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Rebuilt Empire or New Collapse? Geopolitical Visions of Russian Students

VALERIA KASAMARA & ANNA SOROKINA

Abstract

This essay presents findings from 136 in-depth interviews conducted amongst students at three leading Russian universities. Qualitative analysis revealed a three-way divide in how the students imagined Russia's future. The largest group is optimistic about Russia, seeing it as a global power. A second, smaller group expects Russia to decline in the coming years, while the third group is undecided and unwilling to make forecasts. The essay considers the arguments of the 'optimists' and 'pessimists', who respectively backed and criticised the annexation of Crimea. The essay highlights the association between support for the annexation and optimism about Russia's future.

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES THE GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS OF YOUNG Russians studying at leading universities in Moscow. It presents findings from 136 in-depth interviews conducted with students from the Moscow M.V. Lomonosov State University (MSU), the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), and the Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO). Some of these students are likely to join Russia's elite in future and may eventually come to determine the direction of Russia's domestic and foreign policy.

Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed the elite students to be a thoroughly heterogeneous group, encompassing two principal visions, or predictive scenarios, of Russia's position and role in the world. Just over half of the interviewees held a favourable vision of Russia's future: although they perceived contemporary Russia as being encircled by hostile forces, they spoke proudly of their country's ability to defend its interests and stand up to the 'aggressive' United States. Roughly one quarter of the students expressed a much more negative vision: they focused on Russia's failure to resolve a set of economic and demographic problems that, they predicted, would result in the country's decline and, perhaps, its fragmentation. This essay identifies the contradictory sets of arguments and values that underpin these conflicting visions. In particular, it aims to illuminate the strong link between support for Crimea's annexation and confidence in Russia's prospects as a 'great power' on the world stage.

The research has been conducted under the financial support of the Fundamental Research Center of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

Our essay begins by considering the context of Russian foreign policy and public opinion in 2014, and thus drawing a conceptual framework from the existing literature. It then explains the methods used in the research, before discussing the findings from the interviews. We conclude by highlighting promising issues for further analysis.

Russian foreign policy and public opinion: context and concepts

The year 2014 saw Russia actively follow a hardline foreign policy, manifested in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Russia's military involvement in the southeast of Ukraine. These events were followed by the imposition of US and Western sanctions on Russia, and reciprocal sanctions that banned food imports from the United States and the EU. All these events and their media coverage had an impact on Russian public opinion.

The first observed trend was growth in patriotic sentiments and a feeling of national pride. In 2014 the share of Russian citizens who felt proud of living in Russia reached a peak of 86%.¹ Between 2012 and 2015 the number of Russians who felt proud of Russia's political influence and its military force grew from 46% to 68% and from 59% to 85% respectively.² Pride in the country was accompanied by support for President Vladimir V. Putin, whose rating peaked in June 2015 at 89%.³ Most Russian citizens believed Putin was conducting the right international policy—74% said this policy had met their personal expectations.⁴ A poll conducted in August 2014 showed that a majority of Russians perceived their country's strengthened international position, the establishment of domestic order, and an increase in Russia's military capabilities as Putin's major achievements.⁵ Meanwhile, 84% of Russians approved of Crimea's annexation and 66% gave little thought to the fact that 'the greater part of the population in the West and in Ukraine considers that Russia, by incorporating Crimea, has broken its post-World-War-II and post-Soviet international agreements and violated international law'.⁶

A second notable trend in Russian public opinion was the abrupt negative change in attitudes towards the United States, following sharp criticism of Western countries by top Russian officials. For example, during the final plenary session of the Valdai International Discussion Club of October 2014, Putin accused the United States and its allies of destroying the international security system.⁷

In 2015 a majority of the Russian population considered the United States to be their country's main foe. In 1991 80% of respondents had characterised Russia's relationship with

¹'Vospriyatie rossiyanami svoei strany', Levada Centre, 18 November 2014, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/old/18-11-2014/vospriyatie-rossiyanami-svoei-strany>, accessed 6 July 2016.

²'Gordost', patriotizm i otvetstvennost', Levada Centre, 7 December 2015, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/07/gordost-patriotizm-i-otvetstvennost/>, accessed 6 July 2016.

