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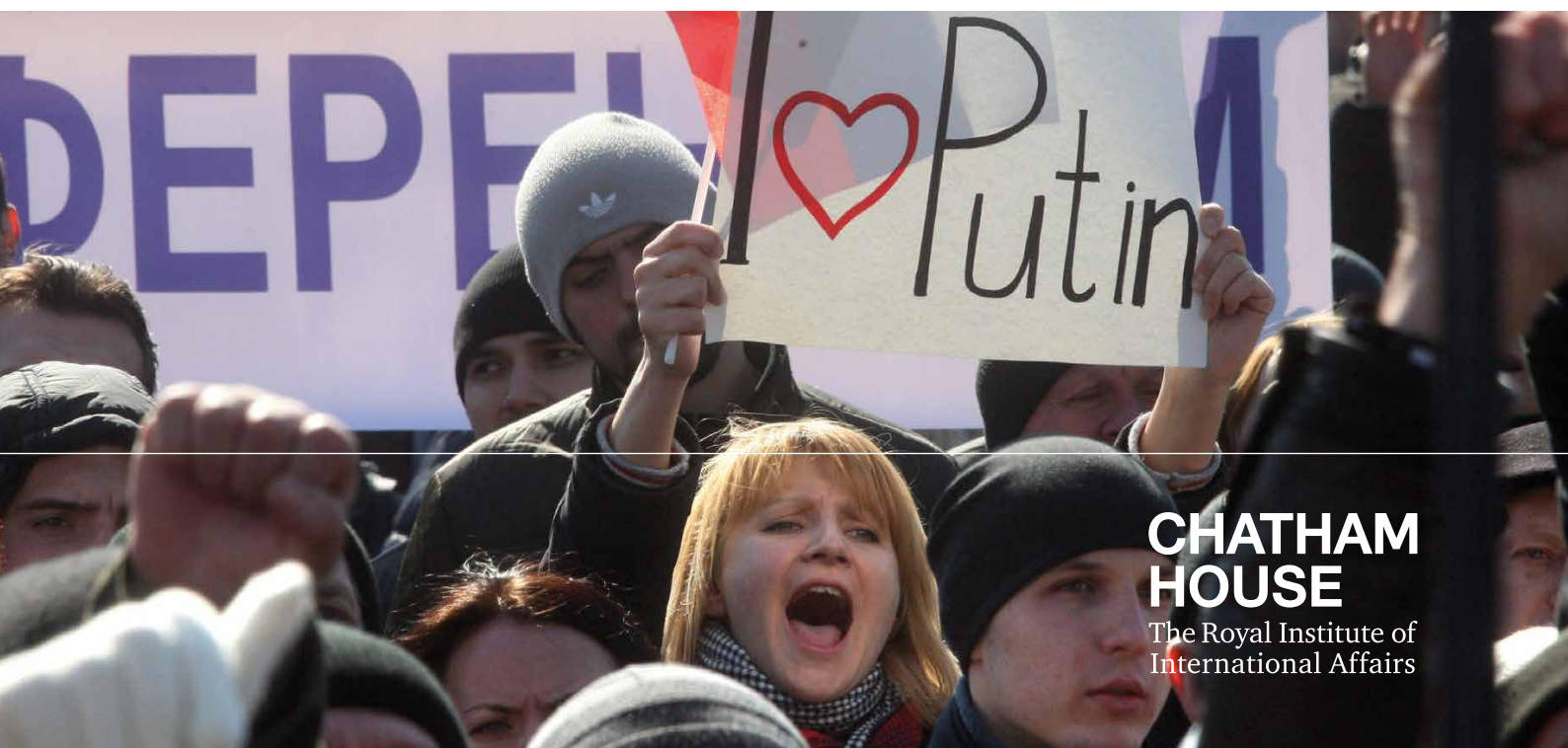
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Agents of the Russian World

Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood



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Summary

- Anxious about losing ground to Western influence in the post-Soviet space and the ousting of many pro-Russia elites by popular electoral uprisings, the Kremlin has developed a wide range of proxy groups in support of its foreign policy objectives.
- This network of pro-Kremlin groups promotes the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*), a flexible tool that justifies increasing Russian actions in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Russian groups are particularly active in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – countries that have declared their intention to integrate with the West.
- Russia employs a vocabulary of ‘soft power’ to disguise its ‘soft coercion’ efforts aimed at retaining regional supremacy. Russian pseudo-NGOs undermine the social cohesion of neighbouring states through the consolidation of pro-Russian forces and ethno-geopolitics; the denigration of national identities; and the promotion of anti-US, conservative Orthodox and Eurasianist values. They can also establish alternative discourses to confuse decision-making where it is required, and act as destabilizing forces by uniting paramilitary groups and spreading aggressive propaganda.
- The activities of these proxy groups – combined with the extensive Russian state administrative resources and security apparatus, as well as the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, pro-Russian elites, mass culture and the media – could seriously damage political transitions and civil societies in the region. Events in Crimea and Donbas have exposed the supportive role of Russian non-state actors in fomenting conflict.
- In the medium term, the contest for the ‘hearts and minds’ of citizens will persist, with the scale and outreach of anti-Western groups continuing to testify to the presence of active networks of genuine believers within this new Russian World. However, greater transparency and deeper engagement with citizens as part of independent civil society organizations could bridge opposing views and help counter the challenge of artificial divisions nurtured by the Kremlin-funded non-state actors.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Russia has re-emerged as an active player in global affairs. Its leadership is committed in particular to position it as the uncontested centre of gravity in the post-Soviet region, with its own, separate sphere of influence in a multipolar world. This approach is above all applied in Russian actions towards Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – countries that are part of the European Union's (EU) Eastern Partnership initiative and which aspire to full membership of both the EU and NATO. For the EU, these countries form a 'shared neighbourhood' with Russia, but for Russia it is a neighbourhood that it has no intention of sharing.

Russia started building up different resources to challenge increasing Western influence in the post-Soviet region. Russia uses a range of tools to achieve its goals in the region: hard diplomacy, economic levers, control of energy supply, trade wars, military force, propaganda and disinformation. While it was evident in its 'hybrid' war¹ with Ukraine in 2014 that Russia uses proxies abroad, it started developing this method a decade or so earlier as a response to the 'Orange Revolution' and other popular uprisings that threatened Kremlin-backed politicians in the region.

These proxies operate under the guise of – or in collaboration with – government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), or pseudo-NGOs. Registered under Russian law as non-profit civil society organizations (CSOs), such groups are financed by the state, or by companies loyal to it, and operate in tandem with the state. Their purpose is to project Russian 'soft power' abroad and help turn the hearts and minds of citizens in neighbouring countries towards accepting Russia's supremacy.

Russia, as other countries, promotes its 'brand' globally through multiple routes, including culture, language, tourism and economic connections. This paper focuses on the subversive and more opaque dimension of Russia's efforts through non-state actors, particularly NGOs, and how these help promote the concept of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) as a geopolitical tool. It examines the agents of Russian influence that often operate in the public space, ostensibly independent but in reality controlled and funded by the Russian state under Putin; and outlines the impact of their activities on the former Soviet space, with a particular focus on Ukraine. Additionally, it offers an assessment of how Russia's use of soft power may continue to evolve, as well as suggestions for counterbalancing this influence and promoting democratic development in the countries that are targeted.

¹ In this context, the term 'hybrid' war is used to define a strategy that combines conventional and unconventional, regular and irregular, and overt and covert means to exploit an opponent's vulnerabilities and achieve combat superiority.

Soft Power the Russian Way

The role of non-state actors in official Russian policy, alongside increased references to soft power as a means of achieving influence, has become more prominent in recent years. In 2013 a key official document, the Foreign Policy Concept, singled out for the first time the role of civil society abroad in foreign policy and pointed to the need to improve the application of soft power.² It gave the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a mandate to engage the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation³ and other NGOs to promote ‘interstate cultural and humanitarian relations between Slavic peoples’. NGOs were tasked with supporting a positive image of Russia abroad and developing tools to improve perceptions of the country.

Russian soft power is packaged in a rigid framework of Kremlin-designed narratives and themes, and excludes truly independent non-state actors.

Like the West, Russia has adopted the vocabulary of soft power. However, the Western concept of soft power is a poor guide by which to analyse Russian actions. Russia instead projects its influence by what has been termed ‘soft coercion’, using methods that include both hard and soft tools, rather than through attraction.⁴ Myriad state-supported groups are an integral part of this system. They use a mix of covert and open measures that hardly fit the conventional understanding of soft power.⁵ Russia’s application of soft power rather more resembles soft force (*myagkaya sila*), in the sense of an ability to exercise control or attain goals by non-military means.⁶ Failing to generate strong appeal for its current economic and social model, Russia linked its soft-power approach to the shared past of the post-Soviet region, its common history and Russian language.⁷

There are other key conceptual differences: Russia’s concept of soft power has a security dimension. Western soft power is seen as undermining the interests of Russia, which thus has to develop its own tools to counter this threat. Russian soft power is packaged in a rigid framework of Kremlin-designed narratives and themes, and excludes truly independent non-state actors. State funding is only available to groups that enable the Kremlin to promote its goals and these narratives in the region.

² ‘Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation’, 12 February 2013, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/o/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D.

³ A state institution composed of Russian NGOs, academia, and religious leaders, established in 2005 with functions including ‘to facilitate coordination between the socially significant interests of citizens of Russia, NGOs, and national and local authorities’. See <https://www.oprf.ru/en/about/>.

⁴ James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion* (London: Chatham House, 2013). See also other publications in the Chatham House series on Russian soft power, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/russia-eurasia-programme/means-and-ends-russias-influence-abroad-project>.

⁵ The definition of soft power as ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction’ is attributed to the American political scientist and academic Joseph S. Nye.

⁶ Zaur Shiriyev, ‘Does Russia Need Soft Power?’, *Today’s Zaman*, 19 February 2013, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/zaur-shiriyev/does-russia-need-soft-power_307507.html.

⁷ Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, ‘A Ghost in a Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine’, Chatham House Briefing Paper, January 2012, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/o112bp_bogomolov_lytvynenko.pdf.

Russia's implementation of soft power also differs from that of the West. The state controls its soft-power resources and narratives, and sets key goals for other actors. For Russia, soft power is often a state-directed exercise aimed at exploiting a targeted country's vulnerabilities. Although his administration funds proxy groups, Putin sees the government and its agencies as the main instruments of soft power.

NGOs as Agents of Political Unrest

The Kremlin views American non-state actors as tools of US foreign policy aimed at weakening Russia and undermining its sphere of influence: senior Russian officials believe that Western NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundations, the International Republican Institute and Freedom House have worked together with local partners to catalyse uprisings against Russia-friendly regimes. This perception of the ‘Colour Revolutions’ is exemplified in a 2014 report by the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which states that these represent ‘a special model of regime change that applies political, communication, moral and psychological methods of influence with grave violation of international law. It is only possible if there is an infrastructure of non-profit groups funded from abroad.’⁸

The Russian leadership identified the disruptive role of US-supported NGOs as early as 2000, when the *Otpor* (Resistance) movement toppled Slobodan Milošević in Serbia. But the fundamental shift in its perception occurred after the electoral revolutions in 2002–05 in Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine against Kremlin-backed leaders who cooperated with Russia on its terms. The spread of pro-democracy popular revolutions exacerbated the Kremlin’s anxiety that Russia was losing ground in the post-Soviet space.

The 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ was regarded by Russia as yet another example of the US strategy to undermine governing elites, this time in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. In the Kremlin’s view, local NGOs and social media launched information attacks, orchestrated from abroad under the pretext of combating electoral fraud or the crimes of incumbent regimes, causing chaos that ultimately led to the ousting of regimes and to the increased dependence of the Middle East and North Africa region on the West.⁹

In Russia itself, faced with mass protests against the outcome of the Duma elections at the end of 2011, Putin made clear his conviction that the demonstrations were being orchestrated by US NGOs to foment anti-government sentiment and bring about regime change in Russia.¹⁰

Ukraine’s ‘Euromaidan’¹¹ protests in 2013 further reinforced the Russian leadership’s conviction about growing competition with the West and the latter’s use of non-state actors as tools of foreign policy. Speaking about the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Putin argued that ‘the US instigated Colour Revolutions in the former Soviet region, using grievances of people against their governments in order to impose their values that contradict local tradition and culture. These

⁸ Translated from ‘Pod “zontikom” bezopasnosti ODKB’ [Under the CSTO’s security ‘umbrella’], *Belorusskaia voennaia gazeta*, 15 April 2014, <http://vsr.mil.by/2014/04/15/pod-zontikom-bezopasnosti-odkb/>.

⁹ ‘International Support to Democracy as Political Funfair’, Foundation for Strategic Culture, 17 March 2012, <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2012/03/17/mezhdunarodnaja-podderzhka-demokratii-politicheskij-atrakcion-i-13348.html>.

¹⁰ Andrew Osborn, ‘Vladimir Putin accuses Hillary Clinton of inciting protests’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8942456/Vladimir-Putin-accuses-Hillary-Clinton-of-inciting-protests.html>.

¹¹ Euromaidan is the term commonly used to describe the wave of popular protest that started on the main Independence Square in Kyiv, also known in Ukrainian as *Maidan*. The protests started in November 2013 in response to the decision of the then President Victor Yanukovich to postpone signature of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement.

efforts were directed against Ukraine, Russia and Eurasian integration.¹² Russian state media asserted that the US government was spending millions of dollars to sustain the revolution,¹³ and Russian websites were flooded with alleged proof of direct US involvement in supporting the Euromaidan protests.¹⁴

¹² Translated from Vladimir Putin's Speech about Crimea, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApP5sWCpjDY>, 18 March 2014.

¹³ Evgenii Mikolaichuk, 'Amerikanske den'gi na ukrainskoi krovi' [American money on Ukrainian blood], *Vremia.ua*, 1 February 2014, <http://vremia.ua/rubrics/zakulisa/5321.php>.

¹⁴ See Rukspert statistics, 'Podderzhka Evromaidana amerikantsami' [American support of Euromaidan], http://ruxpert.ru/Поддержка_Евромайдана_американцами.

