cold War Was Quite Enough.'" AP via NBC News, 7 February 2007. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna17093136>. See also: Lenta.ru, 11 February 2007. <https://lenta.ru/news/2007/02/11/gates/>.

<sup>40</sup> Newsru.com. February 12, 2007. <https://www.newsru.com/world/12feb2007/putin.html>.

Russian soldiers aren't fighting anywhere in the world.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, Ivanov was removed from his post within a week of his public statement contradicting the Russian president.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the fact that the Americans were caught completely off guard by Putin's outburst, the Russian president had made essentially the same point—albeit less vituperatively—during his major press conferences just a week or so earlier, although it is unlikely that anyone in the West took note of his remarks:

After all, regardless of the form of association—take even a fairly liberal form like the European Union—nevertheless certain types of supranational entities are created. Nevertheless, sovereignty is partially handed over to these supranational structures. Well . . . in such a situation one needs to find the optimal version of collaboration.<sup>43</sup>

One of the supranational entities that drew Putin's continual wrath was the OSCE, which was established upon ratification of the "Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe," universally known as the Helsinki Accords.<sup>44</sup> Putin had no use for the OSCE function of monitoring elections in member states. He was particularly incensed when the OSCE declared the 2004 presidential election in Ukraine—where he strongly backed the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich—to be corrupt.<sup>45</sup> When the Supreme Court of Ukraine ordered a second runoff election, Yanukovich lost to Viktor Yushchenko, who was a proponent of integration with Western Europe.

People are trying to transform the OSCE into a vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of certain countries.<sup>46</sup>

Later that same year, before an international audience at the annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin went out of his way to demonstrate that, for him, sovereignty is the ability of a nation to act with no regard for other countries or supranational

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<sup>41</sup> "Ivanov Does Not See That Russia Has Any Military or Political Enemies. Lenta.ru, 11 February 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160406165737/https://lenta.ru/news/2007/02/11/ivanov/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Major Press Conference. 1 February, 2007. <http://lenta.ru/articles/2007/02/01/putin/index.htm>. [Also available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20071226051354/http://lenta.ru/articles/2007/02/01/putin/index.htm#asimm>.]

<sup>44</sup> "Helsinki Accords." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helsinki\\_Accords](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helsinki_Accords).

<sup>45</sup> "Presidential Election, 31 October, 21 November and 26 December 2004." OSCE. [https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/ukraine/eoms/presidential\\_2004](https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/ukraine/eoms/presidential_2004).

<sup>46</sup> Munich Security Conference Speech. 10 February 2007.

organizations and entities unless it chose to do so.<sup>47</sup> If a country is a member of a bloc, it cannot by definition be a sovereign nation:

Frankly speaking, there are not very many countries in the world today that have the good fortune to say they are sovereign. You can count them on your fingers: China, India, Russia and a few other countries. All other countries are to a large extent dependent either on each other or on bloc leaders.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore,

Sovereignty is therefore something very precious today, something exclusive, you could even say. Russia cannot exist without defending its sovereignty. Russia will either be independent and sovereign or will most likely not exist at all.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, Russia must remain independent of all other nations. Without complete independence, it cannot be sovereign. Without sovereignty, it might wither away and die. This belief was reiterated for an American audience during the *Time Magazine* interview two months later:

Russia does not intend to become a member of any military-political bloc, which would limit its sovereignty, because participation in a bloc is of course a restriction of one's sovereignty.<sup>50</sup>

In 2013 at the Valdai conference, Putin expounded on his conceptualization of national sovereignty, this time in opposition to the *unipolar* world order he sees as America's goal in international affairs.

