

Spring 2018

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INT 465
Directed Research Capstone

Modern Irredentism or Cloaked Imperialism?
Hidden Agendas and Hybrid Warfare in Reinstating the *Russkiy Mir*

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Spring 2018

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Abstract

The partition of post-Soviet Union territory ignited numerous border disputes, ethnic-related human rights concerns, and security dilemmas; these issues have intensified in the last twenty years, provoked by Russia's rising power in the international system. The argument is that, despite citing abuses on ethnic kin as the reason for invading the Crimean peninsula, the decision to invade Crimea was a systematic effort to settle post-USSR grievances and rebuild a stronger, hegemonic Russian Federation. By reviewing motivations for Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula—and integrating subsequent action in the Middle East, the United States, the Balkans, and Israel—findings from this research reject multiple theories of improvisation, defense, and ethnic irredentist motivations as a sponsor of aggressive action towards Crimea, and instead supplies evidence for an argument of imperialism, rooted in security concerns, Russia's growing power, and long-term aspirations to assert itself as the sole hegemonic superpower. This research analyzes Russia's armed offensive force, use of soft, hard, and sharp power, hybrid warfare tactics, and exploitation of Western failures and underlying regional pressures in its campaign to destabilize enemy states and delegitimize weaker neighbors, spread influence, convert key US alliances, prevent NATO expansion, and regain domestic popularity, in an attempt to instigate superpower status within the international power hierarchy.

Introduction

Throughout history, the concept of imperialism has frequently aligned with Russia's foreign policy strategies, interests, and motivations. In the last five years, Russia has resurged as an imperialistic force, through the illegitimate annexation of "lost" territory and in the employment of soft-power, hard-power, and sharp-power influence throughout the Balkan States, Syria, Israel, and the United States. Russia's growing geopolitical challenge to the United States is exemplified in the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, occupation of eastern Ukraine, deployment of military forces and bombing campaigns in Syria to sustain Bashar Al-Assad, expanded armed forces and the execution of Zapad military exercises in Belarus, campaigns of intimidation and electoral interference towards eastern European neighbors, oil-based power plays in Western Europe, and electoral tampering and disinformation campaigns in the United States, and threats to shut off crucial oil and resources to Western countries (Faiola 2014; Ferris 2017).

Distinct from soft power or hard power activities, e.g. diplomatic dinners or military invasions, respectively, the creation of sharp power introduces a third dimension of influence frequently employed by authoritarian regimes: “‘sharp power’ captures the malign and aggressive nature of the authoritarian projects...which encourage monopoly of power, top-down control, censorship, and coerced or purchased loyalty—are projected outward, and those affected are not so much audiences as victims” (Walker 2017). Most clearly, China and Russia have employed this form of stealthy influence on their own domestic populations to suppress dissent, silence political opponents, undermine support for NATO, or flood citizens with “propagandistic content...all while seeking to maintain a deceptive appearance of pluralism, openness, and modernity” through online manipulation and by masking “state-directed projects as the work of commercial media or grassroots associations” (Walker 2017). This sharp-power approach provides Russia a third avenue to target its enemies discreetly, which poses a significant, frighteningly multidimensional threat to both international security and domestic stability alike, as Russia places “state power over individual liberty” and “pierc[es], penetrat[es], and perforat[es] the political and informational environments within targeted countries” (Walker 2017).

Russia’s interference with the United States’ 2016 Presidential elections is the clearest example of this sharp power assault; to weaken the foundations of American democracy, disinformation campaigns and hacked voting booths in 21 states were implemented to divide businesses, communities, and families already divided (Fessler 2017). These actions held the capacity to be extremely detrimental to a system, where “American sense of national unity could weaken the institutions and shared beliefs that are central to enduring security and success,” and

“growing domestic strife and diminishing trust in national institutions represent as great a threat to the United States as any traditional national security concern” (Blackwill 2018).

In the Balkans, Russia’s “low-cost, opportunistic” approach to lending rhetorical support, coordination and infiltration of ultra-nationalist groups, amplifying the anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-NATO sentiments and sponsoring corresponding propaganda has materialized through photo-ops and state dinners with Russian President Vladimir Putin, discounted sales for Russian military equipment, small monetary investments in infrastructure and schooling, and plans for direct political intervention, such as the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro (Samorukov 2017).

Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war, in addition to Israel’s continued alignment with Russia instead of the United Kingdom, further exemplifies the foreign policy strategy of taking advantage of Western diplomatic and security failures to cultivate new opportunities and insert the Russian stronghold as a serious, power-wielding ally. Further, in regards to development and national goal-setting, the ideals of America or the European Union are distant and unattainable for smaller, struggling nations; shooting for stability and alliances, these nations may turn to other regional powers offering assistance, rather than choosing to pursue profound democratization or westernization reforms (Ahren 2018; Blackwill 2018; Samorukov 2017).

