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[Deluded Dreams of a Third Rome](#)



Russia's conflict with the West is entering a dangerous new phase. The war in Syria is flaring up once again. An ex-spy is fighting for his life in a British hospital, amid diplomatic fallout over the first use of chemical weapons on European soil since the Second World War. Investigators in the United States are upping the ante in their search for alleged Russian interference in their election process; a fresh round of sanctions on Russia are starting to bite.

All hopes — and there were many — that at least a modicum of "normalization" could have been possible by now have turned out to be specious. And it could even get worse from here.

What is the mood in Russia, one might wonder. National TV channels are duly detailing how best to stockpile a personal bomb shelter. Dozens of analysts are competing to make the most dire of Cold War comparisons, some even equating today's troubles with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Vladislav Surkov, meanwhile, a former top spin doctor for Vladimir Putin, has [published an article](#) on the future of Russia as a "Third Rome." The idea of the piece is quite simple: After its annexation of Crimea, Russia finally broke up with the West and now for hundreds of years will exist as an exceptional civilization: *"For four centuries Russia pivoted to the East and for four centuries to the West. Nowhere have we been rooted. Both roads have we passed. Now the ideologies*

of the third way, the third type of civilization, the third world, the third Rome will be in demand..."

The author, in his characteristically ironic manner, espouses the idea that it is necessary to rejoice in the advent of these new times, and the historical significance of the moment. In his view it is best not to worry much about Trumps, Assads, or the ruble exchange rate.

By dwelling on the clash of "geopolitical structures" and "historical epochs," it seems that Surkov has finally and resoundingly joined a club of Eurasianist dreamers and geopolitical fantasists. Members of this club have been anticipating the demise of Europe for the last hundred years or so, and in turn promise a grand and special future for Russia. (First Rome. Then Byzantium. Now Moscow: An old Tsarist, Russian Orthodox idea.)

Strong But Always Offended

Surkov's reasoning fits well into the more recent foreign policy discourse of Sergei Karaganov, who has been actively shaping the "new meanings" of Russian foreign policy over the past half decade or so. In his version of reality, Russia "wins" year after year on the international arena. Characterizing the results of 2017, he [writes](#): *"the strong are the lucky ones and Russian victories are largely man-made. They are the result of a realistic assessment of the world and adequate solutions."* Karaganov constantly reports on the successes of Russia's attempts at building a multi-polar world — one in which Russia occupies one of the leading places. Already in Asia, Russia has come into "[its own](#)" and is now in lockstep with China in "[not allowing the return of US hegemony](#)." The United States, in Karaganov's view, is incapable of reconciling the loss of its status, and will struggle to accept the onset of a new era of world politics.

Karaganov, Surkov and many other Russian authors are united by an unyielding promise of a new tomorrow, one where Russia is an unequivocal winner, and the West is finally left by the wayside. From the vantage point of a "Third Rome," there are no mistakes made by the leadership of Russia; all responsibility for what is happening lies with its enemies, while Russia is strong but always offended. Naturally, such a picture of the world cannot but resemble the speeches of President Putin, Minister Lavrov and numerous comments of the Russian Foreign Ministry. This is not surprising; the "masters of Russian narratives" work exclusively to support the existing course, whatever that happens to be. If Putin would declare tomorrow the return of Crimea, dozens of articles will be written about the "historical significance of reconciliation" and the new European era of Russian democracy.

Where is the Push Back?

More balanced experts carefully and moderately criticize Putin's foreign policy mistakes, pointing to miscalculations in Ukraine, in Europe, in the US, about the limited success of its pivot to the East and total defeat in matters of economic development. Even when diluted into meek criticisms, this advice is not [taken into account in the Kremlin, and is also hardly relevant](#). The epoch of post-modernist confrontation is over; we are bouncing back to the norm of a real Cold War, with real risks of it turning hot.

We can long reason about the problems of feedback and independent critical analysis in authoritarian regimes like Russia — we could correctly note that Putin treats his electoral success as a popular endorsement for [his military agenda](#). We could also note that the Kremlin hardly bases its decisions on critical, independent analysis; information coming from various military or intelligence channels are the main currency here, followed by informal advice from old friends and comrades. The worldview promoted is one where the military, intelligence and old friends are regarded as trustworthy, while the rest are dismissed as potentially hostile and eminently suspicious.

The deafness to outside criticism can be expected for the rest of Putin's tenure. Putin's own personality — or at least the public's perception of it — plays a huge role here, especially when this personality has ruled for almost 20 years already. The complex of the "lost empire" is not going to disappear. Staying in power for so long will also make it even harder for any attempts for the Russian leader to objectively assess his own strength and capabilities. The result could be a further divorce from reality.

So what to expect? I believe Russia's behavior today can be explained in three general tropes that guide today's Kremlin and will continue to do so.

1. Putin is Russia, Russia is Putin. What's good for Putin is good for Russia.

This of course means no meaningful reforms are possible; the Kremlin can't risk breaking down the existing power vertical of loyalty. The Kremlin needs a visibility of mass support. Thus it has to mobilize the Russian population around its leader. To do this, the strategy has been one where there is constant and dynamic fight against a perceived enemy, both externally and internally; a distraction from substantial reforms.

2. Recognition is priceless.

The recognition of Russia (Putin) as important, dangerous, or strong creates an illusion of being a grand power; it is an illusion which is liked and prized, both by Putin and his electorate. The economy is secondary; the status of a great power is a primary goal. Whatever that means in practice, grandeur is paramount.

3. History decides.

In the full sweep of "Russia's 1000 year history", Putin has no desire to become a Gorbachev. For Putin, to become a Gorbachev is to fail. Better to be like Nicolas I, Brezhnev or even an Andropov. The annexation of Crimea is an historical accomplishment, according to Putin and his acolytes, and he is unlikely to ever back away from a stance that it was Russia's most important moment since the collapse of the USSR. There can be no compromises here.

And Syria? What is Syria for Russia if not an historical prestige prize and a Cold War relic; essentially, it is Russia's geopolitical indulgence of keeping its own vassal. This vassal — the Assad regime — uses chemical weapons and kills its own citizens daily. But the point of pride comes from Russia being the only country able to mete out disciplinary measures at its own discretion.

"History decides" also means that the Kremlin is convinced that at the brink of war, the West will have to offer a bargain which would allow Putin an exit ramp, one that could bring gains at a negotiating table.

That is exactly why sanctions — while hurtful — are inefficient. They do not change the Kremlin's actions, as they represent only an incremental, cautious, predictable response from the West. Sanctions by default can't change how the Kremlin operates. The more Russian oligarchs suffer, the more Russian pensioners would chip in to bail out yet another of the country's powerful business elite, and the more the blame is then deflected onto the perpetrators of the sanctions, giving the country a common external enemy.

That is exactly why, in the medium term, all parties involved are balancing on the brink of war without any clear prospect for any kind of détente. This is a dangerous moment. The Kremlin expresses its readiness for such a balancing act; it has been preparing for it for years now. After the chemical attack on Skripal, and yet another chemical attack conducted by Assad in Syria, it seems the West is getting ready for an active confrontation with Russia. In this context, any more talk from Russian along the lines of a "Third Rome" is farfetched and perilous. Then again, that does not mean there won't be more of it as tensions rise.

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