

## The Return of the Brezhnev Doctrine

**Article by Richard Robert**

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Despite the warnings, the invasion of Ukraine took the world by surprise. For many, Ukraine was assumed to be a bargaining chip in a wider geopolitical game. What this view tragically overlooked was the central place of Ukraine in Vladimir Putin's worldview and the much longer history of Russian imperialism.

### The Return of the Brezhnev Doctrine

by Green Wave



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The fascination of European sovereigntists for Putin's Russia always contained a paradox: his regime's attitude to the principle of sovereignty itself. If the contradiction had been growing ever more flagrant for years, the invasion of Ukraine confirms it explicitly and brutally. Putin's Russia has returned to the "theory of limited sovereignty" formulated in 1968 by the Soviet Union to justify the crushing of the Prague Spring.

It was already visible in the inconclusive negotiations on Ukraine conducted in January 2022. The main parties concerned had no voice in the matter, while Russia and the United States negotiated directly. One could point to a certain symmetry between Moscow and Washington in this respect, two powers returning to their Cold War habits. But there is a fundamental difference between the two capitals: casualness on the part of the United States does not prevent their fundamental recognition of the right to self-determination; the Russians have rejected this central concept in international relations.

### Words, words, words

Russia's attitude to sovereignty is certainly variable, not to say supple. Consider the 2008 intervention in Georgia to "defend" the Ossetians and the Abkhazians, the lightning referendum that provided the pretext for the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's "defence" of the inhabitants of Donbas oppressed by the "fascists" of Kyiv for nearly eight years. In 2021, Putin talked up fears of a "genocide" in the Donbas. Russia, defender of the peoples?

Recall the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoken in February 2014 at the Security Conference in Munich: "I will also cite the words of a US Department of State spokesperson who said the United States hopes that a government will be formed in

Ukraine that will ensure political unity and economic prosperity backed by the IMF and meeting the aspirations of the Ukrainian people for a European future. If this is a confirmation of freedom of choice, then such freedom for the Ukrainian people is interpreted in a rather strange way. The choice is being imposed, which is what we, Russia, do not want to and will not do.”

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Now that the relative confusion that reigned in February 2014 has dissipated, we can turn our attention to two assertions that turned out to be untruths:

First, “A choice is being imposed”? Nothing at the time made it possible to affirm this in such a firm way, and everything indicates today that the Ukrainian people chose the West in complete autonomy.

Then, “What, we, Russia do not want and will not do.” In 2014, it was notoriously false. A presidential candidate was poisoned in 2004. The years 2005-2009 saw three “gas wars” between Russia and Ukraine. Pressure was exerted to influence and constrain Ukrainian choices throughout the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, from 2010 to 2014. Since 2014, Russia has actively and quite openly supported insurgents in the Donbas and sought by all means possible to weaken the Ukrainian state. Ironically, the massive and explicit nature of Russian pressure worked to stiffen the resolve among Ukrainians, reinforcing their desire to distance themselves from Russia, culturally, linguistically, politically, and strategically.

This divergence has taken us to a situation of opposing blocs, a reversion to Cold War logic. Even the defunct Warsaw Pact reappears in the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organization which intervenes in Kazakhstan and conveniently manoeuvres in Belarus. This configuration is also the one favoured by the Russians, who are rediscovering great power status in the construction of a world polarised between Moscow and Washington.

Without ruling out this interpretation, we must not ignore the regional dimension of what is at stake in Ukraine. On this scale, it is indeed geopolitics, but it is not the influence of America, the threat of NATO, or the attraction exercised by the European Union that is the crux of the problem. It is first and foremost Ukrainian sovereignty that Russia seeks to reduce and deny.

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## **Denialism**

There are three factors underpinning this progressive shift towards the denial of Ukrainian sovereignty as a matter of policy.