In addition to strategic alliance-building efforts, Russia’s continued activity of infiltrating and undermining the sovereignty of nations, legally or illegally, clearly suggests a pattern of imperialism, aimed at destabilizing decades-old partnerships and weakening the United States’ reign at the top of the international hierarchy. The pattern begins with the 2014 annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula, home to two million ethnic Russians—nearly 58% of Crimea’s population (“Crimea Profile” 2018). Russia, officially, declared their military occupation a necessary response to Ukrainian laws that blocked the Russian language and the

freedom to protest; essentially a case of irredentism in an effort to support, protect, and represent members of the Russian ethnic kin who were believed to be under attack by the government of Ukraine (“Crimean Profile” 2018; Treisman 2017). This paper discusses the differences between irredentism and imperialism to establish a framework of analysis. Subsequently, given the post-2014 context of brash aggression and silent infiltrations, and in reviewing prospective Russian motivations, this research intends to refute the “irredentist” explanation for the annexation of Crimea and bring attention to the rising objective of reestablishing the Modern Russian Federation as a world superpower. Finally, an outline of long- and short-term consequences of imperialism, in addition to possible positives and negatives of imperialism action, provides the platform for a discussion on future changes in diplomacy, government relations, and conduct within the international system.

Conceptual Framework

Irredentism

Irredentism is described as the intention to, or process of, physically reuniting ethnic kin to the homeland to better represent or protect their interests (Ambrosio 2016; Saideman 2005). Irredentist action focuses on reuniting individuals based on ethnicity and ethnic heritage, who may be refugees—expelled by force, disaster, or conflict—or immigrants—in search of better opportunities. While this action can be executed through a variety of manners, two most common patterns are (1) aggressive, armed, offensive takeover or (2) peaceful negotiations between top leaders and/or third parties. However, it is imperative to note that a multitude of interrelated factors ultimately decide the success and stability of the nations, groups, or regions involved. Because of this, irredentist action driven by either peaceful negotiations or implemented by offensive force is at risk of devolving into (3) a high-tension, violent stalemate,

or (4) a low-tension, rhetorical stalemate, leaving a great deal unsettled, unspecified, and uncontrolled. While many factors decide post-irredentism success and stability, one thing remains constant: the denial of rights and abuses on the homeland's diaspora community is the lead motivation for waging formal irredentist policy against the oppressor.

Imperialism

A similar argument is made for imperialism, cited as the “state policy, practice, or advocacy [for] extending power and dominion...specifically by direct territorial acquisition, or by gaining political and economic control of other areas” (“Imperialism” 2017). Imperialist action almost always employs military force or other subtle tactics of aggression to undermine the sovereignty and stability of a state or region, such as state-sponsored propaganda that discredits the legitimacy, foreign policy, or leadership of the enemy state. Four main modules of imperialist action are as follows:

1. Imperialism as a Benefit;
2. Imperialism as a Natural Struggle;
3. Imperialism as Security; and,
4. Imperialism as Morality (“Imperialism” 2017).

Similar to the “imperialism as a morality trend,” the “imperialism as a benefit” argument emphasizes lending food, resources, goods, and services to those in the corresponding region, ultimately supporting civilians in the region of contention and opening new human and material outlets for material sales and investment. This approach is often linked to the last stage of capitalism with a monopolistic economy—a state is forced to conquer new territory to manage overproduction and sell surplus capital (“Imperialism” 2017).

The “imperialism as a natural struggle” argument references the ancient political approach that “those endowed with superior qualities are destined to rule all others”

(“Imperialism” 2017). In conquering the physical territory or gaining control of the economy, the more powerful state is able to provide economic, political, or social stability, access to trade and ports, establish or extend trade partnerships, build political alliances, supply key resources, and preserve the safety of civilians in the contested area (“Imperialism” 2017). This argument implies that power, sovereignty, and respect are reliant on the size and might of the nation.

Thirdly, the theory that imperialism reassures, extends, or preserves a state’s security is one of the most commonly expressed motivations throughout history; the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Roman Empire each exemplify this theory. Employing imperialist action as a security policy, a state may intend to establish buffer states, obtain or preserve materials (thus limiting enemies’ access), construct military bases, reinforce or protect the “natural frontiers,” or gain control over communication lines (“Imperialism” 2017). Absorbing territory through imperialist action also prevents other “enemy” states from expanding their physical influence, strength, and control within the region. The goal of gaining prestige and protecting power rests within the attainment of physical land.

Finally, authorizing imperialist action because of moral reasoning highlights the use of aggressive or offensive action to aid or support other citizens in need. Comparable to United Nations or NGO/IGO work at the highest levels, leaders of state A opt to enclose on region or state B to liberate the citizens from tyrannical rule and bring them the blessings of state A’s superior lifestyle (“Imperialism” 2017). Though this module of imperialism intends to better the lives of a population threatened by economic downturn or pressures, social issues, or human aggression, the seemingly humanitarian intentions may be masked in selfish aims for increasing security, a drive for power and prestige, nationalism, or greed. Further, while morality-guided imperialism appears altruistic in nature, the potential for causing security dilemma impulses

between regional neighbors may be an unintended effect; throughout history, underlying references in foreign policy towards potential victims has sparked concern and fear when lobbied for aid, personnel, economic, or technological developments, as these resources could be expended on the same group that supplied them (“Imperialism” 2017).

