ONE YEAR ON FROM THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

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Sunset, a church in Crimea bathed in the evening light, a helicopter in front of an orange sun at dusk, and President Putin, reporting with some obvious pride about the events during an undercover operation to evacuate the Ukrainian President the night of 22 to 23 February last year. These were the opening scenes of a ocumentary broadcast on the *Russia 1* TV channel on the evening of 15 March 2015.[1] In close to two and a half hours, the events that took place in Kiev and in Crimea in February and March last year were depicted from a Russian perspective. Particularly from the perspective of the Russian President. He personally explains in the film which steps he took when and why, making a point of stressing the significance of Crimea to Russia. He recalled the statement he had made at the end of the all-night meeting, in the early hours of 23 February 2014: "We are forced to begin work on returning Crimea to russia."[2]

However, if you believe Leonid Gratch, communist, ex-military and former Chairman of the Crimean parliament, this work had, in fact, begun some time earlier. In an interview with the *Zeit* newspaper, he reported that three Russian generals had already been talking to him about the path to a Russian-controlled Crimea on the afternoon of 20 February 2014.[3] And the statements made in a televised disputation by Igor Girkin, aka Igor Strelko, who subsequently headed the militia and security forces of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" in Sloviansk, provide

1 | Andrei Kondrashov, "Крым. Путь на Родину" (Crimea. The way home), *Россия-1*, http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/59195 (accessed 9 Jun 2015).
2 | Christian Weisflog, "Sie hätten ihn einfach liquidiert", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 Mar 2015, http://nzz.ch/international/1.18498365 (accessed 1 Jun 2015).
3 | Herwig G. Höller, "Wann die Krim-Annexion wirklich begann", *Zeit Online*, 16 Mar 2015, http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-03/krim-annexion-leonid-gratsch-putin (accessed 1 Jun 2015).

clues as to how the election of the new Prime Minister of Crimea on 27 February 2014 and the scheduling of the referendum for 16 March 2014 were "organised" with massive pressure being applied to the Members of Parliament in office at the time. [4]In the documentary of 15 March, Putin himself admits that Russian soldiers, the so-called "little green men" or "polite men", had of course secured the process of the referendum in Crimea – unlike a year ago, when he denied the involvement of Russian military and remarked laconically that uniforms could be bought at any street corner.

All these "confessions" do not fit in with Moscow's rhetoric about Crimean inhabitants feeling threatened by the events in Kiev and therefore seeking protection from Moscow. In fact, they point to Russia engaging in a proactive intervention, although it is not clear how far back the actual planning went. An intervention that had the enthusiastic backing of the great majority of the Russian population. According to a police statement, over 100,000 people attended a celebration of the one-year anniversary of the "reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with the Russian Federation" on Red Square. Whether they were all there of their own volition may be doubtful, but according to a statement issued by *Russia 1*, more than 40 per cent of all television viewers over the age of 18 watched the documentary about Crimea on the evening of 15 March. People could hardly be coerced into doing that. The backing by the population is reflected above all in the high approval ratings for Vladimir Putin's policies, which have exceeded 80 per cent for the last twelve months – ever since the annexation of Crimea.[5]

CHANGE IN MOOD VIS-À-VIS THE WEST

There has been a noticeable change in the general mood in Russia over the last year. This has manifested particularly in the stance towards the West becoming more negative.

4 | Christian Weisflog, "Wir haben sie zur Abstimmung getrieben", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 Jan 2015, http://nzz.ch/international/1.18469931 (accessed 1 Jun 2015); disputation: "Гиркин Мы насильно сгоняли депутатов Крыма голосовать за отделение от Украины" (Girkin – We chased the Crimean representatives to vote for secession from Ukraine), http://youtu.be/cyLD2Hl9G0g (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

5 | Press release from 25 Mar 2015, http://www.levada.ru/25-03-2015/martovskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya (accessed 29 Jun 2015). Second graphic and table from the top. Question: Do you support President Putin's work in principle or not?