³'Iyun'skie reitingi odobreniya i doveriya', Levada Centre, 24 June 2015, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2015/06/24/iyunskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya-5/>, accessed 6 July 2016.

⁴'Tretii srok V. Putina: O rabote glavy gosudarstva, ego uspekham i neudacham', Public Opinion Foundation, 25 June 2014, available at: <http://fom.ru/Politika/11568>, accessed 10 October 2015.

⁵'Vladimir Putin: udachi i neudachi, sila', Levada Centre, 9 September 2014, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/09-09-2014/vladimir-putin-udachi-i-neudachi-sila>, accessed 10 October 2015.

⁶'Konflikt Rossii i zapadnykh stran vokrug Ukrainy', Levada Centre, November 2014, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/21-11-2014/konflikt-rossii-i-zapadnykh-stran-vokrug-ukrainy>, accessed 10 October 2015.

⁷'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', 24 October 2014, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>, accessed 10 October 2015.

the United States as friendly; in 2014, 74% saw this relationship as hostile.⁸ In 2014, a great number of Russian citizens believed that the United States was influencing the Russia policy of European states: one in four respondents was convinced that Russia and Western countries were in a state of ‘cold war’.⁹

A negative attitude towards the United States has become prevalent among Russian youth. A majority (53%) remarked that the Russian–US relationship worsened due to US policy, as the United States continues to play a negative role in the world (76%). One in five poll respondents considers that Russia should not even try to build friendly relations with the United States.¹⁰

Russian society at large appeared to be convinced that a major goal of the West is to weaken Russia. Many people believe that Western criticism and the United States’ ‘hostile’ policy are aimed at grabbing Russia’s natural resources (46%) and they also fear US military power (43%).¹¹ The sharp deterioration in attitudes towards the United States is related to recent events in Ukraine, as Russians, generally, hold the United States government responsible for what has happened there. A belief in ‘being surrounded by enemies’ was, however, quite strong in Russian society, and amongst the youth in particular, even before the crisis in Ukraine (Gerber & Mendelson 2008; Kasamara & Sorokina 2012). Contradictory assessments of Western countries have also been observed in relevant scholarly debates (Kasamara & Sorokina 2010). On the one hand, most Russian young people see the US way of life as an example to follow (fashion, technical equipment, popular music, education, and so forth) but, on the other hand, they share popular stereotypes about the United States being Russia’s major foe since the Cold War era.

Dijkink introduced the term ‘geopolitical vision’ to refer to ‘any idea concerning the relation between one’s own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy’ (Dijkink 1996, p. 11). In this study we examine geopolitical visions concerning the role performed and place occupied by Russia in the world. In the terms of Russian scholar Vladimir Kolosov (2003), we are interested in ‘low geopolitics’,¹² that is, how citizens feel about their country, its place in the world, and about other countries.

Numerous previous studies have examined geopolitical visions amongst Russian citizens, including popular perceptions of Russia’s eastern partners (Kozlov 2007; Larin 2008), attitudes

⁸‘Otnoshenie rossiyan k drugim stranam’, Levada Centre, 6 August 2014, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/06-08-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>, accessed 10 October 2015.

⁹‘Kholodnaya voina—vskore nachnetsya ili uzhe idet’, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), 28 November, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115071>, accessed 10 October 2015.

¹⁰‘Otnosheniya mezhdru SSHA i Rossiei: monitoring mnenii’, Public Opinion Foundation, 24 November 2014, available at: <http://fom.ru/Mir/11842>, accessed 6 July 2016.

¹¹‘Vneshnyaya politika rossii: orientiry i kritika’, Levada Centre, 13 January 2015, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2015/01/13/vneshnyaya-politika-rossii-orientiry-i-kritika/>, accessed 6 July 2016.