Comparing Approaches

The cases of irredentism and imperialism are exceedingly similar, but subtle differences highlight their divergence: the potential for immediate post-conflict stability, reliance on force or aggressive action, and motivations for engaging in such action define imperialist action distinctly from irredentist, kin-centered measures. Unlike imperialism, irredentist policy is not contingent on violence, aggression, destabilization, or offensive war. Peaceful negotiations between leading rebel or government leaders, or by third parties, are a common outcome that may be viewed as a comparatively more legitimate decision than imperialistic domination. However, it is important to note that the potential for irredentist conflict to slip into unstable stalemates may appear to be more illegitimate than other cases of imperialism, where clear leaders, state lines, institutions, and rule of law are clearly defined and strictly regulated.

In reviewing irredentist action, the homeland state explicitly focuses on reclaiming their diaspora community and the securing the rights and interests of their ethnic kin, focusing less on economic interests or investment (Ambrosio 2016; Saideman 2005); this suggests imperialism may be implemented more often due to economic, political, or personal-historical motivations. While it could be argued that security interests motivate both irredentism and imperialism, irredentist activity is fixated on human security and individual (or ethnic) interests, whereas imperialist intervention is concentrated on national security and state interests.

While motivations for imperialism and irredentism vary slightly, a few caveats remain. While it is possible for irredentism, like imperialism, to be aggressive in nature and motivated by state interests, all irredentist activity does not rely on military invasions or weapons strikes as main coercive methods; peaceful negotiations between leaders or third parties also occur, which is significantly less likely to be found in the execution of imperialist activities. Similarly, while imperialism is traditionally focused on state interests, these state interests may be contingent on human (or ethnic) interests. The theory of “imperialism as morality” provides for these similarities in relation to irredentist activity. On both sides, action is taken to ensure and protect the rights and freedoms of people, better society’s access to opportunity, increase employment, improve or guarantee an appropriate education, and lend economic stability to markets, either through trade partnerships or access to resources (Ambrosio 2016; Saideman 2005; “Imperialism” 2017).

Research Methodology

In order to successfully analyze Russian motivations and political interests, this research reviews the geopolitical changes following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the evolution of ethnic tensions and conflicts, and Russia’s long-standing grievances with post-devolution borders and state-building. Through documentaries, maps, government documents, and scholarly articles, I will identify motivations, explore theories, and analyze popular conclusions regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to execute aggressive action against the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine.

While this event has frequently been labeled an act of “irredentism,” scholars also cite evidence for a modern “imperialism” argument; this research explores the differences between these two concepts, and attempts to clarify the identity of the Crimean annexation. Following

this analysis, and briefly citing Russia's recent interventions within the international community, I intend to discuss apparent imperialistic intentions in Russia's foreign policy in broader context, and I address the short- and long-term implications of modern imperialism on regional and international politics.

The Case of Crimea

History and Progression of Conflict

From the beginning of the 18th century onward, the Crimean peninsula experienced a series of shifting borders and empirical reign: multiple neighbors, Russia, and the Nazis all commanded pieces of Ukraine and Crimea before Ukraine regained sole control ("Crimea Profile" 2018). This history of annexation and partition ignited ethnic tensions in Crimea specifically, as majority and minority statuses shifted, social hierarchies reorganized, and citizens' alliances between Ukraine and Russia fragmented. Ethnic unrest was further exemplified as the Tatar ethnic group, all 240,000 of which had been forcibly deported en mass for suspected collusion with Nazis during the occupation, returned to the Crimean peninsula after Ukraine gained independence in the early 1990's following the fall of the Soviet Union. Returning Tatars looked to reclaim land previously seized from them, but caused crippling housing, resource, and employment crises throughout the peninsula. Lack of suitable space due to the increased establishment of Russian communities pushed Tatars into horrid, segregated ghetto-like housing, where they were denied basic resources, proper education, stable employment, and subjected to harassment by local ethnic Russians and Ukrainians ("Rights" 2014). Tensions between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians erupted too, as ethnic Russians' rights to organization, representation, protest and expression were banned; Ukrainians faced severe harassment and visible hostility throughout Crimea especially, as Russian was the predominant language and non-speakers or Ukrainian-speakers were subjected to harsh reprisals and ousting

(“Rights” 2014). These issues pushed ethnic Russians’ interest in strengthening ties with the homeland to find stability, resources, and security (“Crimea Profile” 2018).