In a survey on Russia's relations with the EU conducted by the independent Levada Center, 51 per cent of respondents stated as recently as January 2014 that these were very good (one per cent) / mostly good (50 per cent); only 34 per cent of the respondents thought that they were very bad (four per cent) / mostly bad (30 per cent). In January this year, only 20 per cent rated relations between Russia and the EU as very good (two per cent) / mostly good (18 per cent); 71 per cent thought they were very bad (28 per cent) / mostly bad (43 per cent).[6] It stands to reason that the massive campaign in the Russian media, particularly on the television, has contributed significantly to this shift in opinion. The propaganda is aimed at a society which has little in the way of personal international experience. According to the pollster Lev Gudkov, only 18 per cent of Russians possess a passport.[7] Against this backdrop, it may have been a mistake to maintain the visa requirement for Russians wishing to enter the Schengen Area.

In Russia there is a climate of fear. The murder of the Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 demonstrates that regime critics rightly fear for their lives. | Source: © Sharifulin Valery, picture alliance / TASS.

6 | Press release from 9 Feb 2015, http://www.levada.ru/09-02-2015/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya (accessed 29 Jun 2015). Second graphic and table from the top. Above those the question relating to the relations with the USA.

7 | Florian Willershausen, "Vielen Russen fehlt es an kritischem Denken", *Wirtschaftswoche*, 9 Sep 2014, http://wiwo.de/politik/ausland/10657292.html (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

The annexation of Crimea is not only being used to elicit patriotic sentiment. Anyone who voices criticism or does not go along with the national mainstream is viewed with suspicion and is berated. As far back as a year ago, Putin described those participating in a demonstration against the annexation of Crimea as traitors. Pressure is also being applied to NGOs which cooperate with Western partners or receive funding from abroad. The provisions about organisations having to register as "foreign agents", based on the criteria of "political activities" and "funding from abroad", are so loosely defined that it is easy to apply the label to NGOs whose activities are inconvenient to the regime.

This situation has produced a political atmosphere of fear that can be sensed when speaking to NGO representatives and manifests in connection with cooperation projects when the conversation turns to contracts or statements are solicited. The unsettled atmosphere is even evident in university institutions, even more so in the regions than in Moscow. The murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov illustrates that this fear is not without foundation. Where is a country heading if political opposition figures fear for their lives? The Nemtsov case has still not been solved. Many doubt that it ever will be. Since the murder was committed, proceedings have been initiated against five suspects, four of them from Chechnya and one from neighbouring Ingushetia. They are accused of having carried out a contract killing, but who gave the orders and the motive remains a mystery. There is some speculation that the murder was retribution for Nemtsov's support of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. But it is plausible that some form of nationalism is behind it. Nationalism is gaining support in Russia; there is no problem with publicly declaring oneself a nationalist. On 22 March of this year, European nationalists, including representatives of the NPD, the British National Party and the Greek Golden Dawn party, assembled in St. Petersburg of all places.[8] They had followed an invitation by the Rodina party, one of whose close allies is Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin.[9] A small group assembled to protest against the rally, some of

Only those with inside knowledge can understand how such proximity to nationalists can be reconciled with the fight against the alleged "neo-Nazis and fascists" in Kiev.

8 | Friedrich Schmidt, "Böse Nazis, gute Nazis", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 Mar 2015, http://faz.net/-hox-81a2o (accessed 4 Jun 2015); Steffen Dobbert, "Obama, auch so ein Nazi", *Zeit Online*, 23 Mar 2015, http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-03/russland-nazis-eurechte-konferenz-faschismus-europa-usa/komplettansicht (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

9 | Dmitry Rogozin was chairman of the Rodina party during the period 2003 to 2006.

whom were immediately arrested by the police.[10] Only those with inside knowledge can understand how such proximity to nationalists can be reconciled with the fight against the alleged "neo-Nazis and fascists" in Kiev.

ECONOMY IN ROUGH WATERS

The sanctions imposed by the West are hitting the economy hard; the restrictions on access to the Western financial market in particular pose problems for Russian companies.

The national feeling of elation does not, in fact, correlate with the country's economic situation, which is distinctly poor at the moment. The sanctions imposed by the West are hitting the economy hard; the restrictions on access to the Western financial market in particular pose problems for Russian companies. The tit-for-tat sanctions by Russia are resulting in significantly higher prices, particularly for food. In addition, the low oil price means lower state revenues and the costs for propping up the banks and major companies are putting pressure on the national budget. High levels of capital flight, clear signs of which had been in evidence from as far back as 2013, illustrate Russian population's distrust of the current economic situation, which was clearly illustrated by the collapse of the rouble towards the end of last year.