The first is the ensemble of Russian political, economic, and strategic interests. In 1991, the economically, politically, and demographically integrated zone that was the Soviet Union suddenly disintegrated. The links have not disappeared – they are seen concretely in pipeline networks and diasporas – but they are strained. Objectively, there are Russian interests in all the former Soviet republics, starting with citizens of the Russian Federation. The defence of these interests and the ambition to renew ties are at the heart of several transnational projects, received with varying levels of enthusiasm by Russia’s neighbours. Tensions Between Kyiv and Moscow in the 2000s revolved around this reintegration. In 2015, Ukraine did not join the customs union (that would become the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015), to Russia’s great displeasure.

The second factor, particularly sensitive since 2013 but discernible since 2004, is that democratic movements represent a threat to the Kremlin. Ukrainian sovereignty is here seen in the light of the “colour revolutions”. In the eyes of Moscow, these developments were illegitimate and guided by foreigners. The protest movement around the 2012 Russian presidential election markedly hardened the Putin regime and its determination to prevent pro-democracy movements from spreading any further. The ideological dimension of defending an alternative model to liberal democracy is thus central. We note here a return to the Brezhnev doctrine that crushed democratic aspirations in the satellite states of the USSR.

The third factor is an explicitly imperial aim, carried first by a part of the Russian elites and that became a growing part of Vladimir Putin’s vision over his first two mandates. What is at stake is no longer interests or influence but empire. Different concepts have allowed its progressive formulation.

The notion of “near abroad” (*Blijnieie Zaroubiejie*) long predates Putin. The term is reserved for the former Soviet republics and includes Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the three Baltic states, and Moldova. The notion refers to an area where Russian interests are directly at stake and draws from it a doctrine broken down in a certain number of documents and declarations, the substance of which is that Russia is legitimately entitled to intervene, while symmetrically other powers are asked to be discreet. Formally, the geography of the “near abroad” covers that of the Commonwealth of Independent States, whose foundation in December 1991 preceded the official dissolution of the USSR by a few days. But this “commonwealth” never had much substance. While the “near abroad” might not be legally formalised, it is politically clearer for the simple reason that it is imposed by the vision of a single actor: Moscow.

The formula of the “Russian world” is even vaguer but in a certain way more ambitious. This geopolitical notion operates on several levels, its connotations allowing an imperceptible slide from cultural and historical proximity to political symbiosis, not to say absorption. Vladimir Putin used it in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, and it has returned regularly since, in official communication as in more general usage. In Russian, the expression *Ruski Mir* carries an ambiguity: *mir* (мир) means both the world and peace. *Ruski Mir* is therefore not only the Russian world but also the Russian peace, like a distant echo of that other imperial form, the *pax romana*. Finally, *Mir* is also the village considered

not as a place but as community. The term was widely used in Soviet times (the *Mir* space station bears witness to this). But this peaceful community resembling an Orthodox parish carries with it a more disturbing implication: to deviate from the Russian world is also, literally, to deviate from Russian peace. It means making enemies.

Between the “near abroad” and the “Russian world”, lines can become blurred. In 2014, Putin’s propaganda sought to impose the expression *Novorossiia* (New Russia), to designate a strip of land located between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. That offensive failed, but with a new attack underway on this strategic territory, the expression may well resurface. Historically, it is also extendable to the Dnieper.

We see here how, through the magic of onomastics and the dubious legitimacy of an already ancient history, the “near abroad” is pulled towards full reintegration into the “Russian world”. This slippage brings us to the heart of the problem. The elements mentioned so far (defending interests, curbing the danger posed by democracy, reintegrating a disintegrated space) do not fully capture the ambitions and aspirations of Putin’s Russia.

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influence but empire.*

### **“As patient as implacable”**

The concept of imperialism may sound somewhat outdated, but it clarifies Russian movements and intentions. Russian history is that of a centralising state developed through successive conquests. The imperial heritage deeply animates Russia’s relationship with its western neighbours (including its justification of recent annexations), but also more deeply the strange relationship maintained by this immense country with borders that have long been marches. “We have found no other way to defend our borders than to extend them”, wrote Catherine II to Voltaire. No doubt this dynamic conception of the border, where defence is maintained through conquest, needs to be taken into account to understand the Russian convolutions. But nor could we stop there. It would be a world that would no longer be ours intellectually. A world where international law is meaningless and its cornerstone, the rights of peoples to determine their future, absent.