However, tensions later arose between Ukraine and Russia, as disputes erupted over the use of the Port of Sevastopol, which harbored the Black Sea Fleet since 1783, following the fall of the USSR. While agreements had satisfied both parties, a regional conflict with Georgia urged Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko to forbid Russia’s access in 2008 (“Crimea Profile” 2018). A deal for cheaper Russian gas guaranteed Russia’s access to the port until the year 2042, and guaranteed Russia’s regional logistical access (“Crimea Profile” 2018).

The 21st century failed to bring much-needed peace and assurances to Ukraine, as the Color Revolutions rocked the region and threatened Baltic stability in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine itself from 2003-2005 (Pinkham 2017). Beginning in 2010, scandals and corruption in political and administrative offices, in addition to vote rigging, intended to retain pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and his anti-West agenda. Late in 2013, Yanukovich rejected an invitation to strengthen Ukraine’s partnership with the European Union, instead opting to reinforce ties with Russia. This move, noted as a significant turning point in the stability of Crimea, sparked mass protests for weeks, with over 800,000 people taking to the streets (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014). In a desperate attempt to calm protestors and save strategic ally Yanukovich, Putin offered to absorb \$15 billion in Ukrainian debt and reduce Russian gas prices (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014).

Yanukovich’s reactionary lawmaking strategies ignited the Crimean peninsula into chaos; his decision to outlaw protests quickly turned deadly, as the police force and snipers targeted protestors. Pro-Russian protestors stormed government offices, and mass hysteria erupted as 18 innocent civilians were killed by police (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014). President

Yanukovich disappeared for days, pro-Russian protestors occupied the Presidential Administration Building, and a coup d'état was attempted. Yanukovich returned to denounce the coup attempt and banned the Russian language; in response, pro-Russian gunmen overtook the Crimean capital building, combat soldiers guarded key (occupied) government offices, and patrolled airports (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014).

While only temporary, Ukraine’s banishment of the Russian language and subsequent mass unrest between Ukrainians and Russians provoked the threat of serious consequences from Russia. In March 2014, Parliament in Moscow authorized the use of force against Ukraine to protect the Russian interests—the nature of “Russian interests” was unspecified (whether the interests were human, political, or economic is still unknown)—signifying Russia would not concede from Ukrainian dissent (Pinkham 2017; “Ukraine Crisis” 2014). As pro-Russian forces strengthened, organized, and popularized, an unprompted vote to secede the Crimean peninsula and join the Russian Federation—deemed a “sham” by the West—earned 97% support; days later, on March 18th, Russian President Putin legally absorbed the Crimean peninsula into the Russian Federation (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014).

The Crimea crisis did not stop there, however, as pro-Russian troops filed into the provinces of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkin, and immediately called for independence votes. In response to the surge of Russian troops, Ukraine implemented an “anti-terror” operation policy against Russian separatists, which led to increased severity of independence movements and the declaration of independence for Donetsk and Luhansk with contested referendums (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014). Following these Russian separatists elections, Ukraine’s upcoming election excluded most of the east, yet again angering ethnic Russians and Russian sympathizers.

In August, Russia provided humanitarian aid to the city of Luhansk without Ukrainian permission, further insinuating Russia's sovereignty over the region. Rebel groups consisting of 3-4,000 Russian troops entered and occupied the city of Novoazovsk, as the Russians continued to aggressively expand their territorial front ("Ukraine Crisis" 2014). However, following this development, Putin recalled troops, possibly signifying a decrease in tension. This diminished intensity of conflict failed to last long: Ukraine elected pro-Western parties into Parliament, Russian separatists elected pro-Russian leaders in the East. Days later, Ukraine braced for inevitable attacks as Russian military equipment and combat troops filed into Ukraine "in columns" ("Ukraine Crisis" 2014).

Analysis of Arguments

Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions have been extensively analyzed and critiqued following his seemingly-impulsive decision to annex the Crimean peninsula in March 2014. Officially, the Kremlin cited the protection and security of ethnic Russians—an irredentist cause—as the main reasoning for invasion and annexation; popular theories, however, cite a variety of other explanations, including the need to be a "brash improviser" and save the Ukrainian peninsula from collapse, the intention to pursue an imperialist policy to recreate the Russian Empire, and a security-based requirement for action and defense, as NATO began to expand further into the Baltics (Treisman 2016). An analysis of these three theories, and an examination of the morality and security modules of imperialism's applicability in Crimea, follows below.

Treisman (2016) suggests three basic theories describing Russia's motivations and reasoning regarding its decision to annex Crimea:

1. Putin as an Improviser;
2. Putin as a Defender; and,

3. Putin as an Imperialist.

Treisman's first theory, in which Vladimir Putin acted as an improviser, is founded in Putin's response to the need for a strong force of stability and political leadership as Ukraine struggled to regain full control over the unrest sweeping through Crimea. Putin's dedication to regional interests and security pushed Moscow to interfere, and ultimately annex, the Crimean peninsula to stabilize economic partnerships, political interests, and social unrest within the region (Treisman 2016). Putin, described as a "strategist with geopolitical ambitions," assumed the responsibility of safeguarding the Crimean citizens' safety and security, and preserving the Ukrainian government from collapse (Treisman 2016). However, other researchers reject this theory, as the majority of the international community recognizes Russia's guilt in infiltrating Crimea with hybrid warfare—physical military- or government-sponsored forces in conjunction with distributing propaganda, vote-rigging, and stoking of ultra-nationalist groups (Klimkin 2017; Pinkham 2017). Further, Putin's heroic "improvisation" subsequently caused nearly 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDP's) to flee from violence, occupation, and unrest ("World Factbook" 2018).