Russian people joining ranks may be due to their capacity for suffering, maybe also to the conviction that the West's intentions toward Russia are not benign and that one therefore has to face hard times together; alternatively, it may be due to the well-targeted propaganda, or maybe to a mixture of all these. In any case, there is currently no indication of the population rebelling against the Kremlin's policies. Surveys confirm that the motivation among Russians for demonstrating to air their grievances is very low. Only twelve per cent of the population are prepared to take part in demonstrations to protest economic ills and only ten per cent to voice political dissatisfaction.[11]

In this context one should not forget that the Russian population has had to endure a great deal already. The latest hardships only date back 15 years. While the period during which Boris Yeltsin presided over the country was seen in a fairly positive light in the

10 | "Russland heißt Europas Rechtsextreme willkommen", *Zeit Online*, 22 Mar 2015, http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-03/russland-rechtsparteien-npd-udo-voigt (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

11 | Press release from 27 Mar 2015, http://www.levada.ru/27-02-2015/protest-vozmozhnosti-i-gotovnost-uchastvovat (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

West, it entailed drastic repercussions for Russian society and for the economy, which were difficult to cope with. For most people in Russia, the 1990s went hand in hand with a massive decline in their living standards and fundamental uncertainty. They are therefore referred to as the "years of chaos". Only a very few were clever enough to take advantage of the privatisation process and become rich in a short space of time. Monopolies developed, and with them came the oligarchs.

Putin's sociopolitical initiatives after the "chaos years" under Yeltsin were at the expense of the much-needed modernisation of the Russian economy. | Source: carlfbagge, flickr CC BY SA.

Only by taking all this into account can one understand how Vladimir Putin succeeded in becoming popular as President in a relatively short time. He appeared to bring back order to the country, people's pay increased slowly, and pensions were paid on time. People did not take much account of the fact that the economic conditions were totally different for Putin than they had been for his predecessor Boris Yeltsin due to the developments in the oil price. While the oil price rarely rose above 20 U.S. dollars in the 1990s, it rose steadily up to 90 U.S. dollars between 2001 and 2008.[12] That provided the Russian treasury, whose revenues were predominantly derived from the sale of natural resources such

12 | Tecson, "Entwicklung der Ölpreise. Ölpreisentwicklung auf dem Weltmarkt im Rückblick", http://tecson.de/historische-oelpreise.html (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

as oil and gas, with entirely new options. Putin took advantage of the situation to ameliorate social hardships and build up state reserves. At the same time, the opportunity was missed to modernise and diversify the economy, thereby placing it on a broader footing. That makes it all the more vulnerable now.

Many do not see the increasing concentration of power in the Kremlin, which also began with Putin's arrival, as a problem. Surveys do not give the impression that a majority of Russians are unhappy about a lack of democracy. On the contrary: in March 2014, 38 per cent of respondents in a survey conducted by the Levada Center stated they were convinced that their country was undergoing a development towards democracy. Only some 15 per cent (and this proportion has remained stable since 2007) think their country is becoming increasingly more authoritarian.[13]

Currently, the predominant feeling in the country is that Putin is protecting Russia against external threats. The domestic situation could be an inducement to maintain these threats.

Moods can, of course, shift spontaneously, and there is no knowing how opinions will change over the course of a year of poor economic conditions. Currently, however, the predominant feeling in the country is that Putin is protecting Russia against external threats. If the tensions in connection with Ukraine are resolved, the people may redirect their attention to the domestic situation, which could fuel dissatisfaction. This assumption could, however, also be an inducement to maintain the alleged external threats. In an article on the above-mentioned documentary published on 16 March 2015, the daily newspaper *Vedomosti* described it as representing "Putin's Farewell to the West".[14] Anybody who admits openly to having lied appears unconcerned about opinion in the West. And the current denials about regular Russian troops being involved in eastern Ukraine also lack credibility after this film – quite apart from the fact that there are further indications of their existence. This appears to have been accepted as a price worth paying. Russia's turning away from the West did, in fact, probably begin much earlier. It has been a gradual process, the beginning of which is difficult to pin down.