The reference to the Brezhnev doctrine is illuminating – as well as questionable. Enlightening because it combines the defence of the empire with determined opposition to democracy, both focused on an attractive and threatening West. Enlightening because the troop movements and the noise of boots furiously evoke the Warsaw Pact, the armed wing of this doctrine formulated in 1968 to justify the intervention in Prague. It should be noted that Putin visited the graves of Soviet soldiers sent to crush the 1956 uprising when passing through Budapest in February 2015. Nevertheless, the reference to the Brezhnev doctrine is questionable because it was formulated to justify interventions in the Soviet-aligned countries of Eastern Europe, whereas most of what is being played out today concerns the former Soviet republics.

But is the difference so clear, if we consider the history? Ukrainians are today confronted, in

a culturally more uncomfortable way than the Czechs or the Poles of yesterday because of their political and linguistic history, with what Milan Kundera, in a resounding text published in 1984, called “a Russification as patient as it is implacable”. This is what it ultimately comes down to: not Russian ambition to regain great power status or define its relationship with the West, but a renewed dynamic of national absorption, the slow digestion of neighbouring peoples and their territories. These territories were empty. These countries, these peoples, these nations do not exist. How else to understand the astounding article published by Vladimir Putin in July 2021, in which he writes that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”? From the irredentism of the years 2014-2020 (the “defence” of ethnic Russians living in eastern Ukraine), we move on to the pure and simple negation of Ukrainian identity and, by extension, the reality of a Ukrainian nation.

It is not just a matter of cynicism here, even if no one is fooled by the sleight of hand: without a people, there is no right to self-determination. But to understand the feeling of deep legitimacy that seems to inhabit Vladimir Putin, to explain the untruths and inconsistencies of the Russian position, we are obliged to grasp this long perspective, which goes far beyond him and Sergey Lavrov. We must return to the astonishing conception of the border formulated by Catherine II in her letter to Voltaire, which expresses a geopolitical reality in flagrant contradiction with the order of international relations: Russia is fundamentally a country that extends. Putin’s Russia is the direct heir to that of the princes of Muscovy: it tirelessly absorbs and digests what surrounds it. This movement, which began in the 16th century, is not to be confused with modern imperialism, nor with the nationalism of conquest like that of the Third Reich. It is rather a historical process of “nationalisation”, which unfolds through the Russification evoked by Milan Kundera.

This movement is obviously not a long calm river. In the 1830s and 1840s, it came up against an unexpected stumbling block, with the rise of national sentiment in what would once again become Poland and in other parts of the empire. Absorbing, unifying, and Russifying Russia was then returned to the dimension of empire; it became the “prison of the peoples” (the formula is from Lenin, but we encounter this idea in Custine in 1839). It was in reaction to this rise of Slavic nationalism that the dynamic of absorption officially changed, under the reign of Alexander III, into an official policy of cultural, religious, and linguistic Russification.

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After being superseded by Soviet history, which at once thwarted and replayed it (building states for the peoples of the Asian steppe, who then became nations), and after being broken in 1991, this movement has resumed. Once again, it is met with a rising national feeling that is equally powerful, and that is consolidated through resistance. It comes up against a young nation-state, which stands with its laws and the international order against the geopolitical “groundswell” of Russian history.

It is this resistance, in the most physical sense of the term, that Putin’s Russia (from the

president to a part of the population) misunderstands, struggles to understand, grasps as profoundly illegitimate, and tries desperately to deny. The Ukrainian people, in Putin's eyes and the language of the "Russian world", do not exist. It is not Ukraine's independence and its economic or strategic alliances that threaten Russia. It is that it stands in opposition to the Russian world, this slowly expanding entity that sees itself as more powerful, older, and more legitimate than the derisory notions of Western modernity, such as the international order, sovereignty, and the rights of peoples. The peoples? What peoples?

*This is an edited and updated version of an article first published in French by Telos.*

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