Finally, the political steps taken by Putin leading up to and during the period of intense instability and Yanukovich's flight from Ukraine are not consistent with spur-of-the-moment improvisation in the face of political crisis. Years before annexing Crimea, in 2008 while Russia was protecting its separatist enclaves with tanks inside Georgia, Russian officials began distributing Russian passports to Crimean citizens, which suggests Russia was building a possible defense if invasion into Crimea was necessary as well (Treisman 2016). Additionally, months prior to official intervention, the *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper reported a memo from Russia's executive branch outlining potential plans for annexing Crimea and other parts of

eastern Ukraine (Treisman 2016). Starting before the unrest climaxed, Putin's top security advisor Vladislav Surkov made increasingly frequent visits to Kiev and the capital of Crimea, in part to promote Russia's proposed bridge over the Kerch Strait to physically connect Russia and Crimea. As diplomatic relations progressed, the chair of the Crimean Parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, is quoted as saying Crimea was ready "to go to Russia" if Yanukovich was ousted—and just prior to Russia's intervention, Konstantinov was back in Moscow meeting with exclusive senior officials in Putin's cabinet (Treisman 2016). Rather than an act of heroic improvisation by Putin, some evidence suggests a bi-lateral plot to lead Crimea back into Russian control may have been more the case.

The second theory, framing Vladimir Putin as a defender of Russian and regional interests, also has its share of flaws. Treisman suggests Putin meddled in Ukrainian affairs and annexed Crimea in an attempt to prevent its accession into NATO—thus halting a much larger plot for NATO's expansion in the Baltic States and its encirclement of the Russian Federation (2016). Russia has long has severe concerns over growing NATO expansion East, which were heightened after the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Bender 2015).

From a security standpoint, NATO threatens Russia's geopolitical advantage with neighbors and partnerships—losing Ukraine would have been a devastating loss on many cultural, political, economic, and social platforms. NATO expansion into Ukraine would have meant losing valuable natural gas deals and pipeline control ("Divisions" 2014), and forced ethnic Russians into a lifestyle of military opposition against their Russian homeland. In addition, the long-time enemy status of the West and the United States in particular would have

gained yet another regional neighbor bound with a promise to attack enemies, such as Russia, at a moment's notice.

While security issues, the fear of losing a key alliance, and subsequent loss of control over resources and economic deals with Ukraine were of serious concern to Russian domestic and foreign policy, there were no outstanding provocations at the time leading up to Russian meddling in the Crimean peninsula that would have justified aggressive intervention. Although Putin claimed to have “heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO,” the declarations had also been made far after Russia’s first steps into Crimea—at the start of unrest within Crimea, Ukraine was not actively seeking membership in NATO (Treisman 2016). Additionally, in 2010, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich barred Ukraine from joining or participating in military blocs, such as NATO or the EU (Klimkin 2017). To defend interests, annexing part of Ukraine was much less demanding, and much more effective, than waging total war in an effort to stop NATO’s growth in the Baltics. However, stopping NATO expansion and securing resource deals, economic partnerships, and its most strategic alliance, while reuniting the ethnic Russian people, gaining more territory and influence, reaping the benefits of flagrant nationalism, and increasing Russia’s power and legitimacy within the international system were all easily done under Putin’s imperialistic execution of dividing those already divided and strategically taking advantage of opportunities within a weakened state through hybrid warfare.

This is clearly exemplified in Treisman’s “Putin as an Imperialist” theory: a re-strengthened, modern Russia, looking to assert dominance, secure valuable interests, reclaim lost territory and settle grievances regarding post-USSR border arrangements, exploited Ukraine’s weakness and provoked underground sympathizers, ultimately sponsoring the most severe riots in the Baltic region since the early 2000’s Color Revolutions (Klimkin 2017; Pinkham 2017;

Treisman 2016). The assumed loss of prestige and geopolitical power among Russians following the collapse of the Soviet Union stands prevalent in Russia's mind; the philosophical conviction of reestablishing the *Russkiy Mir*—the Russian World—has only grown stronger since the late 1990's (Pinkham 2017). A vital part of Greater Russia and the home of many ethnic Russian glories had been lost in losing Crimea—"the spiritual source" of the Russian state's membership within the Christian world, once under the incredulous command of Catherine the Great, "assert[ed] Russia's new place as one of the world's greatest civilizations" and outlined the immense patriotism and nationalism felt among Russians in the homeland and diaspora alike (Pinkham 2017). In researching Russia's movements, actions taken by the Russian government previous to the 2014 annexation appear to suggest Russia intended to regain lost grandeur; through securing economic and political interests, regaining lost territory, uniting the Russian people, spreading geographic influence, asserting dominance against international law, and blocking NATO's expansion, Russia exploited weakness in Ukraine and quickly boosted its power and prestige within the international system.

