

## **Putin and Russia: Crazy, Fascist or following the blueprint**

### ***Casey Raeside***

“I want to remind you that Russia is one of the most powerful nuclear nations. This is a reality, not just words.” Vladimir Putin

“We must always be ready to repel any aggression against Russia and (opponents) should be aware ... it is better not to come against Russia as regards a possible armed conflict.” Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin is a divisive figure. To the Western world he is considered the reincarnation of Hitler and the old Russian Tsars, although one who hunts bare-chested and hugs bears, with the National Review on 3 September 2014 going so far as to say he had a ‘Hitlerian mind’ and that his Russia was in the midst of a ‘fascist revival’. The majority of Putin’s time as Prime Minister and President (1999 – Present) has corresponded with increasing Russian power and influence, regionally as well as globally. This increase in global influence demonstrated itself most clearly as Putin was able to determine US actions in Syria in 2012. This polarising of Putin is intriguing from a historical and political standpoint as is the venomous hatred spat at Putin and Russia in the time of political and military crisis.

Ludwig Von Rochau describes a way of acting in politics (a term later referred to as *realpolitik*) in his book *Grundsätze der Realpolitik angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands*. Rochau where he states that ‘the study of the powers that shape, maintain and alter the state is the basis of all political insight and leads to the understanding that the law of power governs the world

of states just as the law of gravity governs the physical world.’ Power politics then, without the negativity now associated with the term. Realists in the political realm argue that states act out of their self-interest, rather than any particular ideology. Now, obviously, historically there were many heads of states that acted out of an ideological interest, one may think of Hitler’s hatred of Communists for example. However, as Peter Monteath argues in his paper *Hitler and the Spanish Civil War: A Case Study of Nazi Foreign Policy*, ‘Hitler’s decisions [were] ideologically and geopolitically motivated, whereby it is impossible to distinguish ideological from geopolitical considerations.’ To draw back to the point at hand despite the suggestions and psychoanalysis of Putin in the West, where has he acted that is not in Russia’s best interests? Is it possible that we ascribe to Putin as well as Hitler that his decisions have been ‘ideologically and geopolitically motivated’? We will come back to this question later on.

Geopolitics is a field of study that links geography with political action. The strictest adherents of this school, whilst recognising other factors, argue that the determining factor in political considerations and the condition of the world is geography. For example the British Empire was so large because being separated from continental Europe through the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, Britain could limit the damage from the severe continental wars, dictate its own involvement, and play continental powers against each other. Also the reason the US is the predominant world power is because of their geographical position. The US has access to two oceans, is geographically separated from the world’s powers, has two significant navigable internal rivers and is bordered by two relatively weak nations. The US is where it is now because after the war of 1812 it has never been invaded by a hostile nation, whilst being able to dominate shipping lanes after

the decline of the British Empire. On the adverse of these success stories is the tale of Northern Europe. The North European Plain provides an effective highway from Northern Russia through Poland and Germany. There are no natural geographical barriers to invasion (either way). Therefore the traditional consideration of Germany has been to be powerful enough militarily to withstand an invasion from the east, whereas traditionally Russia has fought very hard to withstand invasion from the west.

‘Russia is...in an untenable position,’ explains George Friedman. ‘Unless Russia exerts itself to create a sphere of influence, the Russian Federation could itself fragment.’ Friedman wrote this argument in his 2009 book *The Next 100 Years*. Friedman argues that Russia’s geopolitical necessity to create for itself a western buffer, which will in the first quarter of the twenty-first century devolve into another cold war (which Russia cannot win). However Friedman also acknowledges that for Russia to have any chance at survival as a federation it needs to extend its buffer states. This is nothing new, Russia has been doing it for centuries. In the nineteenth Century this was the genesis behind the race for empire, or the Great Game as it has come to be called. This leads to the other relevant point, that Russia is not alone in its attempts to create a favourable position in its near neighbourhood. The US has been doing it for the duration of its history, China is making the same attempts in the South China Sea, its recent efforts in Hong Kong, and the standoff with Taiwan, and all nations to some extent attempt to manipulate their immediate neighbourhood to better their own political position (case in point, Australian involvement in the Solomon Islands, or the amount of money given in aid to Indonesia). Matthew Fitzpatrick wrote for *The Drum* regarding the Russian actions in Crimea on March 4 that ‘What protestors in Kiev see as a movement for freedom and prosperity looks to

Moscow like a hybrid US/German empire reaching into the Russian sphere of influence.’ Fitzpatrick’s argument is that the Russian involvement in Ukraine is not a new imperial foreign policy, but merely a continuation of the geostrategic decisions that have faced Russia for centuries, as explained above. Fitzpatrick continues: ‘Russia is happy for independent states to exist on its doorstep, but these states must not join the Western Security pact aimed at Russia: NATO.’