The Russian World: a Flexible Tool

Russia wanted an ideological tool of its own to counter the Western narrative of democracy promotion. Thus the concept of the Russian World became an operational matrix for building up Russian legitimacy and influence in the region, and a key framework for its proxy groups. The current narrative of the Russian World encompasses language, culture, history, shared heritage, economic links, religion and conservative values.

In its late-20th-century sense, the Russian World was understood to refer only to a core of Russian-speakers in the post-Soviet region and the wider Russian diaspora. More recently, the concept has expanded to include all those who feel an affinity with what Russia stands for. As defined by Putin in 2014, the Russian World is a civilization that includes people who feel culturally close to Russia, while Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has stated that it also includes the non-Slavic world, where people have internalized its cultural and spiritual components.¹⁵ The Russian World thus has a fluid geography for its advocates.

The Russian World is put forward in opposition to Western values of liberalism and individual human rights. Similarly, the proponents of Eurasianism are bonded together not so much by a shared affinity with Russia as by the rejection of US hegemony and of globalization as promoted by the United States. This is confirmed by arch-Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin: 'what we are *against* will unite us, while what we are for divides us. Therefore, we should emphasize what we oppose'.¹⁶ Such figures argue that liberalism is dangerous and foreign to Russia and to the Russian World because of its capacity to liberate the individual from all forms of collective identity. Government officials and Orthodox Church leaders reject the idea that individual human rights prevail over the interests of society. This view has become the paradigm for Russia to position itself as a defender of traditional values at home and abroad.

Dugin consolidated many of the ideas informing today's Russian World. His vision encompasses traditionalism anchored in Orthodoxy, occult theories, Eurasianism and geopolitics.¹⁷ He champions the creation of a Eurasian state comprising the former Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe, and even advocates a Russian protectorate over the whole of the European continent, including Western Europe. In Asia, this state would annex Manchuria, Xinjiang, Mongolia and Tibet. The Russian World, in this thinking, extends far beyond the post-Soviet space, reflecting the importance of the Mongol period in the formation of Russian identity.¹⁸

¹⁵ 'Patriarkh Kirill: Russkii mir – osobaia tsivilisatsiia, kotoruiu neobkhodimo sberech' [Patriarch Kirill: Russian World – a special civilization which must be preserved], VRNS.ru, 9 September 2014, <http://www.vrns.ru/news/3254/#.VA7iT6OhE5Q>.

¹⁶ 'Interview with Alexander Dugin', Counter-Currents Publishing, February 2012, <http://www.counter-currents.com/2012/07/interview-with-alexander-dugin/>.

¹⁷ See Marlene Laruelle, 'Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian Version of the European Radical Right?', Kennan Institute Occasional Paper 294 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/OP294.pdf>.

¹⁸ 'L'idéologue de poutine: Entretien avec Alexandre Douguine', *Politique Internationale*, Vol. 144, Summer 2014, http://www.politiqueinternationale.com/revue/read2.php?id_revue=144&id=1290&search=&content=texte.

The current Russian leadership is reluctant to accept the independence of the former Soviet states, and in many of these countries the Kremlin has continued to exercise covert influence. Thus the Russian World concept offers a common identity of national cultures in the region, especially in the Slavic countries, with Russia as the centre of Eurasian civilization.

The Russian World also has an economic component. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a follow-up integration project to the Eurasian Customs Union, was launched in January 2015. Russia promotes it as an alternative regional integration project to the EU that can deliver swift economic benefits, low gas prices and, in some cases – such as in Armenia – implicit security guarantees to its members.

Key Agents of the Russian World

After the Colour Revolutions, the Kremlin began to focus on creating a network of advocates for the Russian World, embracing an eclectic set of actors in the fields of culture, language, history, religion and politics. From the early 2000s several large Kremlin-sponsored foundations, platforms and media projects were launched. These form a close circle of NGOs that have been granted privileged access to state and private funding in the field of foreign policy, in exchange for loyalty.

Three tiers of the Russian World

Three distinct tiers can be identified within the Kremlin's system of agents of the Russian World, based on funding scale and type of operations. The first tier is made up of major state federal agencies, several larger state-affiliated grant-making foundations and a few private charities linked to Russian oligarchs. (See Table 1 for a list of the top state-funded foundations.) The second tier comprises a smaller circle of trusted implementing partners and their local associates in the region. These are the groups funded by the state foundations, presidential grants or large companies loyal to the Kremlin, and include youth groups, think-tanks and other smaller foundations, associations of compatriots, and Cossack and military veterans' groups. They are usually members of various public councils or of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. The third tier is formed of groups that share the Kremlin's agenda and vision for the neighbourhood but that work outside formal cooperation channels. Such groups promote an ultra-radical and neo-imperial vocabulary, and often run youth paramilitary camps in the region.¹⁹

The main state agency targeting Russian-speaking communities globally and projecting soft power is the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo). Established in 2008, it acts as an umbrella organization for a network of Russian compatriots and funds various 'public diplomacy' projects. It operates an extensive network of 60 Russian Centres of Science and Culture and 25 representative offices in Russian embassies,²⁰ and employs 600 people internationally. Compared with, for example, the British Council, which has offices in 100 countries and 8,700 employees,²¹ this may seem a relatively small external presence, but Rossotrudnichestvo plays an active political role in Russia's foreign policy by consolidating the activities of pro-Russian players in the post-Soviet region and in disseminating the Kremlin's narrative.

In line with the new Concept of International Development Assistance, which was signed by Putin in 2014, Rossotrudnichestvo was officially given a flagship role in developing Russia's soft power,

¹⁹ Estonian Internal Security Service, *Annual Review*, 2013, https://www.kapo.ee/cms-data/_text/138/124/files/kapo-annual-review-2013-eng.pdf, p. 11.

²⁰ Doklad o rezultatakh deyatelnosti Rossotrudnichestva po realizatsii vozlozhenykh na nego obyazatelstv [Report about performance results of Rossotrudnichestvo], 2014, http://rs.gov.ru/sites/default/files/final_councilors_doklad_2014.pdf.

²¹ British Council, *Annual Report*, 2014-15, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual-report-2014-2015.pdf>.

often referred to in official documents as the ‘humanitarian dimension of foreign policy’.²² All international aid, which was previously managed by the Ministry of Finance, was now to be channelled via the agency.²³ As a result, its budget in 2014 increased by 50 per cent, to R3 billion (\$95.5 million).²⁴

Table 1: Key state foundations

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Rossotrudnichestvo	Lyubov Glebova (director)	2008	http://rs.gov.ru
Russian World Foundation	Viacheslav Nikonov (head of board)	2005	http://ruskiymir.ru
Gorchakov Foundation	Sergei Lavrov (foreign minister, member of advisory council)	2011	http://gorchakovfund.ru
Foundation for Support of Compatriots	Igor Panevkin (director)	2011	http://pravfond.ru
Moscow House of Compatriots	Vladimir Lebedev (adviser to the mayor of Moscow)	2003	http://www.mosds.ru
Intergovernmental Foundation for Humanitarian Cooperation of CIS countries	Anatoly Iksanov (director)	2006	http://www.mfsgs-sng.org

There is a lack of transparency about funding channelled via Russia’s foundations. Many, including the Russian World Foundation and the Gorchakov Foundation, do not publish annual financial reports. Based on open data sources such as the online portal listing Russian state contracts, a conservative estimate is that the state spends around \$130 million annually on projects worldwide,²⁵ focused mainly on the post-Soviet and Balkan states. This could be an underestimate, however, as overall funding combines state grants with funds from state enterprises and private companies loyal to the Kremlin. Presidential grants are also channelled abroad. For 2015 state support to NGOs doubled over the previous year, to R4.7 billion (\$103 million).²⁶

²² See for example the presidential decree of 8 September 2008 establishing Rossotrudnichestvo, http://rs.gov.ru/sites/default/files/polozenie_ukaza_n01315.pdf; or the official document of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning key directions of international cultural and humanitarian cooperation, 2008, <http://archive.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/fd3aa5ccb0c5f96b442579ec004ec849!OpenDocument>.

²³ Concept of the Russian Federation’s State Policy in the Area of International Development Assistance, <http://archive.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/e68f5e0f3866ece544257d77004b2054!OpenDocument>.

²⁴ Here, and throughout the paper, historical conversion rates are used for the date of the source of data. The agency’s annual budget in 2012 increased to around R2 billion (\$65 million as of January 2012). ‘V krizis v razy povysilas’ poseshchaemost’ kursov baleta’, Konstantin Kosachev [During the crisis, ballet class attendance has dramatically increased, Konstantin Kosachev], *Vedomosti*, 13 March 2014, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/23897621/v-krizis-v-razy-povysilas-poseshchaemost-kursov-baleta>.

²⁵ This estimate is based on information about annual budgets for the following organizations and programmes: Russian World Foundation (\$15 million), Rossotrudnichestvo (\$95.5 million), Gorchakov Foundation (\$2 million), Foundation for Compatriots (\$8 million), Moscow House of Compatriots (\$5 million), Foundation for Humanitarian Cooperation of CIS Countries (\$4 million) and Presidential Grants (\$1 million).

²⁶ ‘Pravitel’svo reshilo uvelichit’ finansirovanie NKO do 12 mlrd rublej’ [The government has decided to increase NGO financing of up to R12 billion], RosBiznesKonsalting, 7 November 2014, <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/07/11/2014/545cc767cbb20fd4ca41e818>.

Presidential grants are disseminated by a number of NGOs. Among these, the Russian Youth Association, the Knowledge Association (*Znanie*) and the Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies redistribute funds to international projects. In 2014 for example such awards to eight Russian proxy groups totalled R33.3 million (\$820,500).²⁷ Transparency International Russia has found that the grant-making process is not transparent, and that it often supports groups affiliated with the government and ruling United Russia party via their governing boards.²⁸

Proxy groups and their narrative

The number of Kremlin-affiliated NGOs active in foreign policy is fairly small: Rossotrudnichestvo reports collaboration with around 150 Russian organizations. Most groups working abroad are members of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation; some 75 per cent of its members are appointed by the state, and many are directly affiliated with the United Russia party.²⁹

Many groups were established by state agencies, ministries and state media, and their boards include high-level government officials and members of the Duma, as well as representatives of state academic institutions, the state media, the security agencies and large state-owned companies.

Another characteristic of these proxy groups is their close connection to the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the wider security (*siloviki*) apparatus. For example, the Russian Association for International Cooperation is headed by Sergei Stepashyn, a former director of the federal counter-intelligence agency, while Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu is chairman of the Russian Geographical Society. The World Congress of Compatriots often features speeches by Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the National Security Council and former head of the FSB.³⁰

Russia's proxy groups focus their efforts mostly on the post-Soviet space, especially on 'swing states' such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, where public opinion has traditionally been divided between support for integrating with Russia or with the West. They also operate in the Baltic states as well as in the wider Balkan region (especially in Serbia and Bulgaria), and their presence has grown in Kyrgyzstan since it became a member of the EAEU in August 2015.

The Kremlin understands that post-modern empires are created not only by military means but also by narratives. Thus its narrative in the region focuses on the threat to traditional values from EU and NATO enlargement. Because countries in the neighbourhood belong to the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, the pro-Kremlin line is that Western values of liberalism, tolerance and multiculturalism are foreign to them: these states' only viable political and economic choice is through a Eurasian Union and the Russian World.

²⁷ Official website for presidential grants, <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-3/>.

²⁸ 'Doklad Tsentra TI-R: Poluchayushchie gospodderzhku NKO ostayutsya neprozrachnymi' [A report by TI-Russia: NGOs receiving governmental support remain opaque], Transperensi Interneshnl Rossiya, 25 May 2015, <http://transparency.org.ru/prozrachnost-nko/doklad-tcentra-ti-r-poluchaiushchie-gospodderzhku-nko-ostaiutsia-neprozrachnymi>.

²⁹ The current head of the Chamber's Secretariat, Sergey Smirnov, is also a member of Moscow City chamber of United Russia's Youth Vanguard (Molodaya Gvardia) movement.

³⁰ 'Chto finansiruet v Latvi fond Putina "Russkiy Mir"' [What Putin's "Russian World Foundation" is financing in Latvia], Re:Baltica, 2 February 2013, <http://www.kompromat.lv/item.php?docid=readn&id=7332>.

The Kremlin's narrative is essentially anti-American. The United States is presented as an arch-enemy and a mastermind, fomenting and triggering the Colour Revolutions to undermine Russia, creating chaos in the international system and violating international law. Russian officials claim that Euro-Atlantic integration is a device to drain natural resources from post-Soviet countries and lure these states into NATO, in order to replenish its human resources to fight US-incited wars globally.³¹ Concerning NATO enlargement, Putin has stated: 'NATO and the USA wanted a complete victory over the Soviet Union. They wanted to sit on the throne in Europe alone.'³²

Russian state-funded groups amplify this Kremlin narrative. Russian state television and an army of social media 'trolls' help turn information into a weapon. They have the capacity to create confusion, spread conspiracy theories, fake opinion polls, demoralize states and civil society and manipulate opinion in the post-Soviet region and in the West, as well as feed, in the words of one commentator, 'resentment of Western superiority' in societies in the region.³³

³¹ 'Moldavia beriotsia za ruchku dveri NATO' [Moldova is pushing on NATO's door], Interview with Dmytri Rogozin, *Kommersant*, 12 May 2014, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2468413>.

³² Translated from Putin's interview 'For me, it is not borders that matter', *Bildt*, 17 January 2016, <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russian-president-vladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html>.

³³ David Remnick, 'Watching the Eclipse', *New Yorker*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse>.

Key Routes of Influence

Russian-speaking communities and ethno-geopolitics

Russian-speaking communities form the bedrock of Russia's network abroad. Contemporary proponents of the Russian World draw on the ideas of the 18th-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder on the correlation between language and the process of thinking. Thus, if a pro-Russian way of thinking is to be nurtured abroad, it is crucial to invest in the reinforcement of the Russian language.

Russia promotes its language by working with universities and schools globally. For example, the Pushkin Institute and the International Association of Russian Language Teachers provide useful assistance in teaching methodology. Language-promotion may also be used as a political tool, however; Table 2 lists key actors helping to consolidate Russian-speaking communities around the world.