In taking advantage of a preoccupied world—the second inauguration of US President Barack Obama, rising North Korean nuclear aggression, Edward Snowden's NSA leaks, the violent ousting of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, and chemical attacks on civilians by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—Russia easily increased quiet influence within Crimean and Ukrainian politics and society, from local vote-rigging and Presidential deal-making, to civil protest-provoking and nationalist group-sponsoring. In addition, by creating and distributing anti-West and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, Moscow effectively utilized a hybrid warfare strategy that went undetected by the international community for years, allowing Russia to establish

deeper strongholds within communities of sympathizers without outside intervention or consequences (Klimkin 2017; Pinkham 2017).

This permeation of Ukraine's sovereignty, and ultimately, the physical seizure of the Crimean peninsula ignited a remarkable force of support behind Putin; this move was the first unifying act of Russian power and patriotism since the Soviet defeat of the Nazis in 1945 (Pinkham 2017). Blatantly discounting international law and the international post-war order, Russia's "imperial glory" in absorbing Crimea caused an immense surge of Russian nationalism as their leader fought tirelessly and aggressively for the *Russkiy Mir*; Russia could no longer be controlled by the Western powers or countered by the United States—Russia had assumed a greater position, a more untouchable status, among its fellow international powers (Treisman 2016; Pinkham 2017). The annexation of Crimea led to an immense increase in Putin's popularity: from an all-time low near 60% in 2013 after years of economic and housing crises, his popularity jumped to nearly 89% approval in the months following the annexation (Nardelli 2015). Russian citizens believed that Putin, once suffering to hold his own against Western sanctions and rising oil issues, had exceedingly represented the ethnic Russian community, "restor[ed] the military, and strengthen[ed] Russia's role on the global stage," bringing great honor to the Russian people and to the Russian Federation as a whole ("Crimean Consensus" 2017). It was clear that a new face of Russian foreign policy had been introduced; a weighty Putin had become "increasingly prone to risky gambles and to grabbing short-run tactical advantages with little apparent concern for long-term strategy"—if it benefitted Russian placement and prestige, it would be done, regardless of assumed consequences or potential counter-aggression (Treisman 2016).

Irredentism or Moral Imperialism?

Following the analysis above, the contrasting imperialism vs. irredentism argument is reintroduced in the analysis of motivations for Russia's actions. Whether Russia acted out of genuine concern for their ethnic kin (irredentism or moral imperialism) or other political motivations (security issues or assumption of power), continues to be debated today. Officially, Vladimir Putin has cited concerns over the oppression of ethnic Russians' freedoms and Russian interests as the main reason for the infiltration and annexation of Crimea. However, outside analyses have suggested security concerns over NATO encirclement, Westernization, potential loss of the port of Sevastopol, and the preservation of key economic ties are all responsible for the pursuit of Crimea (Pinkham 2017; Rainsford 2016; Treisman 2016).

The characteristics between irredentism and moral-sponsored imperialism are small and predominantly centered around the methods of action—irredentist activity does not require violence, but imperialist intervention is traditionally violent (Ambrosio 2016; “Imperialism” 2017; Saideman 2005). However, both types of activity are based on the treatment of their diaspora communities. Any threat to the rights and freedoms, economic wellbeing, happiness, or security of their ethnic kin, could provide the homeland (Russia) reasoning to pursue aggressive activity (against Ukraine).

In the case of Crimea, several issues could have been viewed as provocative or threatening to the rights of ethnic Russians:

1. The Ukrainian government briefly banned the Russian language;
2. Ethnic Russians lacked representation in local and national government, and elections were held, at times, in regions where ethnic Russians were unable to participate;
3. Right to protest pressing political issues was abolished, blocking ethnic Russian's ability to campaign to gain representation; and,
4. Ethnic Russians often had moderate levels of unemployment and low standards of living—a characteristic of the Crimean peninsula in general (“Crimean Profile” 2018; “Ukraine Crisis” 2014).

While these issues clearly violated the Russian diaspora community's rights, freedoms, and wellbeing, these problems (except for unemployment and standard of living) arose only after elections had been tampered with, pro-Russian ultra-nationalist groups erupted, and the weaponized "little green men" began occupying territory, government office buildings, and airports ("Ukraine Crisis" 2014). Moreover, Putin's public defense of Russian intervention—cited as concern for the diaspora's welfare—came nearly a year and a half after the first reports of Russian intrusion (Pinkham 2017; Rainsford 2016; Treisman 2016). Additionally, as Treisman discusses, the morality argument is further discounted by Putin's indifference to social, political, human, or economic issues confronting the diaspora in Crimea, as well as his lack of dedication to preserving their right to self-determination, for the previous 14 years of Putin's reign (2016).