13 | Press release from 17 Mar 2014, http://www.levada.ru/17-03-2014/pozitsii-rossii-na-mirovoi-arene (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

14 | Andrei Sinitsyn, "Владимир Путин обозначил новый этап и уровень самоизоляции России", (Vladimir Putin outlined a new phase and the level of self-isolation of Russia), *Vedemosti*, 16 Mar 2015, http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2015/03/16/ot-redaktsii-putin-idet-na-rodinu (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

RUSSIA'S TURNING AWAY FROM THE WEST

It is legitimate to interpret Russia's involvement in the BRICS, an association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, as a step to openly oppose what it perceives as the dominance of the West. It does seem surprising that Russia is seeking an alliance in which the former superpower places itself at the same level as states which are in part still facing the problems of developing countries. Russia is due to take over the BRICS presidency later this year.[15] The main point on the agenda will be the implementation of the resolutions on a development bank of their own – to rival the IMF and the World Bank. A further common objective of the BRICS states is to counter the supremacy of the U.S. dollar.

The most obvious indication of Russia's aim to raise its profile in the international arena has been the project of the Eurasian Economic Union, which entered into effect on 1 January 2015. The founding members are Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Armenia has since joined as the fourth member state.

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The structures for this union have already taken shape in very concrete form. Both the Council of the Eurasian Commission and its Collegium, modelled to a certain degree on EU structures, have already begun their work, as has the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union. The steps taken to implement the common economic area have so far been very pragmatic. They are aimed at harmonising standards, norms, regulations and taxes. Stressing this is important because this integration project is, in principle, a political one. After all, there do not appear to be compelling economic reasons for Russia to press ahead with this project. If one observes the volume of trade between the current member states, particularly before the agreement on the customs union, one sees that it only accounted for a small proportion of the total trading volume of each country. Furthermore, the economies are not complementary, but operate in competition with each other. The Russian President Vladimir Putin himself revealed that his motivation for the integration project was predominantly geopolitical in nature. On 3 October 2011, he wrote an article in the newspaper *Izvestia*, in which he presented his idea of the Eurasian Union to the public: "We

15 | "Meeting of BRICS heads of state and government", Kremlin, 15 Nov 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47017 (accessed 15 Jun 2015); BRICS, "Official Website of Russia's Presidency in BRICS", http://en.brics2015.ru (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region."[16] With this statement, Putin expressed his hope that the project would provide him greater negotiating power and that it would create a pole within a multipolar world.

Through cooperation with the BRICS countries and the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia aims to strengthen its relevance in foreign politics and to oppose the policies of the West. | Source: Roberto Stuckert Filho, GCIS ZA, flickr CC BY SA.

Losing its superpower status hit Russia hard. Not least because, in its view, the Western partners have disregarded Russia's interests and wishes: Russia was not invited to join the Eastern Partnership. The Founding Act between NATO and Russia did not result in fundamental trust between NATO and Russia; Russia was not able to prevent the 1999 NATO mission against the Milošević regime in the former Yugoslavia aimed at ending the mass expulsion and murder of Kosovo Albanians. Nor was there any real prospect of integration into Western structures – be it due to a lack of capabilities or due to continuing distrust dating back to the Cold War era. From Russia's perspective, its interests were not taken into

16 | "Мы предлагаем модель мощного наднационального объединения, способного стать одним из полюсов современного мира и при этом играть роль эффективной 'связки' между Европой и динамичным Азиатско-Тихоокеанским регионом." Cited in Vladimir Putin, "Новый интеграционный проект для Евразии – будущее, которое рождается сегодня" (A new integration project for Eurasia – a future that is born today), *Izvestia*, 3 Oct 2011, http://izvestia.ru/news/502761#ixzz2mUZwYQ4h (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

account during the accession negotiations between Ukraine and the EU. Russians also felt hurt by the West's stance during the Olympic Games in Sochi: Russia was criticised unrelentingly and there appeared to be no appreciation of domestic developments in Russia on the part of the West. This was how former Soviet President Gorbachev described the mood within the country during a visit to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 2014: "The West has treated Russia like a loser for the last 25 years." His vision of a "common house of Europe", which he shared with the German Chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, did not attract sufficient enthusiastic supporters.

NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS – COULD THE WEST HAVE DONE MORE?

Russia was particularly critical of the eastern expansion of NATO and of the EU. In Russia's eyes, any rapprochement to the EU implies a simultaneous rapprochement to NATO. In the past, NATO membership frequently predated EU membership. While the Russian side concedes that there was no written agreement precluding an eastern expansion of NATO, that is what Russia has understood the agreements made in the 1990s to mean. Russia repeatedly signalled that it felt the West was ignoring its security interests. One only need to think back to Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference or to Medvedev's proposal to conduct talks on a European security architecture. However, the West never responded to these signals, as Russian security experts regularly point out. Nobody was forced to become a member of NATO or of the EU, and it happened at the countries' explicit wish. The sovereignty of Europe's countries is also enshrined in accepted law, and they are entitled to choose which alliances to enter. But Russia felt that this development was directed against itself and saw the geographic buffer between itself and NATO shrinking more and more.