The Russian World Foundation is a good illustration of how legitimate efforts to promote the Russian language may be used for subversive purposes. Set up in 2005, the foundation channels state resources to support Russian language and culture, as well as Russian-language media. It also provides philosophical and scientific support to the broader Russian World concept, cooperates with the diaspora and aims to promote Russia internationally. It is financed by the Ministry of Education and has an annual budget of R500 million (\$15 million).³⁴ It employs 80 people and supports 100 Russian Centres in universities and national libraries globally.³⁵ Each year the foundation receives around 1,000 applications for funding from around the world.³⁶ Its geographical focus is the post-Soviet space. In all, around 20 per cent of its grants go direct to organizations in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Table 2: Key Russian compatriot networks

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
World Congress of Russian Compatriots	Aleksey Lobanov (head of secretariat)	2009	http://vksrs.com
International Union of Russian Compatriots	Vadim Kolisnechenko (head of council)	2001	http://www.msrs.ru
Institute of Russian Compatriots	Sergei Panteleev (director)	2005	http://www.russkie.org
Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia	Aleksandr Ionov (director)	2012	http://anti-global.ru

Almost half of the Russian Centres in the CIS countries are in Ukraine. Although Russian is widely spoken in Ukraine, the country has since 2012 remained a key target of the Russian World

³⁴ Obrazovaniye i obshchestvo: byudzhety obrazovaniya [Education and Society: Education budget], 2008, http://www.jeducation.ru/2_2008/4.html.

³⁵ Russian World Foundation, *Annual Report*, 2014, http://russkiymir.ru/events/docs/report_2014.pdf.

³⁶ Author's interview with Russian World Foundation, July 2014.

Foundation, which spends around \$1 million annually on projects there; Kazakhstan is the next largest recipient of Russian World Foundation funding.³⁷ In Ukraine financial resources have been directed into projects emphasizing east–west linguistic divisions in the country. Associations of Russian-language teachers, groups belonging to the ‘Russian-speaking Ukraine’ organization, and members of the Coordination Committee of Russian Compatriots in Ukraine have been the main recipients of foundation grants. ‘Russian-speaking Ukraine’ was established in 2008 by a former member of parliament for President Viktor Yanukovich’s Party of Regions, Vadym Kolesnichenko, to defend rights of Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. It has claimed to have brought together 120 civic organizations, with more than 10,000 members.³⁸ Kolesnichenko acted as the main conduit between the foundation and pro-Russian groups in Ukraine, and recommended projects to Moscow for funding. He also channelled the resources of other funders, including the Gorchakov Foundation and the Moscow House of Compatriots. The only criterion for the funding of projects was that their content and events should be in the Russian language. In effect, it was funding to buy the loyalty of Russian-speakers in Ukraine.³⁹

Elected to represent Sevastopol in the Ukrainian parliament in 2007, Kolesnichenko has been one of the most active advocates for Russia in Ukraine. He was the author of the 2012 language law that raised the status of the Russian language, to protests from Ukrainian-speakers. In 2013 he sponsored a ‘foreign agents’ law for NGOs, modelled on Russian legislation, and proposed amendments that limited civic freedom.⁴⁰ These were a trigger for violence within the Euromaidan protests, and were repealed after Yanukovich was ousted. Following the annexation of Crimea, Kolesnichenko joined the Russian nationalist party Rodina (Motherland). In 2015 the Ukrainian authorities began a criminal investigation into his affairs, on the grounds that his activities undermined the country’s sovereignty.

The broader ethnic question is used by the Kremlin to foment tensions and separatist sentiments in Ukraine. Russia supports the fringe separatist wings of Slavophile and Russophile organizations of the Rusyn minority in the Zakarpattia (Carpathian Ruthenia) region.⁴¹ Moscow harbours Petr Getsko, a self-styled ‘leader’ of the Rusyn, who is rejected by the wider community in Ukraine.⁴² In 2014 Getsko informed the Russian media that Zakarpattia would follow the Donbas example and declare secession from Ukraine.⁴³ In reality, the People’s Council of Ruthenians, which represents over 90 per cent of Rusyn groups, has declared its support for Ukraine’s European integration and decentralization. A poll later the same year showed only 2.3 per cent support in Zakarpattia for a

³⁷ Author’s interview with Russian World Foundation, July 2014. There are no reliable open sources detailing precise funding to individual countries.

³⁸ ‘Russkoyazychnaia Ukraina na svojom primere prizvala vse obshchestvennye organizatsyi otchitatsia za svoju dejatel’nost’ [Russian Speaking Ukraine by its own example called other NGOs to report about their activities], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 12 February 2012, <http://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/kolesnichenko/4f3fc68719ff1/>.

³⁹ Author’s interview in Kyiv, Ukraine, August 2014.

⁴⁰ ‘Eks-regional: Zakonoproekt Kolesnichenko-Olijnyka- eto delo “mozgovykh tsentrov” FSB’ [Ex-member of Party of Regions: the Kolesnichenko-Olijnyka bill designed by FSB ‘think-tanks’], *Glavkom*, 18 January 2014, <http://glavcom.ua/news/178772.html>.

⁴¹ The Rusyn ethnic group speaks an Eastern Slavic language and declares a separate ethnicity from Ukrainians and Russians.

⁴² ‘Golova Narodnoyi Rady rusyniv Zakarpattya: zayaviy pro z’yizd ta avtonomiyu je provokatsiyeyu’ [Statements about the congress and declaration of autonomy are provocations], *Mukachevo*, 14 March 2015, <http://www.mukachevo.net/ua/News/view/106459>.

⁴³ ‘Donbass uidet, i zakarpat’e odnoznachno uidet vsled za nim – Petr Getsko’ [Donbas will leave, and Zakarpattia will follow – Petr Getsko], *The Anti-fascist*, 25 June 2014, <http://antifashist.com/item/donbass-ujdet-i-zakarpate-odnoznachno-ujdet-vsled-za-nim-petr-gecko.html>.

federal state.⁴⁴ In the same spirit, in September 2015 the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia hosted a global separatist congress in Moscow, an event funded in part by presidential grants.⁴⁵

Most recently, ethnically instigated separatism has manifested itself in Odessa. Pro-Russian activists calling themselves the Odessa Partisans make the claim that the city is Russian because 99 per cent of its population ‘speak and think’ in Russian. The Odessa Partisans make frequent references to the period when Odessa was part of the Russian empire to justify Russian interference in Ukraine.⁴⁶ One Moscow-based activist for the group said of the Odessa Partisans that: ‘they are fighting for the Russian World, which is everywhere where the Russian language is spoken’.⁴⁷ Following their arrest by Ukrainian security services, some members of the group are reported as having stated that they were operating under the direction of Russian intelligence services.⁴⁸ The leaders of another Russian-supported group, Bessarabia Republic, were arrested in early 2015 for plotting separatist activities in the Odessa region.⁴⁹

The historical narrative

To justify and reinforce its dominant position among the post-Soviet states, Putin’s Russia imposes its own version of history – a mix of Russian imperial and Soviet legacies centring around narratives of Kievan Rus as the cradle of Eastern Slavic civilization and the common experience of fighting fascism in the Second World War.

The narrative of the unity of Eastern Slavs, and the Orthodox affinity of Georgia and Armenia with Russia, questions the validity of these states as fully independent polities. Ukraine is often presented as a historical mistake – a country that emerged by accident and that has no basis for its existence. At the 2013 Valdai Club meeting, Putin declared that Russians and Ukrainians were ‘one people’, and that Ukraine was part of ‘our great Russian, or Russian-Ukrainian world’.⁵⁰ In 2014 he rejected the sovereignty of Ukraine over its southeastern territory as a consequence of Lenin’s ‘unclear impulse’ to give the lands of the Novorossiia region to Soviet Ukraine while ‘the [Russian] people remained’ there.⁵¹

Adherence to this historical narrative is prominent in the work of many Russian foundations (see Table 3). One of the foremost custodians of the history debate is the Foundation for Historical Perspective, established in 2004 by Natalia Narochnitskaya, a former Soviet diplomat and erstwhile

⁴⁴ Opinion poll ‘Zapadnye Tsennosti’ [Western Values], *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, December 2014, <http://opros2014.zn.ua/west>.

⁴⁵ ‘U Moskvi vidbuvsya vsesvitnij z’yzd separatystiv’ [Moscow hosted Global Congress of Separatists], *Pressa Ukrayiny*, 21 September 2015, <http://uapress.info/uk/news/show/96573>.

⁴⁶ See the group’s VKontakte social media account at <https://vk.com/id325818787>.

⁴⁷ ‘Odessit na sjezde Drugoi Rossii priznalsia v diversijakh protiv Ukrainy’ [Odessa citizen at “Other Russia” party conference admitted to subversive operations against Ukraine], *Public Radio*, 15 September 2015, <http://hromadskeradio.org/ru/2015/09/15/odessit-na-sjezde-drugoy-rossii-priznalsya-v-diversiyah-protiv-ukrainy>.

⁴⁸ ‘SBU zatrymala na Odeshchyni dyversantiv, yakyky keruvaly rosijski spetsluzhby’ [SBU arrested activists in Odessa who worked in cooperation with the Russian security services], *Public Radio*, 15 September 2015, <http://hromadskeradio.org/ru/2015/09/15/sbu-zatrymala-na-odeshchyni-dyversantiv-yakymy-keruvaly-rosijski-specsluzhby>.

⁴⁹ ‘Odesa minorities cry foul as new “people’s council” report their persecution’, *Human Rights in Ukraine*, 17 April 2015, <http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1429061566>.

⁵⁰ Transcript of Putin’s speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 September 2013, <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/6007>.

⁵¹ Transcript of TV programme ‘Direct line to Vladimir Putin’, 17 April 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20796>. Novorossiia in the 18th century was a province of the Russian empire that brought together the territories of the current Crimea, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizha, Donetsk, Mykolaiv, Kirovograd and part of Luhansk.

member of the Russian Duma.⁵² A frequent recipient of presidential grants,⁵³ as well as grants from the Gorchakov Foundation, Narochnitskaya is one of the most prominent exponents of the Kremlin's historical line. Experts from her foundation have given lectures at the Gorchakov Foundation information centre in Kyiv, emphasizing the unity of the Ukrainian and Russian people, and warning about the dangers of what they see as a revisionist portrayal of the history of the Second World War. After the annexation of Crimea, the Foundation for Historical Perspective was awarded R4.7 million (\$110,000) to implement a project there concerned with the historical connections between Crimea and Russia.⁵⁴

The Soviet historical narrative about the Second World War, in particular, plays a prominent role in how Russia projects itself at home and internationally. This emphasizes Russian achievements in saving Europe from fascism, without discussing the human losses, and recalls the time when Russia was among the great powers, redrawing the post-war map of Europe in its favour.

Russia's leadership has often idealized the history of the Second World War to mobilize loyalty, maintain order and counter national apathy. Although the Soviet historical narrative is recognized in the West as highly politicized and biased,⁵⁵ Russia resists what it considers to be efforts by other sovereign states to reassess the events of the war. Attempts at re-evaluation by societies and academics, especially in Ukraine and the Baltic states, are portrayed as expressions of fascism and evidence of a Nazi revival. The Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, which operated between 2009 and 2012, focused on preventing deviations from the official Russian narrative. *Inter alia*, it condemned publications that pointed to any direct negative Russian role in the war, or in the 1933 famine in Ukraine.

Table 3: Key groups promoting the Russian historical narrative

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Foundation for Historical Perspective	Natalia Narochnitskaya (president)	2004	http://www.fiip.ru
Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (Paris)	Natalia Narochnitskaya (president)	2007	http://www.idc-europe.org/ru/
World Without Nazism	Boris Shpigel (president)	2010	http://worldwithoutnazism.org
International Antifascist Front	Boris Kolisnechenko and Vladimir Vorontsov (founders)	2011	www.antifashyst.org
Russian Association for International Cooperation	Sergei Stepashyn (president)	1925	http://rams.org.ru

⁵² The foundation's website is at <http://www.fiip.ru/>.

⁵³ Website of state grants to Russian NGOs, <http://grants.oprf.ru/grants115/operators/isepi/winners/rec6278/> [R3,700,000]; <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2015-1/winners/?search=&district=&subject=&operator=4&offset=10> [R7,396, 970]; and <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-2/winners/?search=Фонд+изучения+исторической+перспективы&district=&subject=&operator> [R3,500,000].

⁵⁴ Website of state grants to Russian NGOs, <http://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-3/winners/?search=Фонд+изучения+исторической+перспективы&district=&subject=&operator>.

⁵⁵ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Historical Memory Foundation	Aleksandr Diukov (director)	2008	http://www.historyfoundation.ru
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In 2014 Russia funded several history projects to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. For example, the Russian Association for International Cooperation⁵⁶ received funding from Rossotrudnichestvo to work on preventing ‘historical distortion’.⁵⁷ Aleksandr Affanasiev, one of the key figures participating in the project, has stated that: ‘liberalism in Russia led to extreme freedom in public life, which resulted in conscious falsification of history. Pseudo-historians are aiming to destroy Russia without the need to use military force.’⁵⁸ The association organizes events in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Latvia, and has published essays on topics such as the role of Russia in the Second World War, and the clash of US and Russian models of development.⁵⁹

The narrative of fascist revival

Particularly since 2011, Russia has made use of the narrative of a fascist revival in Eastern Europe to discredit Ukraine and the Baltic states, and to create and consolidate pro-Kremlin networks abroad. This narrative emphasizes a Russian struggle against fascism that began with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and which continues today with the conflict in Ukraine.⁶⁰

The World Without Nazism coalition, established in 2011, describes itself as an international human rights movement of 136 organizations from 28 countries, and has affiliates in Ukraine, Moldova, Finland, Bulgaria, the Baltic states and the United States.⁶¹ World Without Nazism and other similar groups promote the narrative of the rise of neo-fascism – and of ‘enemies within’ – in the former Soviet sphere of influence in Europe. For example, anti-fascist marches in Ukraine in 2013 were orchestrated by the Party of Regions, with the active participation of various groups from this network, apparently to promote fear among the Russian-speaking population of creeping Ukrainian nationalism.⁶²

The rhetoric about fascism was fully deployed to discredit the Euromaidan protests and the subsequent new leadership in Ukraine. Anti-Ukrainian and anti-US publications, many by purportedly ‘independent’ experts, flooded bookshops in Russia.⁶³ They were also circulated in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states via a widely developed Russian-language book-trade network.