When analyzing security- or political-based motivations for imperialist activity, however, a much more relevant argument forms. From 2010 to 2013, the Ukrainian people began wishing to pursue a more Westernized political platform, edging away from their ties and alliance with Russia; protests against Viktor Yanukovich, the President of Ukraine with a pro-Russia and anti-NATO agenda, began to erupt ("Ukraine Crisis" 2014). The lack of representation in government, the inability for ethnic Russians to protest, and the lack of potential to gain representation meant Russia was unable to maintain a stake in Ukraine's political and economic affairs, e.g. pricey gas trade deals with Ukraine. These fears were amplified after Yanukovich was removed from office.

This newfound opposition also threatened Russia's most treasured and strategic pawn: the Port of Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. The geographic placement of the port was critical, Putin believed, to maintaining their regional power advantages, should conflict in

the Baltic States erupt (Treisman 2016). The port had been a point of contention and negotiation before, during Ukraine’s vote for independence and smaller subsequent rifts (Treisman 2016; “Crimea Profile” 2018). The most important threat to Russian security, though, was the potential to, during the rise of anti-Russianism, lose Ukraine as a regional ally and succumb to NATO pressure. The biggest threat to Putin’s reign and status within the international community was Ukraine’s rejection of the pro-Russian strategy in favor of a Westernized, pro-EU, and pro-NATO approach. Losing economic trade deals, political alliances, and a steady geopolitical affront to NATO encirclement would corner Russia into a minority status against the West without respectable support from neighboring states (Rainsford 2016; Treisman 2016).

A world rejecting Russia would effectively block the state from achieving their *Russkiy Mir*, let alone assuming hegemonic status. The blatant defiance of international law and post-war order guaranteed Putin’s continued presidency, added national fodder to his imperialistic and hegemonic aspirations, nearly immediately dismantled coalitions of rebellion within Russia, and rallied support for arresting or executing opposition leaders (Pinkham 2017). And finally, in the effort to become a regional stronghold of power, Russia’s low-cost intervention in Crimea ensured both NATO’s distance and domestic freedom of investment.

Analysis

Is this an attempt to recreate a Greater Russian Empire?

The consecutive electoral tampering, propaganda campaigns, stoking of ultra-nationalist voices of dissent, and the physical infiltration, annexation, and occupation of five Ukrainian cities in close geographical proximity to Russia, all motivated predominantly by security-based fears, clearly establishes Russian imperialistic intent. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was not the close of Putin’s imperialistic agenda, however—Putin’s narrative of a “fascist junta”

in Ukraine, exterminating Russian speakers and crucifying Russian children, continually provided cover as Moscow ushered in trained protestors and troops into the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Novoazovsk (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014). Along the Russian border, and without key naval ports or reports of amplified human rights abuses or political restriction, these cities were quickly filled with pro-Russian supporters and calls for independence votes to separate from Ukraine and join the Russian homeland (Pinkham 2017; “Ukraine Crisis” 2014). Russia quickly—and illegitimately—assumed sovereignty over Luhansk, yet to declare independence from Ukraine, and gifted the city with humanitarian aid without Ukraine’s blessing, clearly asserting their control over the region, regardless of international response (“Ukraine Crisis” 2014).

The Russian homeland was filled continuously with false propaganda about Ukrainian violence and aggression towards ethnic Russians, in order to provide cover for its aggressive actions in overtaking a total of five Ukrainian cities and extending the frontier of the Russian Federation (Pinkham 2017). Taking advantage of the United States’ and European sanctions’ unfortunate repercussions on the lower- and middle-class, Moscow reinforced their anti-West sentiments and illusions of the enemy state, allowing the government more support in its intent to demobilize the United States and its Western alliances (Pinkham 2017).

However, Russia’s imperialistic agenda may be a nontraditional one; rather than pursuing physical territory to create a Greater Russian Empire, Russian imperialist activity appears to be focused on merely dethroning the UK and the US, by fostering a broader spread of Russian interests and sympathizers, and capitalizing on Western failures or lackluster partnerships. This is a uniquely modern effort to become the sole superpower in a community where traditional Western securities—a stable, strong, powerful United States President, great faith in the UN, a

resilient liberal order, and a steadfast dedication to EU- and NATO-alliances—can repel or contain an instable, ill-motivated, or improper state looking to assume hegemonic status.