At the same time, we see attempts to somehow revive a standardized model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardized world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals. In a historical sense this amounts to a rejection of one's own identity, of the God-given diversity of the world.<sup>51</sup>

States that join geopolitical blocs in which they depend on the support of one country are

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<sup>47</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. 14 September 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> *Time Magazine* Interview. 12 December 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. September 19, 2013.

by definition *vassal states* in Putin's mind—states that kowtow to the dictates of the "hegemon." This attitude was expressed bluntly in a televised interview with Oliver Stone: "The US has no allies, only vassals."<sup>52</sup> The hegemon can ignore international law whenever it chooses and can impose its will on other nations. This is an evil, of course, only when the culprit is the United States. Thus, when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, the true culprit was the United States.

However, Russia is not bound by international law, because as a truly sovereign state it is not a member of any geopolitical bloc, and it is not subject to any supranational norms or restrictions. Similarly, if Ukraine were a truly sovereign state, Putin asserts, it would not lean westward:

Joining any military bloc or any other rigid integration alliance amounts to a partial loss of sovereignty.<sup>53</sup>

Putin continued to rail against international law throughout 2014. In a speech at Yalta in August of that year, he opposed the *supremacy of international law* as the "concession of a portion of one's national sovereign authority to an international organization" that serves as a "mechanism for interfering in the internal affairs [of another country]."<sup>54</sup> He continued this line of thought at the Valdai meeting in October:

The very notion of "national sovereignty" has become a relative value for most countries: the greater one's loyalty to the world's center of influence, the greater the legitimacy of that ruling regime.<sup>55</sup>

Putin's antipathy for collaboration in international affairs is seen clearly in his attitude toward the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which was created at Russia's initiative when the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia signed the "Treaty on the Eurasian

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<sup>52</sup> "The US Has No Allies, Only Vassals – Putin." TV Zvezda, June 3, 2017.

<https://tvzvezda.ru/news/201706032247-noka.htm>. The reporter references a story in Politico: "FIRST IN PLAYBOOK: 'The Putin Interviews.'" See also: "Putin Calls the Countries in NATO Vassals." RBC, June 3, 2017. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5932de939a794722e5e8645c>.

<sup>53</sup> Europa-1 / TF1 Interview. June 4, 2014. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45832>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45832>.

<sup>54</sup> Meeting with Members of the State Duma. 14 August 2014.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46451>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46451>.

<sup>55</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. 24 October 2014. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.



Economic Union” on May 29, 2014.<sup>56</sup> As described by Richard Sakwa—a renowned British political scientist—the “Westphalian idea of state sovereignty” lies “at the heart of the greater European idea.”<sup>57</sup> However,

Eurasian integration is contested on a number of grounds. None of its three founding members – Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia – are comfortable with the loss of sovereignty that regional integration involves, although all three welcome the constraints placed on regime change by the reassertion of Westphalian principles. Even Putin’s enthusiasm began to wane when confronted by the reality of the loss of sovereignty and the difficulties of ensuring foreign policy coordination with Belarus and Kazakhstan and their lukewarm support for Russia’s positions during the Ukraine crisis.<sup>58</sup>

In this regard, Sakwa states that:

Post-sovereign normativity appeared to come into direct contradiction not only with territorially-based security systems but with the very existence of Russia as a sovereign state.<sup>59</sup>

### **What Happened to Westphalian Sovereignty?**

So: Where did it go? Why did it go? What became of it?

What happened was the imposition of sanctions and Russia’s need to find reliable suppliers for the foreign goods and services that gradually were withdrawn from its economy. The first sanctions were applied immediately after Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula; the most recent round (as of this writing) targeted the Moscow Exchange and cut off access of most Russian banks to the SWIFT system for clearing business transactions. These moves essentially eliminated Russia’s ability to carry out international trade using dollars or Euros and forced the nation to expand its economic ties with China.

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<sup>56</sup> “Eurasian Economic Union.” Wikipedia.