⁵⁶ This dates back to 1925 and unites around 100 friendship associations globally.

⁵⁷ Seminar ‘Obshchestvennaya Diplomatiya – Za Pravdu o Rossii [Public Diplomacy for the Truth about Russia], 18 April 2014, <http://rs.gov.ru/node/1061>.

⁵⁸ Translated from ‘Relations at Various Levels Are Needed to Fight History Falsifications’, 26 February 2014, Rossotrudnichestvo, <http://rs.gov.ru/press/news/4304>.

⁵⁹ ‘Zbornik materialov triokh moskovskikh kruglykh stolov i publicnykh meropriyatij v shesti zarubezhnykh stranakh’ [Publication of articles of three roundtables in Moscow and six public events abroad], Public Diplomacy Foundation, Moscow, 2014, <http://public-diplomacy.ru/assets/files/sbornik.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Simon Shuster, ‘Russians Rewrite History to Slur Ukraine over War’, *Time*, 29 October 2014, <http://time.com/3545855/russia-ukraine-war-history/#3545855/russia-ukraine-war-history/>.

⁶¹ World Without Nazism website, <http://worldwithoutnazism.org/about/>.

⁶² ‘Antifashysts’ki temniki’ [Antifascist Guidebook], *Levyj Bereg*, 21 March 2014, http://lb.ua/news/2014/03/21/260239_antifashistski_temniki_.html.

⁶³ ‘Nizhe poroga brezglivosti – Galina Iuzefovich o knigakh, kotoryje luchzhe ne chitat’ [Beneath Contempt – Galina Iuzefovich on books that aren’t worth reading], *Meduza*, 30 January 2015, <https://meduza.io/feature/2015/01/30/nizhe-poroga-brezglivosti>.

In July 2015 Ukraine banned imports of 38 books written by Russian ideologists, among them Dugin and Narochmitskaya.⁶⁴

Subverting nation-building and promoting Eurasian integration

In its attempts to nurture pro-Russian attitudes among elites, journalists and youth in the post-Soviet states, the Kremlin's narrative aims to convince people that their current national governments are incompetent. Its proxies work to undermine state-building and reforms, and to promote Eurasian integration under Russia's auspices instead. This work is mostly carried out by groups affiliated with the incumbent United Russia party and the state media, which promote the modern Russian ideology as a beacon of conservatism and global anti-Western resistance. In October 2011 *Izvestia* published an article by Putin on the 'new integration project',⁶⁵ setting out his vision for the new Eurasian Union. The article made the case for closer integration in the post-Soviet space, based on 'common values, economic and political cooperation'; and also pointed to the need for greater humanitarian cooperation as well as enhanced educational and cultural links.

In the wake of Putin's article, several new organizations and networks emerged to support Eurasian integration at grassroots level. Longer-established organizations such as Vladimir Zatulin's Institute of the CIS, with a traditional focus on Ukraine, have been joined by new groups that provide platforms for anti-EU movements in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Some establish affiliates abroad, and some attend events organized by local pro-Russian groups. Many of them feature publications by figures such as Aleksandr Dugin, Father Tikhon Shevkunov (Putin's 'personal confessor') and presidential adviser Sergei Glaziev.

Table 4: Key ideological groups

Name	Areas	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Centre for Social and Conservative Politics	United Russia Party think-tank	Borys Gryzlov	2005	http://www.cscp.ru
Institute for Civic Projects	Development of 'liberal conservative' ideology	Valery Fadeev	2005	http://www.inop.ru
Centre for Strategic Assessment and Forecasts	Geopolitics	Sergei Griniaev	2012	http://csef.ru
Institute for the Study of Foreign Relations and Initiatives	Geopolitics and media	Veronica Krashennikova	2011	http://www.invissin.ru

⁶⁴ A copy of a letter from the Ukrainian State Television and Radio Committee to the Head of Ukrainian Fiscal Service Roman Nasirov with the list of banned Russian books, <http://sfs.gov.ua/data/material/000/150/210549/dergkomtelradio.PDF>.

⁶⁵ 'Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlia Rossii – budushchie, kotoroe rozhdaetsia sehodnia' [New Integration Project for Russia – A Future that is being born today], Vladimir Putin, *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011, <http://izvestia.ru/news/502761>.

Russian Institute for Strategic Studies	Official think-tank of the president of the Russian Federation	Leonid Reshetnikov	1992	http://riss.ru
Essence of Time (<i>Sut Vremeni</i>)	Neo-Soviet leftist movement, linked with Vladislav Surkov	Sergei Kurginian	2010	https://eot.su

Table 5: Key Eurasian integration groups

Name	Areas	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Institute of CIS	One of the first post-Soviet groups to focus on Russian interests in the CIS	Konstantin Zatulin	1996	http://www.zatulin.ru
Foundation for the Support of Eurasian Cooperation	Economic, military, youth cooperation; focus on Armenia	Mreg Simonyan	2012	http://fondres.ru
Russian People's Front/ Internationalist Russia	Subgroup of Russian People's Front with 120 NGO members	Aleksey Anisimov, head of Executive Committee	2011	http://onf.ru
Eurasians New Wave	Media; focus on Kyrgyzstan	Yuri Anufriev	2010	http://www.enw-fond.ru
Griboedov Club, Armenia Skovoroda Club, Ukraine	Platform for propaganda and neo-imperial content	Dmitry Kiselyov, Russian Today Agency	2010	http://skovoroda.net http://griboedoff.net
Eurasian Foundation for Development	Humanitarian assistance to Transnistria	Aleksandr Argunov	2012	http://www.eurasianintegration.ru
Eurasian Heritage	Established by Oleg Derepaska to promote expert, academic and business cooperation around the Eurasian integration project	Aleksandr Dorofeev	2004	http://www.fundeh.org

The Eurasian integration theme became prominent in the discourse of many pro-Kremlin groups, especially in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – countries that aspire to join the EU and which are part of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative. (See Tables 4 and 5 for details of key ideology-shaping groups.) These Russian non-state advocates focused their narrative on the damaging effects of European integration on the economy and traditional values, and presented regional elites with reports and studies explaining the benefits of joining the Eurasian Union. In Ukraine Victor Medvedchuk and his NGO Ukrainian Choice was a front-runner in promoting such anti-EU narratives (see Box 1).

Box 1: Putin's man in Ukraine

Victor Medvedchuk, who *inter alia* served as head of the administration of President Leonid Kuchma in 2002–05, is one of the strongest lobbyists for Kremlin interests in Ukraine. Putin is godfather to Medvedchuk's daughter, and the two men met regularly in 2013 on the margins of sporting events in Russia.^a In 2012, as part of efforts to influence public opinion against the proposed EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, Putin made a widely publicized visit to Crimea to meet Medvedchuk.^b Such endorsements made

it clear that he is Putin's man in Ukraine.

Medvedchuk, now outside formal politics, established the NGO Ukrainian Choice in 2012. Officially, this civil society organization aims to support citizen rights and to develop direct democracy. In reality, it is one of the actors aiming to consolidate pro-Russian groups. It promotes the federalization of Ukraine and the use of a specific form of 'direct democracy' whereby legally elected government officials are discredited as incapable of running the country and local referendums are suggested as a viable alternative. Its network includes around 300 groups in Ukraine, many of which are religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church or Cossack units. Ukrainian Choice also unites Rusyn community groups. It has representative offices in all oblasts of Ukraine, and leaders of local chapters often come from the law-enforcement sector.

Ukrainian Choice ran a campaign against the EU–Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement for Ukraine before the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in 2013. Its key messages included anti-LGBT propaganda, as well as warnings about skyrocketing prices and job losses as a result of closer integration with the EU. The DCFTA was presented as an irrational agreement made by Ukrainian elites. Medvedchuk stated that it would cost Ukraine more than \$10 billion through trade tariffs, export quotas and higher gas prices introduced by Russia in retaliation, and made the case that the EU Association Agreement contradicts nine articles of the Ukrainian constitution.^c Ukrainian Choice used large public events to spread such messages. In 2013 Medvedchuk also launched the Eurasian Forum in Kyiv, in partnership with the Russian Youth Public Council, to communicate to the wider public the risks of European integration.^d

^a 'Medvedchuk zustrivsya z Putynim i poobitsyav uporatysya z "isterieyu opozytsiyi"' [Medvedchuk met with Putin and promised to deal with the 'hysteria of the opposition'], Unian Informatsijne Agentstvo, 24 November 2013, <http://www.unian.ua/politics/855272-medvedchuk-zustrivsya-z-putynim-i-poobitsyav-uporatysya-z-isterieyu-opozytsiji-video.html>.

^b 'Putin pislya Yanukovycha pryixav do Medvedchuka v mayetok iz fontanamy' [Putin, after Yanukovich, visits Medvedchuk's villa with the fountains], *Ukrayins'ka Pravda*, 13 July 2012, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2012/07/13/6968773/>.

^c 'Pravovaya otsenka raz'yasnenij Ministerstva Yustitsii Ukrainy otnositel'no sootvetstviya Konstitutsii Ukrainy proekta Soglasheniya ob assotsiatsii mezhdru Ukrainij i ES i ego gosugarstvami-chlenami' [The legal assessment of clarifications, provided by the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine regarding the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement's compliance of with the Ukrainian Constitution], *Pravova Derzhava*, 14 August 2014, http://ukr-pravo.com.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9530:2013-08-14-14-07-43&catid=3:initsiatyvy&Itemid=4.

^d 'Interv'yu koordinatora initsiativnoj gruppy po sozdaniyu Evrazijskogo Molodezhnogo Parlamenta Romana Shkolina' [An interview with Roman Shkolin, the coordinator of the initiative group on the creation of a Eurasian Youth Parliament], Allrus.info, 22 July 2013, http://allrus.info/main.php?ID=663136&arc_new=1.

Obstructing European integration

Russia's elite-cooperation efforts extend beyond Ukraine to include other Eastern Partnership states. In Moldova the pro-Russian youth movement Rodina Eurasian Union, in cooperation with the Moscow-based Eurasian Discussion Club, calls for the annulment of the country's Association Agreement with the EU. It argues that it will have 'catastrophic consequences' and equates EU integration to occupation. Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin is a high-profile champion of these Moldovan groups.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ YouTube, Rogozin visit to Chisinau in August 2014 included public events hosted by pro-Russian NGO Motherland – Eurasian Union and Sodruzhestvo Foundation, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMQ2dLf79ks>.

The Recognition Foundation (*Priznanie*), already a visible force in Crimea,⁶⁷ became active in Moldova in 2009.⁶⁸ It focuses on issues of neutrality, integration with Russia and the Russian language, and since 2012 has specifically targeted Moldova's mainly Russian-speaking Gagauzia region. The region held a consultative referendum in 2014, financed by private Russian business interests. The outcome of the vote was in favour of integration with the Russia-led Customs Union rather than the EU, and created tensions between this region and Chisinau.

Such messages and events are replicated in the South Caucasus. Inspired by Ukrainian Choice, the Eurasian Choice organization emerged in Georgia to promote a similar agenda there. It is linked with the country's Society of Irakli II, which promotes closer relations between Russia and Georgia and is vocal in its opposition to European integration.

The pro-Russia Eurasia Institute in Tbilisi, headed by Gulbat Rtskhiladze, organizes protests, circulates anti-NATO public opinion polls, and is vocal about what it portrays as the threat of EU integration for Georgia.⁶⁹ The views of Rtskhiladze and other Georgians who share them are widely publicized through the Russian state-funded Caucasus Research Network.

When the reforms programme implemented by the government under Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia attracted positive attention elsewhere in the post-Soviet region in 2011–12, the country became a target for efforts to undermine the society's belief in the value of reforms. In 2012 the Gorchakov Foundation financed and published a book by Nikita Mendkovych, of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, examining the failure of Georgia's reforms.⁷⁰ Presenting Georgia as a fake 'Caucasus Tiger', this was a counter-argument to a popular book by Russian economist Larisa Burakova about the success of the reform programme. Burakova's work, *Why Georgia Made It*,⁷¹ was widely discussed in both Russia and Ukraine; it was translated into Ukrainian and helped promote confidence that positive change is possible in the post-Soviet space.

Moulding the next generation in the post-Soviet space

Since the 2000s there has been a growing tide of conservative and nationalist movements inside Russia. Many youth and religious groups emerged, at the Kremlin's instigation, to build majority support for Putin and to foster support for his anti-Western narrative. This tide has spilled over Russia's borders into the neighbourhood, where sympathetic groups focus in particular on the next generation.

Such groups work to instil in students in the post-Soviet states adherence to ideas of Eurasianism, of the Russian struggle against US dominance, and of the Russian model of 'sovereign democracy'.⁷²

⁶⁷ Valentina Samar, 'Atraksion predvidennoi shchedrosti' [The showcase of anticipated generosity], *Mirror Weekly*, 23 October 2009, http://gazeta.zn.ua/POLITICS/attraksion_predvidennoy_schedrosti.html.

⁶⁸ 'Rossijskij humanitarnyj fond "Priznanie" nachal raboty v Moldavii' [The Russian humanitarian foundation "Priznanie" has begun work in Moldova], *Novyj Den*, 17 September 2009, <http://www.region.urfo.org/kishinev/249620.html>.

⁶⁹ 'Institut Evrazii proved opros na temu otnosheniya gruzin k SSHA i NATO' [The Eurasia Institute carried out a survey on the attitudes of Georgians to the USA and NATO], 24 December 2014, <http://www.georgians.ru/news.asp?idnews=161536>.

⁷⁰ An online version of the book is available at <http://libed.ru/knigi-nauka/161842-1-rossijskiy-institut-strategicheskikh-issledovaniy-a-mendkovich-cena-reform-ili-pochemu-gruzii-poluchilos-moskva.php>.