This imperialist intent to destabilize or convert the innermost Western partnerships is clearly exemplified in the monetary investments, organizational support lent, and soft-power diplomatic favors granted to various Balkan States (Ahren 2018; Samorukov 2017). Abusing its UN veto power and playing into Middle Eastern interests—regional alliance power and material resources—Russian presence in the Syrian civil war and Israel offers yet another extension of pro-Russian sentiments throughout the world (Ahren 2018). In weakening the United States' stronghold on power, Russia infiltrated the 2016 Presidential election by employing its refined propaganda tactics in disinformation, fake news, and social media broadcasting, and by targeting electoral polls in 21 states, causing those already divided to experience even greater divides at the most local and national stages alike (Fessler 2017). The opportunistic approach to penetrating public opinion and altering the public's self-education on political affairs was not the end of Russian interference; support for far-right parties in the United States and Europe, a partnership with WikiLeaks, and the suspected use of Kompromat—compromising material sponsored by a foreign state—to secure Donald Trump's allegiance to Moscow each continued in a series of sharp power offenses on American soil (Ioffe 2017).

The cultivation of technology and social media has allowed Russian imperialism to infiltrate millions of individuals' lives and perceptions of the world without physical or much monetary expense. The destruction of steadfast, pro-NATO and pro-EU, leadership within the United States, unrest within the United Kingdom with Brexit, an overall shift towards illiberal nationalist party platforms, and the upcoming 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia has created the prime opportunity for Moscow to attempt this moderately intangible imperialistic venture in

becoming the next international superpower. Further, messy and divergent reactions to Moscow's new "belligerence" between EU-members and NATO-members created weakness and ultimately inaction on the Crimea case, as Western Europe was heavily reliant on Russian oil and Eastern Europe neighbors to Russia were exceedingly alarmed by resumed feelings of Cold War-like tensions and panic (Faiola 2014). Russia's ever-growing presence and influence within the international community will not stop with Crimea or United States; the lack of sincere outrage or severe repercussions in both cases has signaled Moscow's safety to pursue Putin's imperialist agenda.

Conclusion

It must not be forgotten, however, that past imperialist action has provided benefits to individual communities and the global community alike. Opening markets, cultivating crops, and mining raw materials helped establish broader economic trade throughout the world; this also sparked the evolution of technology with weapons and machinery sales. Imperialism provided better education and healthcare in some nations, taught modern languages, instilled rule of law, pushed for modern immunology, and diversified cultures.

However, imperialist action also caused grievous unrest between populations, colonized small nations dry of materials and resources, imposed assimilation rules and denied natives their basic human rights, and left waves of confusion in the wake of an Empire's collapse. Infighting, lack of political organization, muddled views of culture, and general instability plagued the already resource-poor regions after the fall of an empire, setting up these regions for long-term setbacks, crises and grievances.

Overtaken involuntarily, populations under imperialist rule are often forced into a lifestyle of assimilation and persecution; denied basic rights and freedoms, stripped of their

unique culture, and forced to obey a foreign government's rule of law, these populations often develop deep-seated grievances that last long after the dissolution of the empire. Further, as seen within the Balkans, a reverse-effect to forced assimilation arises: an extreme effort is made to diversify the muddled culture, language, customs and traditions, in an attempt to define a specific nationality or culture. Overlap of traditions or foods becomes a severe offense, and this objective of manifesting a culture unique to one "state" or region feeds a nearly unhealthy sense of ultra-nationalism and institutionalized tension with regional neighbors.

These long- and short-term consequences of traditional imperialism are especially concerning, but the introduction of a modern hybrid imperialism seen in Russia's annexation of Crimea, rooted in internet and social media infiltrations in addition to physical occupations, suggests new challenges as well. The ability to permeate a democracy through internet websites and social media from thousands of miles away is uniquely troublesome, and although the physical occupation is not present, the undetected nature and sheer amount of convincing propaganda and narrative-based claims targeting vulnerable and divided populations perhaps causes reason for even more alarm. Putin launched an entire campaign for monitoring and posting social media content on Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Google, Twitter, and blogs, and invested millions of dollars in hacking, cyber warfare strategies, and technological developments (Boot 2017). Although monetary investment on social media advertisements was significantly lower than that spent by both frontrunner candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, it is estimated that nearly 10 million individuals viewed the Russian-sponsored ads; this highlights the notion that hybrid warfare and sharp power methods are highly menacing to the internal stability of a nation, as social media stands as a platform for extending content much further than intended, regardless of the amount of money spent on crafting such content (Boot 2017).

Stoking ultra-nationalist groups and employing them with the resources and support necessary to enjoy higher popularity, media attention, and legitimacy in communities allows nations—even power strongholds like the United States—to crumble from within, as citizens begin to distrust the basic foundations of their entire political system. Russia, or any other nation, does not carry the financial, political, technical, or man-power burden required to destabilize the enemy state if the enemy state destabilizes itself first.

To counter this modern imperialist aggression, many changes must be made: a greater awareness of hybrid warfare and a great understanding of social media breaches must occur, in addition a serious pursuit into cyber warfare prevention and security of systems. The international community, independently and collectively, must make a conscious effort to recognize imperialist and opportunistic action in tumultuous situations, and must not hesitate to denounce these actions and demand the most severe repercussions. Russian aggression, and any other imperialist moves that follow, must be countered swiftly and publicly, through multifaceted intervention that defeats the benefits of dismantling and forcibly reorganizing the natural international hierarchy.

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