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The negotiations over an association agreement were meant to bring Ukraine closer to the EU. This would not only have meant that Ukraine, which Russia considered indispensable to the success of the Eurasian Economic Union, would have been lost to this integration project. It was also likely that the subject of Ukraine's potential NATO membership would be back on the agenda. The EU should, in principle, have realised how sensitive this issue was. The question is whether a different negotiating tactic would not

have been opportune, particularly in view of the fact that the EU was not even prepared to offer Ukraine the prospect of accession.

Western criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine is dismissed by Putin with the reference to "double standards" of the West and its interventions in Iraq and Libya. | Source: Roel Wijnants, flickr CC BY SA.

Russia, for its part, intervened by exerting influence on former Ukrainian President Yanukovych, to good effect. However, no one had counted on the massive opposition by the Ukrainian population, which escalated to the extent that Yanukovych felt he had to flee the capital. Moscow's influence over Kiev then appeared to dwindle, but Russia regained the initiative by annexing Crimea. From its perspective, Russia defended its legitimate security interests by taking this action. Accusations by the West that this was in blatant contravention of international law were refuted with the comment that the West was operating according to double standards: one only need look at events in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere. But there are also those who point out that the situation in Crimea is much more complex historically. The post-war order in Europe developed with a functioning Soviet Union in place. What we are seeing now are the belated repercussions of its collapse, which took its course with relatively little bloodshed 25 years ago.

The fact that Putin is receiving such widespread support for his decisive action in Crimea among the Russian population cannot only be explained by the fact that many Russians consider the

Crimean Peninsula as historically Russian territory. It also has to do with a certain satisfaction about finally standing up to the West. There is a feeling of having returned to the world stage and playing an important role. Russia can once more hold its head up high. Surveys indicate that it is important to many Russians to live in a large country that is noticed and respected by the world. The Levada Center regularly asks in its surveys which country people would prefer to live in: a country that is a major power, respected and even somewhat feared by the world, or a country with high living standards, even if it is not one of the most powerful countries in the world. In March 2014, 48 per cent of the respondents plumped for the major power, while 47 voted for the high living standards.[17] By March 2015, the percentages had shifted a little towards the high living standards.[18]

THE FEAR OF A "COLOUR REVOLUTION"

The security threat perceived by Putin and his inner circle also has another name: "colour revolution". This is the fear of an alternative model of society, which would entail the loss of their power and very probably also their wealth. There was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine back in 2004, but the other protest movements, including the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Arab Spring, have not been forgotten either. President Putin never tires of remarking that all these upheavals were initiated by the West, first and foremost the USA, with assistance from the NGOs, the so-called Fifth Column, operating in the countries. Those in power presumably fear that similar events could take place in Russia. The Moscow elite still vividly remember the mass protests in Moscow in 2011/2012 after the election fraud during the Duma elections and the so-called "castling" between Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin involving the presidential office. The protests must have come so unexpected for Putin that he was genuinely shocked. In those cases too, he spoke of forces in the West controlling the protests. Public debates ignore the question as to whether a middle class may already have developed in Russia, which would have something to lose if the regime became even more autocratic. Instead, efforts are made to ensure that such events cannot happen again. To this

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17 | Press release from 17 Mar 2014, http://www.levada.ru/17-03-2014/pozitsii-rossii-na-mirovoi-arene (accessed 29 Jun 2015). Third table from the top.

18 | Press release from 23 Mar 2015, http://www.levada.ru/23-03-2015/pozitsii-rossii-na-mezhdunarodnoi-arene (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

end, increasing pressure is exerted on NGOs, and instructions are sent out to the regions on how to take preventative action against a potential "colour revolution". There are also frequent statements made in the media that such a revolution would not be tolerated.