<sup>57</sup> Sakwa, Richard, “How the Eurasian Elites Envisage the Role of the EEU in Global Perspective.” *European Politics and Society* vol. 17, sup. 1 (2016):pp. 4-22, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 18. Virtually the same statement is repeated elsewhere: Sakwa, Richard. “External Actors in EU-Russia Relations: Between Norms and Space.” In *Avoiding a New ‘Cold War’: The Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis*, pp. 86-93, 89. Christian Nitoiu, ed., Dahrendorf Forum, London School of Economics, March 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Sakwa, “External Actors,” p. 88.

Whatever else is true about Western sanctions—whether or not they have significantly damaged the Russian economy or complicated the conduct of its war against Ukraine—they have forced Vladimir Putin to rely on other nations, a situation that he undoubtedly finds anathema. As a result, Putin has been forced to look outward. One avenue available in that direction was the potential for collaboration in BRICS (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa), which was established in 2009-2010 during Medvedev's presidency.<sup>60</sup> Medvedev explicitly sought to reduce Russia's economic dependence on petroleum exports. He failed. Although Putin discussed the need for modernization in a 2012 *Vedomosti* article, shortly after returning to the presidency, he did very little in that regard.

Having an economy that can guarantee neither our stability, nor our sovereignty, nor our prosperity is not acceptable for Russia. We need a new economy with competitive industry and infrastructure, a well-developed services sector, and an effective agricultural sector. An economy that operates on a modern technological base.<sup>61</sup>

BRICS was dormant for a number of years, and not until the annexation of Crimea triggered Western sanctions did Russia invigorate its participation in the organization. However, this mechanism was available to Putin when he sought trading partners beginning in 2014.

Once Putin determined—as a result of Western economic sanctions—that Russia could no longer *go it alone* geopolitically, but rather had to find support elsewhere in the world, castigating that world became untenable, and it became impossible to maintain a Westphalian approach to sovereignty in his political rhetoric.

### **Technological And Economic Sovereignty**

So, how did Putin's conception of sovereignty change? He seems to have come, albeit gradually, to the understanding that a nation's sovereignty in the international arena must be founded on a strong domestic economy—that a strong, multi-faceted

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<sup>60</sup> Four Middle Eastern nations officially joined on 1 January 2024, and several other nations with smaller economies have applied or expressed interest in joining the organization. See: "BRICS." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BRICS>.

<sup>61</sup> "Vladimir Putin: We Need a New Economy." *Vedomosti*, 30 January 2012. [https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2012/01/30/o\\_nashih\\_ekonomicheskikh\\_zadachah](https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2012/01/30/o_nashih_ekonomicheskikh_zadachah).

economy serves as the basis for a nation's independence. This was a significant revelation, given that post-Soviet Russia has always had a mono-economy—a *commodity-dependent* national economy that is “reliant on a single commodity.”<sup>62</sup>

Nearly three years later, after hostilities in the Donbas had raged for several months, Putin told his audience at the 2014 meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club that “politically motivated sanctions have only strengthened the trend toward bolstering [Russia's] economic and financial sovereignty.”<sup>63</sup> As a result, he continued:

We already see that more and more countries are looking for ways to become less dependent on the dollar and are setting up alternative financial and payments systems and reserve currencies.<sup>64</sup>

Following this Valdai speech, the concept of sovereignty almost entirely disappears from Putin's speeches. When it does return in his 2018 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (his first upon embarking on his fourth term as president), Putin puts an entirely new spin on the subject—technological sovereignty:

The fact of the matter is this: the speed of technological progress is accelerating sharply. It is rising dramatically. Those who manage to ride this technological wave will surge far ahead. Those who fail to do this will be submerged and drown in this wave. Technological backwardness and dependence translate into reduced security and economic opportunities of the country and, ultimately, the loss of its sovereignty.<sup>65</sup>

It is clear, however, that not much progress was made over the next four years of

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<sup>62</sup> Radetzki, Marian, and Linda Wärell. “The Mono-economies: Issues Raised by Heavy Dependence on Commodity Production and Exports.” Chapter Twelve in: Radetzki, Marian, and Linda Wärell. *A Handbook of Primary Commodities in the Global Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: pp. 245–276.