⁷¹ Larisa Burakova, *Why Georgia Succeeded* (Moscow: Al'pina biznes buks, 2011), <http://www.liberal.ru/upload/files/Georgia---1-26.pdf>.

⁷² The concept of 'sovereign democracy' was elaborated in 2007 by Vladislav Surkov, then First Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration. It justified the limitation of civic and political liberties in Russia by the special 'Russian way' in history and civilization.

They operate networks of Eurasian Clubs, organize large-scale youth forums and create various youth parliaments.⁷³ (The principal such groups are shown in Table 6.)

Table 6: Key youth groups

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Eurasian Youth Movement	Aleksandr Dugin, founder	2005	http://med.org.ru
Young Eurasia	Yuri Kofner, leader	2011	http://yeurasia.org
Commonwealth (Sodruzhestvo)	Konstantin Kosachiov, head of board	2012	http://sodruzhestvo.org
Russian National Council of Youth Organizations	Grigori Petushkov, head	1992	http://www.youthrussia.ru
Russian Federal Agency for Youth	Sergei Pospelov, head	2008	http://www.fadm.gov.ru
Eurasian Youth Parliament	Andranik Nikogosyan, head	2012	http://eayp.org www.eamr.pf
Foundation for International Youth Exchanges	Andrey Nechaev, chairman	2006	http://www.rus-germ-ja.org

The Gorchakov Foundation (see Table 1) is an active player in this field. Established by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011, this grant-giving and operational organization funds around 25 projects annually, mostly focused on youth, leadership and history.⁷⁴ The foundation received R58 million (\$2 million) in direct funding from the ministry in its inaugural year.⁷⁵ Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov is a member of the board, which sets its grant-making priorities; its work is also supported by large Russian businesses, and these are similarly represented on the board.⁷⁶ Information about funding in this sphere of influence is hard to verify, but there is evidence of Russian companies such as Gazprom Export supporting youth camps for Russians living abroad.⁷⁷

The Gorchakov Foundation also sponsors numerous youth platforms that promote Slavic integration. Bulgaria is a frequent host of youth camps, and has since 2010 hosted annual meetings for young members of the Russian diaspora from some 40 countries. Dialogue for the Future, the Slavic Integration Forum, and Balkan, Caucasus and Baltic Dialogues are among the most prominent forums for networking and nurturing pro-Russian views among young people in the region.

InterSeliger, the international arm of Russia's domestic Seliger youth camp, is one of the largest youth platforms and a major soft-power actor. It is funded and co-organized by the Russian Federal Agency for Youth; the Russian state invests in the camp, which it views as a youth-moulding forum

⁷³ In 2012, for example, the Eurasian Youth Parliament was established to enable young people to network.

⁷⁴ See full list of projects supported in 2014 available on the Gorchakov's Foundation website, <http://gorchakovfund.ru/news/11898/>.

⁷⁵ See statistics from the Committee of Civic Initiatives, <http://csp.sdlabs.ru/contract/0173100002211000042/>. No more recent financial information is available.

⁷⁶ The board includes, among others, the former head of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin, Alisher Usmanov of Metalinvest and owner of Arsenal football club, and Fatakh Shodiev of the natural-resources company ENRC.

⁷⁷ 'V Mezhdunarodnyj molodyozhnyj forum "Molodyozh" stroit budushchee' [The International Youth Forum 'Youth' builds the future], Department of Youth Policy and Tourism, Yamalo-Nenetskiy autonomous region, 28 November 2014, <http://www.yamolod.ru/content/v-mezhdunarodnyj-molodyozhnyj-forum-molodyozh-stroit-budushchee>.

for Putin's Russia. In 2014 and 2015 InterSeliger hosted special events for young Russians in the diaspora, promoting anti-US and pro-Kremlin narratives to participants. For 2016, notably, it is planned to run camps in locations including Crimea, Kaliningrad and the disputed Kuril islands.

Also notable is the Putin administration's focus on young journalists as a means of entrenching the Russian narrative in the post-Soviet media space. Special media schools in the Caucasus and Central Asia promote Russian standards in journalism and emphasize the Russian line on the war in Ukraine. Their events feature journalists from RIA Novosti, *Russian Reporter* and Russia Today (RT): for example, the 'New Wave', a training event for young people from Lithuania, Armenia, Georgia, Transnistria, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, featured a lecture by journalist and political pundit Anatoly Vasserman entitled 'Censorship as an instrument for media freedom', as well as professional advice from Vladimir Mamontov, president of the board of *Izvestia*.⁷⁸ Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has organized annual forums under the auspices of the International Assembly of Young Journalists for Russian-language media and other publications. This network claims to present an 'alternative view on Crimea' as a counter to the block on information arising from the 'Western hybrid war against the peninsula'.⁷⁹

Orthodox Christian groups

The Russian Orthodox Church has supported the 'gathering of Russian lands' and the reinforcement of the Russian World via affiliated NGOs. Its leverage stems from the large numbers of believers abroad as well as high levels of public trust in Russia and in the post-Soviet region. Through various publications and charity groups, the church plays an important role in promoting a Russia-centric vision of the world. Table 7 lists the main Orthodox organizations that are vocal on political issues – including speaking out against EU and NATO membership – as well as condemning the West for its moral degradation.

Traditionally, the Russian Orthodox Church has engaged with religious groups affiliated with parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate abroad. But in 2007 it also established its own international organization, Day of Baptism of Rus (*Den Khreshchenia Rusi*) to promote the union of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia as one Holy Rus. In 2013 Day of Baptism of Rus, which enjoys the high-profile support of Patriarch Kirill, organized open-air concerts in 10 cities across Ukraine, with slogans such as 'We Are One', 'Unity for Slavic Peoples' and 'Holy Rus is Indivisible'.

Russia's private sector also supports the Russian World by investing in the promotion of conservative and Orthodox values both in Russia and abroad. Known as 'Orthodox oligarchs', figures such as Konstantin Malofeev, the founder of Marshall Capital, and Vladimir Yakunin, formerly head of Russian Railways, have poured substantial funding into their private charities to do so.

⁷⁸ 'Zhurnalisty ne dolzhny gorovit' na yazyke vrazhdy' [Journalists should not use the language of hatred], *Strategii Razvitiya*, 19 June, 2014, <http://strategiirazvitiya.com/topic.php?id=187>.

⁷⁹ 'V Krymu otkrylas vtoraja mezhdunarodnaja assambleja molodykh zhurnalistov' [Second International Assembly of Young Journalists opens in Crimea], NTS Sevastopol TV, 14 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsEhmMwNtXI>.

Table 7: Main Orthodox organizations and charities

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Day of Baptism of Rus (<i>Den Khreshchenia Rusi</i>)	Patriarch Kirill	2007	http://dkr.kiev.ua
Global Russian People Council	Patriarch Kirill	1993	http://www.vrns.ru/experts/
Foundation of Saint Vasily	Konstantin Malofeev	2007	http://fondsvv.ru
St Andrew's Foundation Centre for National Glory	Vladimir Yakunin	1992 2001	http://cnsr.ru
Dialogue of Civilizations Endowment	Vladimir Yakunin	2003	http://wpfdc.org
Russian Parent Committee of Schoolchildren and its counterparts in Ukraine and Armenia	not available	Russia: 2000 Ukraine: 2009 Armenia: 2013	Russia: http://www.r-komit.ru Ukraine: http://pravrodkom.ru Armenia: https://vk.com/varkvk
Association of Orthodox Experts	Kirill Frolov Affiliates: Union of Orthodox Ukrainians, the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods and the Association of Slavic Activists	2005	http://kirillfrolov.livejournal.com/profile

Malofeev's Foundation of Saint Vasily is one of the largest private charity foundations in Russia. In 2014 it spent more than R1.1 billion (\$17 million) on various projects.⁸⁰ It mostly supports programmes in Russia, such as the Orthodox Union of Youth, but in 2008, in partnership with the Moscow Patriarchate, it launched the Russians Without Russia community, aimed at uniting young believers of the Russian World.⁸¹ In August 2014, in an effort to further influence public opinion and consolidate conservative demographics across the region, Malofeev launched his own television news channel, Tsargrad TV,⁸² broadcasting a mix of religious, ideological and nationalistic rhetoric.

Yakunin, for his part, has established the St Andrew's Foundation and the affiliated Centre for National Glory. Both have the objective of promoting the Russian national heritage and peaceful coexistence of various nations and religions. The St Andrew's Foundation runs a Russian World programme in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸³ Internationally, Yakunin's Dialogue of Civilizations hosts an annual forum on the Greek island of Rhodes, promoting, *inter alia*, Russia as a separate global civilization 'entitled' to its own development space.

Ukraine, as the religious core of the Russian World, is host to hundreds of civic groups affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. Such groups assert that they stand for spiritual, cultural and moral unity with the brotherly nations of Belarus and Russia, arguing that there is only one choice

⁸⁰ St Vasily Foundation website, <http://fondsvv.ru/upload/otchet%202014.pdf>.

⁸¹ Programme 'Sodruzhestvo pravoslavnoj molodezhi' [Commonwealth of Orthodox Youth], Fond Svyatitelya Vasiliya Velikogo [Foundation of Saint Vasily], <http://fondsvv.ru/activity/youths/sodruzhestvo-pravoslavnoj-molodezhi/>.

⁸² See Malofeev's channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/tsargradtv>.

⁸³ 'Programma "Russkii Mir" [Russian World Programme], 23 June 2014, <http://www.cnsr.ru/o-fonde/proekty/programma-russkiy-mir/>.

for Ukraine: to preserve the Eastern Orthodox civilization.⁸⁴ Their supporters are mobilized around anti-EU and anti-NATO agendas,⁸⁵ with activities including protest marches against the enlargement of both institutions.

Orthodox parents' committees, modelled on the Russian Parent Committee of Schoolchildren, have opened in Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. Such groups instigate verbal attacks on LGBT and feminist groups in the region, and claim that gender equality is a Western construct intended to spread homosexuality in Eastern Europe, blaming the United States and the EU for the decay of 'moral health' in their respective societies.

The 'parallel discourse' on human rights, elections and democracy

The work of Russian proxy groups highlights the stark competition between liberal democratic and conservative neo-Soviet ideologies for the 'hearts and minds' of citizens. While clamping down on democracy at home, Russia makes use of the access provided by liberal systems to spread manipulated information and create a parallel discourse. Russian state-funded groups have appropriated the established vocabulary of democracy and human rights – commonly viewed in Putin's Russia as instruments of the West to exert pressure abroad⁸⁶ – to accuse the West of double standards. Mimicking US and European NGOs in the area of human rights and election monitoring, Russian groups publish 'alternative' human rights reports, observe elections abroad and act as human rights defenders for Russians living abroad. The most prominent actors in this sphere are listed in Table 8.

Human rights

The Foundation for the Support of Compatriots, established by Rossotrudnichestvo in 2009, is a leading provider of grants to defend the rights of Russians in courts abroad. Over the two-year period 2012–13 it received R291.8 million (around \$8 million) from the state.⁸⁷ It finances 18 human rights centres, mostly in post-Soviet countries;⁸⁸ each centre employs between five and 12 staff, and has an annual budget of R2.6–5.2 million (\$82,000–176,000).⁸⁹ In 2013 there were some 10,000 beneficiaries of its work, more than three times the number in the previous year. In

⁸⁴ 'NATO-NET: V Kieve Sostojalsja Uchreditelnyj S'jezd Orthodox Choice' [NATO-NO: Founding Meeting of Orthodox Choice Organization Took Place in Kiev], Novorossiya-Dukhovno Patriotichesky Sojuz [Novorossiya – Spiritual and Patriotic Union], 22 June 2008, <http://www.novorossiya.org/nato/15-v-kieve-sostojalsja-uchreditelnyj-sezd-voo.html>.

⁸⁵ 'Obshchestvennye Organizatsii-partnery Dvizheniya 'Ukrainskij vybor' Proveli Forum ko Vsemirnomu Dnyu Mira' [Civic Organizations partners of Ukrainian Choice Movement hosted a Forum for Global Peace Day], Ukrainskij Vybor, 19 September 2014, http://vybor.ua/news/obshchestvennye_organizacii_partnery_dvizheniya_ukrainskij_vybor_proveli_forum_ko_vsemirnomu_dnyu_mira.html.

⁸⁶ Aljazeera Programme 'Russia: Old Foe or New Ally?' with Natalia Narochitskaya, 12 December 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/headtohead/2015/12/russia-foe-ally-15120112017212.html>.

⁸⁷ See statistics from the Committee of Civic Initiatives <http://csp.sdlabs.ru>.

⁸⁸ Foundation website, <http://pravfond.ru/?module=articles&action=view&id=567>. Centres have been opened in Moldova, Latvia, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia, Israel, China, Sukhumi (Abkhazia), Lithuania, Turkmenistan and Ireland.

⁸⁹ 'Materialy Mezhdunarodnoj Konferencii "Zashchita Prav Sootechestvennikov Prozhivajushchikh Zarubezhom"' [Materials from International Conference on 'Defending Human Rights of Russian Compatriots Abroad'], Moscow, 24 October 2013, <http://www.materik.ru/upload/iblock/472/4723ad7f66541770cbaa49fae81e3fd1.pdf>.