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS IN THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

The Ukraine conflict illustrates that Russia has made a cost-benefit analysis of its own regarding its dispute with the West, which is not based on economic data. The Russian economy is already suffering considerably from the sanctions imposed by the West, particularly by the loss of trust among investors. But to date this appears to only have resulted in a further closing of ranks and increasingly strident propaganda. Russia's leadership is demonstrating in unprecedented fashion what hybrid warfare means, one of its aims being to undermine trust in any form of reporting. The measures to reform its military capabilities are already showing some results. Both the number of military manoeuvres and the number of instances of Russia violating the airspace of EU Member States are rising.[19] Military expenditure currently makes up 4.2 per cent of Russian GDP;[20] despite the deteriorating economic situation, Russia intends to go ahead with its plans for the modernisation of its military arsenal.[21] President Putin has made it clear that nuclear weapons figure prominently in this.

The Western partners have a different cost-benefit analysis. To Western democracies, it is essential to enable their own populations to prosper. Greater defence expenditure regularly meets with strong opposition. Against the backdrop of the current serious disputes with Russia, the Member States of the European Union will be facing uncomfortable decisions in this context. At their last summit in Wales,[22] the NATO partners took important decisions and reconfirmed previous ones: the establishment of a

19 | "Mehr als 400 russische Militärmaschinen abgefangen", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 Jan 2015, http://nzz.ch/international/europa/1.18472402 (accessed 4 Jun 2015); Kai Küster, "Russlands Kampfjets kommen näher", *tagesschau.de*, 30 Jan 2015, http://tagesschau.de/nato-russland-luftraum-101.html (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

20 | "Russian Defense Budget to Hit Record $81 Billion in 2015", *The Moscow Times*, 16 Oct 2014, http://themoscowtimes.com/business/article/509536.html (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

21 | Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin Spending Big On Military Modernization Despite Russia's Economic Woes", *The World Post*, 2 Apr 2015, http://huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/04/_n_6612418.html (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

22 | NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration", 5 Sep 2014, http://nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, (VJTF), a stronger presence in the eastern EU Member States, raising the national defence budgets to two per cent of the respective GDP. However, the implementation of the last point by the national parliaments is still outstanding in most countries. The decision by the EU to tie the easing of the sanctions against Russia to the implementation of the Minsk protocol[23] is correct in the current situation.

Despite the poor economic development and budgetary position of Russia, Putin sticks to a costly modernisation of the Russian military. | Source: Dmitry Terekhov, flickr CC BY SA.

CONCERTED EU ACTION AS A CLEAR SIGNAL

It is unlikely that the sanctions will produce any change in Russia's policies in the short term. The Western partners will therefore need to persevere and continue to act in concert. Disunity would weaken the EU at this point in time. If Moscow were to succeed in undermining unity within the EU, this would do untold damage to the credibility of the West.

Many observers in Russia assume that the conflict will continue for a long time. The ceasefire agreed in Minsk is fragile, and Russia's foreign policy has become unpredictable, not least because President Putin cannot afford to lose face. In this sense, he is not acting

23 | Federal Agency for Civic Education, "Dokumentation: Minsker Protokoll vom 5. September 2014", 17 Sep 2014, http://bpb.de/191799 (accessed 4 Jun 2015).

from a position of strength but from one of weakness. Foreign politics has become an instrument of domestic politics. Nor can one discount the possibility that Putin may not have made up his mind about what steps to take next and is waiting to see how the West will react before making any decisions. It appears that he had not counted on the EU states closing ranks and on the painful economic sanctions. It is therefore all the more important to maintain this concerted action as a clear signal. In addition, every effort must be made to seek to resolve the conflict with Russia by diplomatic means. There are currently not sufficient channels of communication open.

It would also be important to investigate what could be offered to Russian society. No doubt it is difficult to counter the current propaganda with anything that could make an impact. A first step would be to at least make objective information available to people in the Russian language. An alternative offering in Russian could well be worth a try, not least for the numerous ethnic German resettlers from the former USSR, who frequently obtain their information predominantly from the Russian media even in Germany. Many of these people still have close links with Russia and could take on a mediating role at civil society level. Further important measures could include study opportunities, work placements and other visiting opportunities, which would enable young Russians to gain their own impression of the West. And maybe it would be worth attempting once again to eliminate the hurdle the visa requirement represents for Russian people. One thing should be made perfectly clear: the West is opposed to Russia engaging in aggressive policies and attempting to deny other states their sovereignty. The West is not turning against the Russian people or against Russia as such. On the contrary: Russia is an important partner. It is in our interest to make common cause with Russia in countering global challenges such as the increasing Islamist fundamentalism and terror in the Middle East. This does, however, require the two sides to come to an understanding about common principles in foreign and security policy.