<sup>63</sup> Valdai Club Meeting. 24 October 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> PAFA. 1 March 2018. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>. Official English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>. Interestingly, in 2008, Richard Sakwa first broached Russia's need for economic sovereignty regarding the clash between Putin and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. See: Sakwa, Richard. *The Quality of Freedom: Khodorkovsky, Putin, and the Yukos Affair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In 2016 he raised the issue again, this time in the context of liberal economists in Russia, who were “worried about the implications of Eurasian integration, concerned that the leakage of economic sovereignty to the [EEU] will reduce manageability and raise the spectre of Russia's isolation from Europe and the West, as advocated by the ideologists of Neo-Eurasianism, notably Alexander Dugin.” See: Sakwa, “How the Eurasian Elites Envisage the Role of the EEU in Global Perspective.” (p. 14)

Putin's presidency. Accordingly, in his 2023 Presidential Address, he set out the following urgent goal:

The task is clear: in the next five years we need to train about a million specialists ... for the electronics industry, the robotics industry, mechanical engineering, metallurgy, pharmaceuticals, agriculture and the defense industry, construction, transportation, nuclear, and other branches of the economy that are key to ensuring Russia's security, sovereignty and competitiveness.<sup>66</sup>

Judging by two of Putin's most recent speeches, the situation has reached crisis proportions. In his 2024 Presidential Address, he announced the launch of "new technological sovereignty national projects" in order to "attain technological sovereignty in critical spheres that can ensure the resilience of our economy." Russia needs to "set new goals" that will ensure the nation's technological sovereignty "in such revolutionary fields as generative artificial intelligence and large language modeling."<sup>67</sup>

Sounding exactly like a Soviet-era economist, Putin boasted that:

The practical application of such systems promises to produce a real breakthrough in the economy and social sphere, and so it shall.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, in his 7 June 2024, speech at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin highlights the issue of sovereignty in the realm of technology, the economy, and human capital eight times. Russia needs to strengthen its sovereignty "on three key levels: the state, cultural values, and the economy."<sup>69</sup> He talks again about:

a number of new national projects [that] will be launched in the field of technological sovereignty in such key areas as production and automation equipment, new materials, chemistry, advanced space services, energy technologies, and a whole range of others.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> PAFA. 21 February 2023. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

<sup>67</sup> PAFA. 20 February 2024. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>. Official English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> SPIEF Plenary Speech. 7 June 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Such investments, “which will strengthen the financial, technological, and human resource sovereignty of our country and improve the business climate, are focused on achieving national development goals.”<sup>71</sup>

## Westphalia Revisited

On 6 June 2024—one day before the start of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum—Vladimir Putin held a briefing for foreign reporters. In an otherwise routine discussion devoted primarily to the ongoing *special military operation* in Ukraine and NATO’s interference in that country, the Russian president made one remarkable statement regarding Germany, whose support of Ukraine could lead to *very serious problems*. Reiterating the notion of Germany as a vassal state, he continued:

[W]e understand, as a famous German politician has said, after World War II the Federal Republic of **Germany has never been a sovereign state** in the full sense of that term. (emphasis added)

It’s very strange, but no one in Germany’s leadership today is trying to protect German interests. It’s clear—**Germany is not fully sovereign**, but Germans do exist, and someone has to think of their interests. (emphasis added).<sup>72</sup>

A fascinating extension of technological and economic sovereignty into the realm of autarky—a further elaboration of Russian isolationism—can be found in the following statement, not by Putin but by a manager at a drone factory extolling the development of advanced versions of such weaponry:

It is precisely such projects that should become the basis of the technological sovereignty of our country so as not to depend on anyone.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>71</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> Meeting with Foreign Reporters. 5 June 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74223>. Official English version: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74223>.