September 2015 the Ukrainian authorities imposed sanctions on the foundation on the grounds that it was a ‘threat to national security’.⁹⁰

Table 8: GONGO democracy and human right groups

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Website
Moscow Bureau for Human Rights	Aleksandr Brod	2002	http://pravorf.org
CIS-EMO	Stanislav Byshok, Lead Analyst	2003	http://www.cis-emo.net/ru
Foundation for the Development of Civil Society ‘People Diplomacy’	Aleksey Kochetkov	2010	http://www.publicdiplomacy.su
Foundation for Study of Problems of Democracy	Marsim Grigoriev	not available	http://democracyfund.ru
International Institute of Newly Established States	Aleksey Martynov (Director)	2008	http://www.iines.org
The Russian Institute of Electoral Law	Igor Borisov (Head of Board)	1999	http://www.roiip.ru
Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections	Luc Michel	2006	http://www.eode.org/

Using data from pro-regime NGOs, the Russian government undertakes its own reporting on human rights. In 2011 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its first report about the state of human rights in selected countries – including the United States, EU member states and Georgia but notably excluding Belarus, Azerbaijan and other Kremlin-friendly states.⁹¹ In addition, in 2014 the ministry commissioned the Foundation for the Study of Problems of Democracy and the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights to prepare three reports on human rights violations in Ukraine, which were also published in English translation.⁹² These heavily state-funded groups are close to the Kremlin and are members of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.⁹³

The text of the reports on Ukraine is highly selective, with no mention of torture, ill-treatment of military prisoners, kidnappings of activists, expropriation of property by pro-Russian fighters, violation of human rights of Crimean Tatars, or the increased number of foreign combatants, including fighters believed to be from the Russian Federation, all of which were set out in detail in the report of the 35-strong UN Human Rights Monitoring mission in Ukraine, released in October 2014.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ ‘Fond Podderzhki Zashchity Prav Sootechestvennikov Popal v Sanktsionnyi Spisok Ukrainy’ [Foundation for the Support of Compatriots is on Ukraine’s Sanction List], 17 September 2015, <http://pravfond.ru/?module=news&action=view&id=4249>.

⁹¹ Doklad MID Rossii ‘O Situatsii s Pravami Cheloveka v Nekotorykh Stranakh Mira’ [Russian MFA Report ‘On Human Rights in Some Countries of the World’], 28 December 2011, www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-dgpcn.nsf/03c344d01162d351442579510044415b/c32577ca00173cb244257974003e49c4!OpenDocument.

⁹² Belaya Kniga Narusheniya Prav Cheloveka i Verkhovenstva Prava na Ukraine [White Book of Human Rights and Rule of Law Violations in Ukraine], Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-dgpcn.nsf/03c344d01162d351442579510044415b/38fa8597760acc2144257ccf002beeb8!OpenDocument>.

⁹³ ‘Fond Golos ne poluchil grant ot Putina’ [Golos Foundation did not receive a grant from Putin], *Vedomosti*, 28 August 2012, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/15708401/associaciya-golos-ne-poluchit>.

⁹⁴ ‘UN Report: Protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues to take heavy toll on civilians’, 8 October 2014, <http://www.un.org.ua/en/information-centre/news/1916>.

The Foundation for the Support of Compatriots also regularly finances reports focusing on ethnic conflicts in the Baltic states, discrimination against Russians and the stifling of the Russian language. In 2015 it funded at least six publications on Ukraine, all containing a clear anti-Kyiv bias and selective use of sources, and omitting mention of human rights violations linked with the annexation of Crimea and military operation in eastern Ukraine.⁹⁵

Russia is attempting to dominate the information space by injecting alternative messages that are often based on manipulated information. The main aim is to obstruct decision-making in the West, especially in organizations where decisions are based on consensus. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs promotes proxy groups that spread the Kremlin's message more widely in multilateral forums such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the UN, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, and makes efforts to discredit states by means of false human rights allegations. During the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meetings in 2014 and 2015 Kremlin proxies – in this instance World Without Nazism and the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society 'People Diplomacy' – accused Ukraine's government of 'mass killings of dissidents', and claimed that half of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians have no opportunity to learn Russian in state-run schools.⁹⁶ They also accused OSCE member states of turning a blind eye to violations of human rights in Ukraine.⁹⁷

'Alternative' election monitoring

Russia also invests in groups that conduct 'alternative' election monitoring, including monitoring polls in breakaway territories with the intention of lending these a semblance of legitimacy. At the time of the March 2014 referendum on the status of Crimea, Russian media disseminated commentaries by what were termed 'European' observers. Monitors led by Mateusz Piskorski, head of the Polish-based European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis, confirmed that 'the referendum meets all international standards'.⁹⁸ The OSCE, for its part, did not monitor the referendum process, because of the lack of sufficient time for preparatory work and the presence of Russian troops on the ground.

The Russian Institute of Electoral Law and the CIS Election Monitoring Organization (CIS-EMO) monitor elections in parallel with the OSCE and usually draw opposing conclusions. The 2014 illegal elections in the Luhansk and Donbas regions of Ukraine were portrayed as 'democracy under fire' in a book published by CIS-EMO.⁹⁹ By the end of 2014 CIS-EMO had received almost R5 million (\$125,000) in Russian presidential grants for a study of 'nationalist threats to democratic institutions in the post-Soviet space and cooperation of Russian and Ukrainian NGOs at the regional level'.¹⁰⁰ In 2015 the group was awarded a grant of R2.5 million (\$36,000) to

⁹⁵ Foundation for the Support of Compatriots website, publications section, <http://pravfond.ru/?module=pages&action=view&id=21>.

⁹⁶ OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, 21 September–20 October 2015, Warsaw, Overview of Side Events, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/181746?download=true>.

⁹⁷ Byshok's speech at the OSCE Human Dimension Meeting in Vienna, 1 November 2014, <http://www.cis-emo.net/en/news/byshoks-speech-osce-human-dimension-meeting-vienna>.

⁹⁸ Translated from 'Mezhdunarodnye nabludateli: referendum v Krymu otvechaet demokraticeskim protseduram' [International Observers: Referendum in Crimea meets democratic standards], *TASS Information Agency*, 16 March 2014, <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1051375>.

⁹⁹ Alexander Bedritskiy, Alexey Kochetkov, Stanislav Byshok, *Ukraine After Euromaidan: Democracy under fire*, 2015, http://www.cis-emo.net/sites/default/files/imagesince/after_euromaidan.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Website of Russian state grants to NGOs, <http://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-3/winners/rec278/>.

implement a project aimed at fostering the ‘integration of Tatar communities into Russian society’ in Crimea.¹⁰¹

CIS-EMO cooperates with the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections (also sometimes known as the Eurasian Council for Democracy and Elections). Launched in 2006 in Chisinau and Brussels, this group claims to monitor elections in the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. It is led by Luc Michel, a Belgian far-right activist with neo-Nazi connections.

Neo-imperial voices

Since 2012 many previously extremist voices have moved into the mainstream of Russian foreign policy and state media. There have long been public figures in Russia who for example supported the wars in Chechnya and the frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while ‘fringe’ intellectuals and nationalists challenged the capacity of Ukraine to be an independent state. It was not uncommon to hear statements, including from senior government officials, that Sevastopol is a Russian city.¹⁰² Table 9 lists some of the main Russian groups that promote ultra-radical views and support the re-creation of Orthodox neo-imperial Russia.¹⁰³

Table 9: Key neo-imperial and paramilitary groups

Name	Leading figures	Year established	Web page
Izborsky Club	Aleksandr Prokhanov	2012	http://www.dynacon.ru
Night Wolves	Aleksandr Zaldostaniv	1980s	http://nightwolves.ru
International Eurasian Movement	Aleksandr Dugin	2003	http://med.org.ru
Veterans in Military Action	not available	2010	http://sojuz-v.com
Afghan Veterans	Franz Klintsevich	1990	http://www.rsva.ru
Military Fraternity (<i>Boevoe Bratstvo</i>)	Boris Gromov	1997	http://bbratstvo.com
Union of Russian Cossacks	Pavel Zadorozhny	1990	http://www.allcossacks.ru
Great Don Cossacks	Nikolai Kozitsyn	1994	http://vvd2003.narod.ru
Russian Imperial Movement	Stanislav Vorobiev	2005	http://rusimperia.info

Russia’s most prominent contemporary Eurasianist, Aleksandr Dugin, is no longer regarded as a ‘fringe’ intellectual.¹⁰⁴ His ambition is to influence political circles and shape a new generation of leaders. He set up the International Eurasian Movement (IEM) in 2003, and the Eurasian Youth

¹⁰¹ Website of Russian state grants to NGOs, <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2015-2/winners/>.

¹⁰² Luzhkov – Sevastopol Russkij Gorod, Baza Rosii [Luzhkov – Sebastopol is a Russian City, Russian Base], *Focus Magazine*, 22 July 2010, <http://focus.ua/country/133984/>.

¹⁰³ Andreas Umland, ‘New Extreme Right-Wing Intellectual Circles in Russia: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Isborski Club and the Florian Geyer Club’, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 135, 5 August 2013, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-135.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ In March 2015 Dugin was notably included by the US Department of the Treasury on its list of figures subject to financial and trade sanctions in connection with the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Movement (already noted in Table 6) in 2005. The IEM has members from 20 countries in the EU and among the former Soviet states. Dugin's online news resource, the Russian World of Eurasia,¹⁰⁵ is funded by presidential grants.¹⁰⁶ Beyond the post-Soviet space, leaked materials apparently highlight Dugin's efforts to create a network of connections with pro-Kremlin supporters in Romania, Poland, Hungary, France, Croatia, Serbia, Greece and Italy.¹⁰⁷

The Izborsky Club, established in 2012 as a platform for conservative intellectuals, is a notably influential organization on Russia's far right. In essence, it is the antithesis of the ostensibly more liberal Valdai Club. The core of the Izborsky Club comprises 30 'patriotic' intellectuals, and it is chaired by Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor-in-chief of the extreme right-wing newspaper *Zavtra*.¹⁰⁸ Prominent members include Dugin, Valery Korovin (founder of the neo-imperial Moscow Center for Geopolitical Expertise), Mikhail Leontiev (a right-wing journalist) and presidential adviser Sergei Glaziev. Such figures tour Russia's neighbours, and are regular political talk-show guests on state television.

Paramilitary groups

Russia's ultra-nationalist and neo-imperialist intellectual groups are complemented by various paramilitary bodies. These bring together former members of the various military agencies, and many such groups receive funding in the form of presidential grants. For example, in 2014 Military Fraternity (*Boevoe Bratstvo*), chaired by former Moscow oblast governor Borys Gromov, received R7.5 million (\$188,000) in funding for the 'patriotic education of youth and membership building'.¹⁰⁹

Particularly favoured by Putin among these groups are the Night Wolves, a bikers' club led by Aleksandr Zaldostaniv (known as Khirurg), which has embarked on a 'gathering of Russian lands mission' in the post-Soviet states. The Night Wolves have grown from a small association in the 1990s to become a network of some 5,000 members with chapters in locations including Kaliningrad, Belarus and Simferopol, Crimea. In both 2011 and 2012 the Night Wolves held their annual gathering in Crimea, with a blessing from Patriarch Kirill. Putin personally rode with other bikers in 2013 on the occasion of their annual meeting in Crimea, and has financially supported the Night Wolves' development across Russia and in other post-Soviet states. The group received some R18 million (\$0.5 million) from the state in 2014 – one of the largest amounts awarded to any Russian NGO in a single year – for 'the patriotic education of youth'.¹¹⁰

Russian Cossack networks, with a total of some 740,000 members, have been encouraged to cooperate with their counterparts in the post-Soviet space.¹¹¹ Cossack units have opened chapters in Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, among others. They also run paramilitary youth

¹⁰⁵ Russkij Mir Evrazii website, <http://eurasia.su>.

¹⁰⁶ A grant to the IEM was channelled via the Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies.

¹⁰⁷ Christo's Blog: Observations and Analysis on the New Information War, <https://cgrozev.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/elitelist.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ *Zavtra* website, <http://zavtra.ru/>.

¹⁰⁹ Website of Russian state grants to NGOs, <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-3/winners/?search=BOEBOE+BPATCTBO&district=&subject=&operator>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ 'Kozachije Organizatsii Budut Reorganizovany' [Cossack Groups Will Be Reorganized], Yugregion.ru, 03 July, 2008, http://cosaque.net/articles/news_post/mezhdunarodnye-kontakty-kazachih-organizaciy-rossii-sovremen.

camps in Armenia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Ukraine. In 2013, for instance, the Tavrida Sich summer camp in Crimea brought together 170 young people from Kyiv-controlled Ukraine, Russia and Transnistria, who were taught shooting, fighting and survival skills.¹¹² One of its co-organizers, the Union of Crimean Cossacks, received financial support from Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russian consulate in Simferopol, and any discussion of foreign policy and the West had a distinct pro-Kremlin ideological angle. Cossack organizations cooperate with the Russian army's 45th Detached Reconnaissance Regiment, which took part in the Chechen wars as well as in the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹¹³

¹¹² 'Separatisty Kryma' [Separatists of Crimea], Inform Napalm, 01 April 2014, <https://informnapalm.org/22-separatisty-kryma-kazachya-5-ya-kolonna-k/>.

¹¹³ 'Belarusian Authorities Are Not Doing Too Much to Prevent the Spread of Pro-Russian Organizations', EuroBelarus, 1 December 2014, <http://en.eurobelarus.info/news/politics/2014/12/01/belarusian-authorities-aren-t-doing-much-to-prevent-the-spread.html>.

The Ukraine Gambit

Crimea: the separatist test bed

Many of the Russian proxy groups referred to above were to varying degrees involved in the events in Ukraine in 2014. Indeed, many had operated in Crimea for decades. Yuri Luzhkov, the former mayor of Moscow, established two foundations, Moscow-Sevastopol and Moscow-Crimea, in 1994 and 1996 respectively, to support the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Soviet army veterans, Russian citizens and members of the Russian diaspora in Crimea. More recently, Moscow House opened in 2008, and had been active in funding pro-Russian groups in Crimea.¹¹⁴ Russian donors were generous in their support for Cossack units and youth political movements, as well as for pro-Russian media in Crimea.

The most recent reliable public opinion poll on the subject, conducted in 2011, indicated that only 24 per cent of the population of Crimea supported unification with Russia.

In February 2014 the Russian Community of Crimea (*Russkaya Obshchyna Kryma*), a key recipient of Russian funding in Crimea, sent a written appeal to Putin, defence minister Sergei Shoigu and the head of the Duma defence committee, Vladimir Komoedov, asking for protection in view of the ‘risk of genocide of the Russian people’ in the peninsula.¹¹⁵ A few days later the Russian parliament authorized the use of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine because of the potential threat to Russian citizens in Crimea.¹¹⁶ This marked the start of the occupation of Crimea by so-called ‘little green men’¹¹⁷ and its subsequent annexation. Russia’s proxy groups in Crimea were unable to mobilize large numbers of people to attend their rallies, but these were none the less enough to serve as triggers for the Russian media to magnify and increase pro-Russian sentiment. The most recent reliable public opinion poll on the subject, conducted in 2011, indicated that only 24 per cent of the population of Crimea supported unification with Russia, a drop of almost 10 percentage points from 2009.¹¹⁸ The official results of the Russia-orchestrated referendum in 2014 showed 96 per cent support for unification.