And so we reach the crux of the issue; Russia has constantly stated publicly that it sees the demonstrations and overthrow of the Ukrainian government as 1) illegal and 2) directed, supported and funded by the West (read US/UK/Germany) as a deliberate attempt to draw Ukraine into a pro-west stance. Further, Russia cannot be moved on Crimea. First, from 1783 to 1954 Crimea was part of Russia and the Soviet Union and one of Russia’s most important naval bases is Sevastopol, the home of the Black Sea Fleet. Crimea further is estimated to have approximately 77% of its population speak Russian and identify as Russian. Further, Ukraine decided that it no longer wanted its ‘democratically’ elected government through the application of protest and violence, however when Crimea decided that it would not recognise the new Ukrainian government and wanted to secede to Russia this was considered illegal and morally objectionable in the international community and a definitive sign of Russian intrigue and influence in the region. Going back to the Ukrainian mainland, in 2008 Russia demonstrated to the international community that it would not tolerate hostile states on its borders in the invasion of Georgia. The West and Ukraine itself has consistently and deliberately provoked Russia into a reaction over the Ukrainian crisis. What Russia is observing is aptly described by Fitzpatrick thus: What prior to 1989 was called "containment of the Soviet menace" has since been an

incremental push to deny Russia any influence in its immediate region. Not content with peeling off ex-Soviet territories, NATO and the EU have denuded Russia of all its remaining buffer states. All that remain are Ukraine and Georgia.

Is it not enough now to agree that Russia is acting as a state that aspires to regional influence must act? Putin is not insane, crazy, irrational, or Hitlerian. Putin is acting as the head of the Russian Federation and thus is intent on resisting threats to Russian Sovereignty. Is this to excuse illegal action within Ukraine, loss of life, and recent threat of nuclear action? Of course not, however speaking realistically here, what other course of action should Russia take? Let us now draw some parallels across the international community. Historically one of the reasons the US is now the sole world power is because of its foreign interference when considered necessary. Some examples can be seen in Mexico, Canada, Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Some of these actions were declared wars while some were deliberately clandestine and deniable (and denied) by the Government. Also actions of US Special Forces are, in the west, acclaimed and at times celebrated, as are the actions Australian and British SAS forces. However, many of the actions of these Special Forces are 1) illegal under international law, 2) most clearly infringe with other nations' sovereignty, 3) unofficial and denied by their own government and 4) performed whilst not wearing the official military uniform of the country of origin. The parallels here with the universally (in the West) denounced actions of the Russian military should be readily apparent.

Friedman succinctly demonstrated the events that are occurring within Ukraine at the moment, even though he was writing six years ago.

Russia's grand strategy involves the creation of deep buffers along the North European Plain, while it divides and manipulates its neighbours, creating a new regional balance of power in Europe. What Russia cannot tolerate are tight borders without buffer zones, and its neighbours united against it. This is why Russia's future actions will appear to be aggressive but will actually be defensive.

Further what is NATO but an anti-Russian military organisation? To be sure it began in the Cold War as a military alliance against expansionist USSR, however since the end of the cold war there was no drawdown of NATO, no attempts to integrate Russia into NATO even with the peace agreements signed between the two, and as the Ukraine conflict demonstrates deliberate attempts on the behalf of NATO and the EU to draw peripheral states into their sphere of influence rather than Russia's. To tie now into the beginning of this piece where is all the venom and hatred coming from in the West? Is the majority view of western political leaders and media outlets that Russia has now swung to being Fascist? Is this a result of the cult of personality that Putin so deliberately cultivates? If we are to take Friedman at his word, Putin is not aggressively domineering in Russia's neighbourhood; Russia does not intend to subsume Ukraine. Putin intends that Russia's immediate neighbourhood remains friendly toward Russia, hostile interference remain buffered from Russia's borders, and Russia maintains its regional primacy. For any middle power aspiring to regional leadership and primacy what less could be suspected in a world dominated by power politics?

## **About the Author**

Casey Raeside recently finished his honours in history at Flinders University, with a thesis that examined the intersection of British imperial policy and the impact of the print media in the late 19th Century. He has previously completed a Master of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism at Macquarie University. Casey is interested in the intersection of political and social history, especially as it relates to Empires around the turn of the 19th/20th Centuries.