<sup>73</sup> Sebastian, Clare, Vasco Cotovio, Allegra Goodwin, and Daria Tarasova-Markina. “Russia Lifts Lid on Secretive Drone Factory as Satellite Images Reveal Rapid Expansion at Key Site.” CNN, July 25, 2025. [https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/25/europe/russia-secretive-drone-factory-rapid-expansion-intl?cid=ios\\_app](https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/25/europe/russia-secretive-drone-factory-rapid-expansion-intl?cid=ios_app).

Over the twenty-five years that Vladimir Putin has been the leading political figure in post-Soviet Russia, he has always placed remarkable emphasis on defining, defending, and strengthening the nation's sovereignty. In addition to the classic definition of sovereignty (border security and unquestioned authority in one's domestic affairs), he has woven three other threads into his rhetorical arsenal: cultural uniqueness; absolute independence from any external influences or norms; and domestic self-sufficiency, particularly in the technological sphere.

In every society's rhetorical arsenal, there are what Michael Calvin McGee identified as "ideographs"—rhetorical touchstones that are universally understood by everyone, yet at the same time are understood differently by nearly everyone.<sup>74</sup> These are not symbols that have sharply divergent meanings depending on point of view, but rather are embraced by all, albeit with differences of response. These are terms that are used to give the impression of a clear meaning and can serve as a building block to influence public opinion. As such, ideographs can condense arguments and evidence into a single phrase and become reference points for political persuasion. Examples in the United States are words such as "liberty," "freedom," "democracy," or "rights." Symbols that serve this purpose might include a country's flag.

Within the context of our rhetorical analysis, Putin's understanding of sovereignty—which he conceived of as a philosophical invariant—is nonetheless clearly mutable and has in fact morphed into something much more malleable. Predictably, *sovereignty* joined *democracy*, *freedom*, and *the rule of law* as merely transactional concepts to be modified as necessary to fit Putin's "definition of the situation" as circumstances change over time.<sup>75</sup>

Putin's emphasis on Russia's sovereignty became a touchstone of his rhetoric, as he deployed it across the landscape of problems and solutions he identified, returning to it frequently over the course of his presidencies. For example, in making technological

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<sup>74</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): pp. 1-16. [Reprinted in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, edited by John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally A. Caudill, pp. 425-440. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.] See also: Condit, Celeste M., and John L. Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>75</sup> Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." See also: Cox, J. Robert. "Argument and the 'Definition of the Situation.'" *Central States Speech Journal* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1981): pp. 197-205, 198-199.



capabilities an issue of *sovereignty*, Putin demonstrates the term's utility in his public rhetoric.

The inviolability of Russia's borders was an important aspect of the Second Chechen War, which encompassed the first decade of the twenty-first century from 1999 through 2009. Additionally, during his first two terms as president, Putin emphasized the cultural aspect of sovereignty. Once he returned to the presidency in 2012, he seemed consumed by the Westphalian concept of total independence from external impacts, an idea he had first broached in Munich prior to leaving office in 2008.

But Westphalian sovereignty was unsustainable as a concept once it became obvious to Putin that Russia could not withstand the economic pressures imposed by the West starting in 2014. Accordingly, he sought support in international alliances (both formal and informal) and shifted his emphasis to modernization of Russia's economy as a necessary element in maintaining the nation's competitiveness in a rapidly advancing technological revolution. Thus, it is not surprising that references to sovereignty became less frequent over the next few years.

However, not until 2018, at the start of his fourth term in office, did Putin come to the conclusion—perhaps quite reluctantly—that the key to Russia's geopolitical independence was economic self-sufficiency (economic sovereignty) and that this could be achieved only through technological modernization and a dramatic shift away from a monoconomy based on exports of petroleum products. Without a modern, innovative economic structure, Russia could not achieve technological competitiveness vis-à-vis the West. Nor could it ever attain true independence from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately for Russia—and for Putin's personal legacy—these efforts have yet to produce the desired effect. In fact, because of its need for weaponry, it has had to revert to a monoconomy, increasing the export of petroleum products.

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