Rossotrudnichestvo was also involved in preparing the ground in Crimea. In late 2013 it organized a number of events with pro-Russian groups and compatriot organizations there, transmitting the

¹¹⁴ Vladimir Pelevin, ‘Moscow-Sevastopol Foundation is dead’, blog, 25 September 2011, http://vladimir-pelevin.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/blog-post_4405.html.

¹¹⁵ ‘Appeal of Russian Community of Crimea to Vladimir Putin’, <http://sevrus.info/content/view/266/20/>, and ‘The Russian Stronghold in Ukraine Preparing to Fight the Revolution’, *The Truth Seeker*, 24 February 2014, <http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=91402>.

¹¹⁶ Translated from ‘Vladimir Putin Vnios Obrashcheniye v Sovet Federacii’ [Vladimir Putin Submitted a Request to the Federal Council], 1 March 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20353>.

¹¹⁷ The term ‘little green men’ was first used in March 2014 by Ukrainian media to describe Russian soldiers without insignia who carried out the operation to annex Crimea. The tactic of using Russian Special Forces disguised as local ‘self-defence’ units was later replicated in Donbas and led to open conflict between Russian and Ukrainian military forces.

¹¹⁸ ‘Jakhyst Zhyttia Krymchan: Problemy Rozvytku Krymu, Problemy Realizatsii’ [Quality of Life in Crimea: Problems of Development in Crimea, Problems of Implementation], Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, Issue 4–5, 2011, http://razumkov.org.ua/ukr/files/category_journal/NSD122_ukr_3.pdf.

Kremlin's take on Euromaidan and sowing fears about the future of the peninsula if a pro-European government came to power in Kyiv.¹¹⁹

Cossack regiments in Crimea were among the first separatist fighters. The 'little green men' who emerged from the military bases of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, as well as members of the Crimean Cossack Union and the Crimean regional chamber of Union of Cossacks of Ukraine, were mobilized to assist the Russian Special Forces in the occupation of the Crimean parliament and other public buildings. Their actions reinforced the appearance that this was a local rebellion against Kyiv.

Donbas: from Russian World to Russian war

Once Crimea had been annexed, Russian proxies turned their attention to Novorossiia. This, from the outset, was a Kremlin-designed separatist project, launched by Kremlin-affiliated groups and supported by Russian special security forces and intelligent services. Russia thus fuelled a separatist conflict in the eastern region of Ukraine to destabilize the country and exert leverage over its future development.

According to some sources, Putin was already planning a separatist uprising in Ukraine before the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit in 2013, as a means by which he could force his Ukrainian counterpart not to sign the DCFTA with the EU. A leaked Kremlin document details plans for a possible Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine beginning in February 2014 – i.e. before Yanukovich was removed from office.¹²⁰ A former close ally of Yanukovich has stated that during the last meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in November 2013, Putin had threatened to annex part of eastern Ukraine.¹²¹

In Donbas, Russian Cossacks and paramilitary groups rolled out to capture local public administrations with the help of Russian Special Forces. The first instigators and leaders of the rebellion in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were Igor Strelkov (real name Igor Girkin) and Aleksandr Borodai.¹²² Strelkov, the first self-appointed 'defence minister' of Novorossiia, is a former Russian intelligence officer and fighter in the Transnistrian secession war of 1992, while Borodai served as self-proclaimed 'prime minister' of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic (*Donétskaya Naródnaya Respúblika* – DNR) from May to August 2014. After returning to Russia, Borodai established the 'Union of Donbass Volunteers' in 2015.

Russian proxy groups provided troops and helped to recruit mercenaries to fight in Donbas. They advertised on their websites and through social media, presenting mercenaries as 'freedom fighters of the Russian Spring' and 'liberators of Orthodox brothers from fascists'. Among the proxy groups that were most active in mobilizing fighters were Dugin's International Eurasian Movement; Other

¹¹⁹ Information received from official sources as part of research for this paper.

¹²⁰ 'Predstavlyaetsya pravil'nym initsiirovat' prisoedinenie vostochnykh oblastey Ukrainy k Rossii' [It feels right to initiate a unification of Eastern Ukraine with Russia], *Novaya Gazeta*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67389.html>.

¹²¹ 'Moskal rasskazal pravdu ob ATO i objasnil pochemy Putin vskore pojdiot v nastuplinije' [Moskal told the truth about ATO and why Putin will attack soon], *Zakarpatsky Korrespondent*, 01 May 2015, <http://zak-kor.net/politika/6724-moskal-rasskazal-pravdu-ob-ato-i-obyasnil-pochemu-putin-vskore-poydet-v-nastuplenie.html>.

¹²² 'Iz Kryma v Donbas: prekljuchenija Igoria Strelkova i Oleksandra Borodaja' [From Crimea to Donbas – The Adventures of Igor Strelkov and Aleksandr Borodai], *Slon*, 19 May 2014, http://slon.ru/russia/iz_kryma_v_donbass_prikljucheniya_igoria_strelkova_i_aleksandra_borodaya-1099696.xhtml.

Russia (*Drugaya Rossiya*), under the National Bolshevik Party's radical leader Eduard Limonov; the Russian Imperial Movement; Military Fraternity; and various Cossack groups.¹²³ Although Russia officially denies the presence of its soldiers in eastern Ukraine, these groups often acted as cover for the Russian military operation. For example, Sergei Kurginyan, a vocal proponent of the restoration of the Soviet Union and a leader of the Russian movement Essence of Time (*Sut Vremeni*), presented the supply of Russian military equipment as 'assistance from Russian civil society'.¹²⁴

Dugin himself played an active part in inspiring the rebellion in eastern Ukraine against the new central authorities, championing the so-called 'Russian Spring' there, which attempted to replicate the Arab Spring uprisings through the use of non-state actors.¹²⁵

Kremlin-backed election monitors were dispatched for the staged DNR elections in November 2014. The Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections monitored the polls in order to promote the appearance of international legitimacy. On the eve of the poll, RIA Novosti falsely claimed that OSCE observers had arrived in Donetsk to monitor the elections. In reality, the OSCE had condemned these elections and did not take part in monitoring activities. Instead, a 'clone' observer group under a very similar name – the Agency for Security and Cooperation in Europe (ASCE) – did participate, notably holding a press conference and posing for pictures with the separatist leaders.¹²⁶

The Russian Orthodox Church and Russia's private sector organized assistance to sustain the rebels in Donbas. Church buildings and religious community centres were used to store ammunition, and fighters received blessings from priests. Local observers in Sloviansk have claimed that so-called 'Russian volunteers' were coordinating their actions with Moscow.¹²⁷ Religious charities also appealed to Russian sentiment to act as 'protectors of traditions' and orthodoxy. The Foundation of Saint Vasily signed a memorandum of cooperation with the DNR, while another Russian charitable foundation, Humanitarian Battalion Novorossiia, under the direct command of Strelkov, channelled goods from Russia to his fighters,¹²⁸ claiming to have collected over \$200,000 for Donbas since its founding in May 2014.¹²⁹ Another 'fundraising' group, Save the Donbas, claimed to have raised donations to the value of some \$1.3 million.¹³⁰ Ukrainian intelligence services discovered that in some cases such 'humanitarian' assistance consignments contained military equipment and explosives.¹³¹

¹²³ 'Armiya i dobrovol'tsy' [Army and volunteers], *Novaya Gazeta*, 3 September 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65096.html>.

¹²⁴ *Sut Vremeni* YouTube Channel, press conference held by S. Kurginyan in Donetsk, Issue 6, 7 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGBko_kdpqU.

¹²⁵ See YouTube video in which Dugin instructs the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jPoyebodlM>.

¹²⁶ 'Sham Observer Group for Ukrainian Separatist Strong Hold Invented Day Before Elections', *Globe and Mail*, 1 November 2014, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/sham-observer-org-for-ukrainian-separatist-strongholds-invented-day-before-election/article21418834/?cmpid=rss1&click=sf_globe.

¹²⁷ 'Evidence Grows of Russian Orthodox Clergy's Aiding Ukrainian Separatist', Andrew Higgins, *New York Times*, 6 September 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/world/europe/evidence-grows-of-russian-orthodox-clergys-aiding-ukraine-rebels.html?_r=0.

¹²⁸ 'Rassledovanie RBK: kak fond Konstantina Malofeeva pomagajet Novorossii?' [RBK Investigation: how Konstantin Malofeev Foundation is aiding Novorossiia], *RBK*, 8 September 2014, [http://top.rbc.ru/politics/08/09/2014/947484.shtml#xtor=AL-\[internal_traffic\]--\[rbc.ru\]-\[main_body\]-\[item_14\]](http://top.rbc.ru/politics/08/09/2014/947484.shtml#xtor=AL-[internal_traffic]--[rbc.ru]-[main_body]-[item_14]).

¹²⁹ Jo Becker and Steven Lee Myers, 'Russian Groups Crowdfund the War in Ukraine', *International New York Times*, 11 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/12/world/europe/russian-groups-crowdfund-the-war-in-ukraine.html?_r=0.

¹³⁰ *Sut Vremeni* YouTube Channel, Press Conference of S. Kurginyan in Donetsk.

¹³¹ 'Zbroja ta vybukhivka v mishkakh z pid putinskoji humanitarky' [Weapons and Explosives in Putin's humanitarian assistance], ICTV, 14 September 2015, <http://fakty.ictv.ua/ua/index/read-news/id/1561350>.

Many of these groups also spread Russian state propaganda to radicalize the local population, using social media and Russian state television. Western journalists following the development of military operations in Donetsk and Luhansk reported a noticeable change of mood among the local populations; a more antagonistic attitude towards Kyiv developed in the space of a few weeks.¹³² Russian television and websites demonized the Ukrainian army and portrayed Kyiv as a threat to local identity. Once again, there was apparent evidence of the manipulation of information. For instance, media-watching organizations such as StopFake have identified the same witness appearing in multiple clips, posing as different Ukrainians at various protests around the region.¹³³ A multitude of digital information projects have been set up to sustain the Russian narrative about the uprising in eastern Ukraine. Many use the .su domain, a known haven for cyber criminals.¹³⁴

To support the Kremlin-created state of Novorossiia in Donbas, Russian experts worked to create de facto attributes of legitimacy, such as history books justifying its existence and a 'national' anthem. Seminars on the history of Novorossiia were convened in Moscow by the Institute for Civic Projects, headed by Valery Fadeev, also head of the Higher Political Council of United Russia. The Russian Academy of Sciences is also engaged in the Novorossiia project. The Izborsky Club's Aleksandr Prokhanov has already published a book, the title of which translates as *The Murder of Cities*, about the 'liberation uprising' in Novorossiia.¹³⁵ Such efforts point to the strength of Russia's commitment to supporting the new status quo, in which annexed Crimea and occupied territory in Donbas will remain outside Kyiv's control with weak chances of successful integration with the rest of Ukraine.

¹³² Author's interview with a German journalist from *Die Welt*.

¹³³ 'Stop Fake.org Is Like a "Snopes" for Ukraine', Mashable UK, 5 March 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/03/05/stopfake-ukraine/>.

¹³⁴ 'Hack in the USSR: Cybercriminals find haven in .su domain space', *The Guardian*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/may/31/ussr-cybercriminals-su-domain-space>.

¹³⁵ See summary of *Ubiystvo Gorodov* [*The Murder of Cities*] at <http://www.km.ru/books/ubiistvo-gorodov>.

Assessing the Impact of Russia's Proxy Groups

There are inherent difficulties in attempting to make a wholly objective assessment of the impact of Russia's proxy groups in the post-Soviet states: the overall picture is blurred by the reality that these groups are working alongside other agents of influence. That Russia did deploy military hard power in Ukraine may suggest that its non-state actors there were limited in their effect, if not ineffective, and some voices within Russia have criticized the Kremlin's current approach to soft power as old-fashioned, underfunded or too soft.¹³⁶ The situation on the ground suggests the opposite, however.

Russia's proxies demonstrably do have impact, especially where Russian-language media are prominent. They are useful in creating ambiguity, and where they are portrayed as 'genuine' civil society they claim part of the public space and promote a disruptive discourse. Their messages resonate among those who are nostalgic for the Soviet Union – including people in socially deprived regions and Russians abroad. For such audiences, Russia may still possess the soft power that can exploit residual Soviet sentiment. For radical nationalist movements and younger generations, they offer the narrative of a rising Russia and of a new pole of Eurasian civilization that is challenging the United States.

Russian efforts to polarize societies and impede European integration processes lead to weak states lacking democratic reforms.

Russian efforts to polarize societies and impede European integration processes lead to weak states lacking democratic reforms. The agents of the Russian World are attempting to export a Russian style of governance with restrictions on the media and human rights, instead of democratic transition, connectivity and integration. Bills replicating Russian laws restricting NGOs, foreign agents and 'gay propaganda' have, for example, been tabled in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the World Bank's 'Voice and Accountability' indicators rank the members of the EAEU significantly lower than Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.¹³⁸ Freedom House classifies Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia as 'Not Free' in its 2016 *Freedom in the World* report, while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, along with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are classed as 'Partly Free'.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ 'Russikiy Mir Bessmyslennyj i Nebogatyj' [Russian World is Pointless and Poor], Znak.com, 19 February 2015, <http://www.znak.com/moscow/articles/19-02-20-23/103588.html>.

¹³⁷ 'Putinspeak in Kyrgyzstan', Masha Gessen, *New York Times*, 5 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/opinion/masha-gessen-putinspeak-in-kyrgyzstan.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=c-column-top-span-region®ion=c-column-top-span-region&WT.nav=c-column-top-span-region>.

¹³⁸ As of September 2015, World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators data on Voice and Accountability gave the following percentile rankings to the EAEU members for 2014: Armenia 30.5, Belarus 6.9, Kazakhstan 15.3, Kyrgyzstan 31.0, Russia 20.2; equivalent rankings for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were, respectively, 55.7, 48.8 and 47.3. Voice and Accountability indicators capture perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and free media. The full data sets are available via <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/worldwide-governance-indicators>.

¹³⁹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>.

Putin and his system fear the free and critical thinking that could rebel and undermine the regime from within. Thus the system feeds disinformation in the interests of self-preservation. None the less, Putin appears to understand that he cannot sustain the Russian World if individual citizens do not care about it, which suggests that the clash between the Russian and Western worlds could be more dangerous than is sometimes thought by analysts and policy-makers in both the West and the region. Russian groups manage to connect with and recruit followers in the region who are prepared to work for the expansion of the Russian World and undermine support for Western-style democracy. Their scale and outreach are indicative of an active network of genuine believers.

A more subversive function of Russia's proxies is manifested in their efforts to prepare the ground for separatism in territories of the former Soviet space, and in mobilizing citizens around a pro-Russian agenda. For example, by mobilizing civilians to prevent the movement of Ukrainian military forces, or by recruiting them into local 'self-defence' units, Russian-speaking citizens in Crimea and subsequently in Donbas became tools in the hands of the Russian security services. Moreover, Russian proxy groups have a role to play in stirring opposition to governing elites in the former Soviet space in order to disrupt reform programmes and moves towards integration with the West.¹⁴⁰

Stalemate in Ukraine

Russia's own model of 'soft autocracy' may be attractive to some ruling elites in the region, but in Ukraine the Kremlin's approach backfired. There, it provoked a counter-mobilization of citizens who feel a strong Ukrainian identity and who share commitment to Western-style democracy and market reforms. The Kremlin's strategists were wrong in identifying the language as the key factor determining pro- or anti-Russian sentiment. In reality, the split between western (Ukrainian-speaking) and eastern (Russian-speaking) blocs is more subtle, and is expressed along the lines of values rather than binary ethnic or geographic divides.¹⁴¹ The results of an opinion poll published in April 2015 showed that 72 per cent of the population across Ukraine regarded Russia as the aggressor; only 16 per cent believed the current conflict to be a civil war.¹⁴² Moreover, in polling conducted in November that year, some 75 per cent of respondents in the areas of Donbas controlled by Kyiv expressed the view that the region should remain part of Ukraine, while 72 per cent considered that the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk under Russian control should also remain part of Ukraine.¹⁴³

Ukraine stands out because more than two decades of independence and semi-democratic political culture have resulted in vocal citizens who express demands for the rule of law and democracy. In some other post-Soviet countries – mainly those with autocratic regimes, where the proportion of

¹⁴⁰ See more on Moldova: Stanislav Secieru, 'How to Offset Russian Shadow Power?', The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 31 October 2014, http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=18536.

¹⁴¹ Mykola Riabchuk, 'Ukraine's Muddling Through: National Identity and Post-communist Transition', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45 (2012): 439–446 (Elsevier.com).

¹⁴² Razumkov Centre, public opinion poll, 3 April 2015, http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=608&direct=14.

¹⁴³ International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Poll, 12 January 2016, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri%E2%80%99s-center-insights-poll-pessimism-high-after-two-years-violent-conflict-russia-people>. The poll was conducted in all regions of Ukraine, excluding the occupied territory of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The national survey had a randomly selected sample of 1,800 permanent residents of Ukraine aged 18 and older and eligible to vote, and also included an oversample of 1,284 respondents in the Ukrainian-controlled territories of the Donbas region.

society with an emancipated, pro-democratic culture and identity is smaller – Russia, with the support of incumbent regimes, is attempting to suppress the emergence of such movements.

The failure of the Novorossiia project in Ukraine exposes the conceptual weakness of Russian World thinking that emphasizes language as a tool to foster support for Russia. In the years since Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, the drift of Russian-speaking Ukrainians away from a Russian (i.e. pro-Moscow) outlook has tended to increase. An opinion poll conducted in 2008 indicated that only 11 per cent of Russian-speaking Ukrainians aligned themselves with a Russian cultural tradition, while a majority of Russian-speakers aged 18–35 expressed the view that a European cultural system would prevail in Ukraine.¹⁴⁴ This would suggest that Ukraine's Russian-speakers see themselves as an integral part of the Ukrainian nation, rather than as a part of the Russian World: for them, the Russian language is simply the medium of communication. In more recent polling, the results of which were published in April 2014, a majority of respondents, including those in the Russian-speaking east, did not support Russia's decision to send its army into Ukraine.¹⁴⁵

While Russia's gambit in Ukraine may have failed on the grand scale, it none the less succeeded in producing a new conflict in the east that is being used as a lever of Russian influence. Using state-controlled media, Russia has apparently been able to marshal public opinion to the extent that 70 per cent of people in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine polled in 2014 considered that the events of Euromaidan were an armed coup organized by the West; 45 per cent expressed the view that Russia defends the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine.¹⁴⁶ Such people waved Russian flags, participated in illegal referendums and provided the false legitimacy for the various efforts of Kremlin-backed spin doctors, mercenaries and volunteer fighters to take control of parts of Donbas, intended to serve as a barrier to the future integration of Ukraine into Western institutions and to destabilize the post-Euromaidan government.

The popularity of Russian media in the post-Soviet information space has clearly shaped public opinion in the wider region in line with the Kremlin's narrative about the role of Russia in its conflict with Ukraine. In Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan the majority of citizens supported the Russian position in the conflict with Ukraine; 60 per cent of Belarusians¹⁴⁷ and 80 per cent of Armenians¹⁴⁸ agreed that the annexation of Crimea was a historically just restoration. Even in Moldova, where many have access to news from Romania, the majority of citizens blamed the EU, the United States and Russia equally for instigating the protests in Kyiv.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ 'Rossijskomovni Gromadiany Ukrainy: "ujavna spilnota" jak vona je"' [Russian-speaking Ukrainians: 'How this imaginary community looks'], *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, 19 May 2008, http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/print.php?lng=UKR&&news_id=676&&address=article.

¹⁴⁵ Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Ukraine, International Republican Institute, April 2014

<http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20April%2024%20Survey%20of%20Residents%20of%20Ukraine,%20April%203-12,%202014.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ 'Views and opinions of residents of South-East Ukraine: April 2014', poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology between 8 and 16 April 2014.

¹⁴⁷ 'Belarus has an identity crisis', Open Democracy, 14 May 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/vadim-smok/belarus-has-identity-crisis>.

¹⁴⁸ 'Naselenije Armenii Polozhytelno Otnositsia k Prisojedeniju Kryma k RF' [Population of Armenia Is Positive about Unification of Crimea with the Russian Federation], *RIA Novosti*, 23 September 2014, http://ria.ru/crimea_today/20140501/1006216076.html.

¹⁴⁹ 'Opros: Chto Dymajut Moldavane o Sobitijakh na Ukraine' [Opinion Poll: What Moldovans Think about Events in Ukraine], AVA.md, 17 March 2014, <http://ava.md/society/024180-opros-chto-dumaqt-moldavane-o-sobitijah-na-ukraine.html>.

The actions of Russia and its proxies have resulted in a dangerous stalemate in Ukraine. The Kremlin has, on the one hand, succeeded in bringing a part of Ukrainian territory under de facto Russian administration, with an active Russian military presence there. On the other hand, it has failed to achieve recognition by Kyiv or by the West of the Russian-proxy administrations there as legitimate representatives of Donbas. Furthermore, the annexed Crimean peninsula remains a disputed territory. While Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, was able to block the adoption of a Security Council resolution urging non-recognition of the March 2014 referendum, the UN General Assembly did adopt a (non-binding) resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, underscoring that the referendum had no validity and thus could not form the basis for any alteration of the status of Crimea or of the city of Sevastopol.¹⁵⁰ This stalemate, as well as deteriorating living conditions in the territories occupied, is eroding what pro-Russian sentiment there was among residents of the territories at the start of the occupation.¹⁵¹ Through the Novorossiia project, some 4 million people in Ukraine have effectively become caught up in Putin's geopolitical ambition to turn Ukraine into a failed state and block its moves towards further integration with the West. None the less, despite the high human costs and the burden of conflict, his gambit has failed to deliver political dividends to the Kremlin in full. The rest of Ukraine is making serious efforts to reform and build new institutions that are incompatible with Russian World thinking.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/282, 27 March 2014, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/273/44/PDF/N1427344.pdf?OpenElement>. The resolution was adopted by 100 votes in favour to 11 against, with 58 abstentions.

¹⁵¹ As of the first quarter of 2016, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), Ukraine was the only European country to require and receive WFP assistance. Some 1.5 million people in eastern Ukraine were classed as food insecure, of whom 290,000 severely so and in need of immediate food assistance. WFP reported that government support to public services had stopped in some areas, including funding to schools and hospitals as well as the payment of social benefits and pensions. The full WFP assessment is available at <https://www.wfp.org/countries/ukraine>.

Conclusions

Future trends

The ongoing economic crisis in Russia will to some extent undermine the Putin administration's capacity to scale up its efforts to influence the politics of the contested neighbourhood. However, it will not undermine the Russian leader's ambition to project the Russian World narrative and maintain its sphere of influence in the short to medium term. Funding will continue to flow into its military and soft-power sectors, even in the context of austerity. Military expenditure notably increased by 30 per cent in 2015, while other sectors had budget cuts imposed.¹⁵² Funding proxy groups is a minor outlay in comparison, and one that can yield useful results.

Russia will continue its efforts to use non-state actors in foreign policy on the dual planes of regional assistance and a narrative of common identity. Through the first of these, it will position itself as a global and regional donor. Aid will become a pillar of the Eurasian integration project, and non-state actors could get a share of this. In 2014 Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs began formulating a new doctrine of soft power and humanitarian influence, whereby aid is to be redirected from multilateral agencies to bilateral assistance to Russian allies.¹⁵³ The chairman of the Upper House committee for foreign affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, urged that Russia's aid 'should be more visible to citizens [in the recipient countries] and be a factor when they are manipulated by competitors to make geopolitical choices hostile to Russia'.¹⁵⁴

In parallel, the Kremlin will also continue to use the levers of language, history, religion and ethno-geopolitics to attract the countries of the region into the Russian World and to promote a Eurasian-Orthodox identity. It will further consolidate compatriot networks as well as breakaway territories and anti-Western conservative groups in the Eastern Partnership countries and in Eastern European members of the EU. Information campaigns will continue to be launched as part of efforts to discredit European values, as well as to further the narratives of EU-driven economic and social deprivation and of the economic exploitation of the former Soviet states by the West. These levers can be used to reinforce Eurosceptic parties within the Eastern Partnership countries, and thus obstruct the implementation of EU association agreements.

Furthermore, it is likely that some of the Kremlin's proxy groups will be 'rebranded' in order to give them a less exposed Russian identity, as was the case with Russian youth movements in Moldova and Crimea. Their names will emphasize a brand that is more Eurasian and less Russian.

¹⁵² 'Russian Defence Spending to Increase by One-third', *Russia beyond the Headlines*, 13 October 2014, http://in.rbth.com/economics/2014/10/13/russian_defence_spending_to_increase_by_one-third_38973.

¹⁵³ 'Rossiya sokratit financirovaniye obezlichenykh program za robezhom' [Russia will decrease non-assigned funding abroad], *Vzgliad*, 5 June 2013, <http://www.vz.ru/news/2013/6/5/635776.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Konstantin Kosachev, 'Rossiya i sodejsviye mezhdunarodnomy razvitiyu' [Russia and support for international development], *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhyzn*, June 2014.

Events in Ukraine have served as a preview of Putin's ambition for the Russian World, and what this may lead to. There is no guarantee that similar scenarios could not be played out in Estonia (Narva), northern Kazakhstan, Moldova (Gagauzia) or Latvia (Daugavpils). These regions have a high concentration of Russian-speakers or Russian ethnic minorities, and the fluid geography of the Russian World provides the Kremlin with ample room for manoeuvre across the former Soviet space.

None the less, if the Ukraine gambit exposed the scale and impact of Russian non-state actors, the space for Russia to conduct proxy operations in its neighbourhood has since become more challenging. In September 2015 Ukraine's National Security Council imposed sanctions on 12 Russian associations, Cossack groups and religious charities, and banned their activity in Ukraine.¹⁵⁵ Moldova has also barred entry to the leaders of several proxy-groups.

Countering the challenge

Understanding the network of Russian state-funded proxy groups is critical to countering their potential threat to state integrity and sovereignty. For example, the media in the region and in the West need to understand that spokespeople or commentators connected with these groups are not always the 'independent' experts that they claim to be. Russian state media operating abroad must be closely monitored for compliance with the broadcasting regulations of their host countries and, where necessary, sanctioned for violations. Media and watchdog organizations should challenge disinformation and launch professionally produced, authoritative information sources targeted at the Russian-speaking populations. Russia's neighbours should act to reinforce police authority and strengthen the rule of law through reform of their civil security sector. The activities of proxy groups in host countries should be closely monitored, and such groups should even be closed down if they are deemed to undermine state sovereignty or represent a threat to territorial integrity.

Western pro-democracy foundations should focus on deepening the engagement of citizens in their programmes and forge contacts with non-traditional local civil society actors such as cultural groups, religious charities and parental associations. Strong, independent CSOs should identify specific parts of societies targeted by Russian propaganda and proxy groups, and promote efforts to connect more effectively with citizens and create depoliticized, neutral spaces as a forum for the expression of diverse views and to help build consensus. Such face-to-face, ongoing and potentially transformative activities are critical to increasing social cohesion, building trust and finding the common ground that could expedite reforms and result in more democratic policy-making.

Such a robust Western strategy, in cooperation with efforts by national governments, civil society and independent media, can help protect nascent democracies, reinforce open societies and facilitate a European future for the countries of this shared neighbourhood.

¹⁵⁵ 'Ukraina nareshti vvela sankcii proty Rosii: Povnyj spysok pryzvyshch i kompanij' [Ukraine finally introduced sanctions against Russia: Full list of names and companies], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2015/09/17/7081600/>.

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Cover image: A pro-Russian demonstrator shouts slogans during a rally in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk on 8 March 2014

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