¹²Kolosov argues that critical geopolitics involves studying interaction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ geopolitics. ‘High’ geopolitics is created by political leaders, academics, and other experts and reputable journalists engaged in international relations. By ‘low’ geopolitics he means a set of social perceptions of a country’s place in the world, principles and orientation of its foreign policy, potential allies and sources of external threats, symbols, and images. The author underlines that in modern society, ‘high’ and ‘low’ geopolitics are inseparable: being able to develop autonomously, they still complement each other (Kolosov 2003, p. 125).

towards Western countries (Andreev 2010; Semenenko 2013; Gerber 2015), and Russia's role in the world (Urnov 2014). Some research has focused particularly on the attitudes of youth (Muller 2009; Kolosov & Zotova 2013, Mäkinen 2016).

These studies emphasised two consistent features of geopolitical visions in Russia. The first is a widespread conviction that Russia must play a leading ('great power') role in international relations; the second is the widespread conviction that Russia is encircled by a group of enemies, led by the United States.

Research by Stent (2008) highlighted continuity between Putin's Russia and the Soviet era, when elites spoke about the West as the main enemy (*glavnyi protivnik*), whose goal was to overthrow the regime and to weaken Russia. Under Putin, foreign policy has been heavily based on past achievements. According to Sakwa, 'as in all countries, but particularly in those which once gloried in an imperial past, the present is viewed through the prism of historical concerns and achievements. In the Russian case this is reinforced by a double historical tradition, the Soviet and the tsarist' (Sakwa 2011, p. 958). Anti-Americanism and officially sanctioned anti-Western agitation has lately been described as comparable to the worst years of the Cold War (Kara-Murza 2013).

What is the source of Russian geopolitical visions, and how are they maintained? Shlapentokh (2011) challenges the idea that anti-Americanism is engrained in the Russian psyche. He points out that most research attributes negative Russian attitudes towards the United States either to Russia's 'authoritarian personality', or to the legacy of Soviet communism and Stalin. Shlapentokh also argued that the scholarly discourse tended to exaggerate the relevance of these factors (Shlapentokh 2011, p. 876). Anti-Americanism, in his view, is generated by Russia's ruling elite, who play a crucial role in guiding public opinion. The population changes its stance towards the United States as it is manipulated by government-controlled media. Shlapentokh has furthermore emphasised that elite-level anti-Americanism is not unique to Russia: his investigation of elite attitudes in six countries (India, China, Germany, Columbia, Russia, and Egypt) found that, even in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, hostility towards the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration was widespread (Shlapentokh 2011, pp. 881–82).

The key role of political elites in forming the geopolitical visions of young Russians is also identified by Gerber and Mendelson (2008), who conducted nationally representative surveys of Russian youth aged from 16 to 29, in which 64% of respondents described the United States as either an 'enemy' or a 'rival'. Gerber and Mendelson asserted that Putin's rhetoric represented the leading factor shaping this generation's perceptions of the United States and foreign influences in general (Gerber & Mendelson 2008, p. 137). A number of more recent studies has similarly drawn attention to the leading role of Putin's government in shaping Russian geopolitical visions, for instance, in campaigns aimed at the growth of Russian (anti-Ukrainian) nationalism, and the division of Ukrainians into 'good' and 'bad' varieties (Goble 2016; Kuzio 2016; Riabchuk 2016).

We share the view that the political elite exerts considerable influence over the formation of geopolitical visions. However, the effectiveness of official propaganda is conditioned by its reference to symbols that are long-established in the Russian consciousness. According to Gudkov (2015), support for Putin is linked to contemporary Russian nationalism, which is in turn closely connected to the traumatic experiences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, defeat in the Cold War, and loss of superpower status, which occupy a central place in the structure of Russians' collective identity. Gudkov writes,

The feeling of belonging to an enormous country, one of the two militarily most powerful states, which ‘everyone in the world used to fear and respect’, provided the ‘little man’ with compensation for his daily humiliation, for his awareness of chronic poverty, lack of rights, and dependence on a despotic authority. In this respect Russian nationalism feeds on the negative energy of mass resentment. It is devoid of images of the future and oriented toward a mythologised past—this is why it is preoccupied with the search for internal and external enemies, for the culprits responsible for the country’s degradation, blocked transition to democracy, and so on. (Gudkov 2015, pp. 37–8)

Our previous research (Kasamara & Sorokina 2012) confirmed that the image of a ‘great power’ surrounded by enemies led by the United States is deeply rooted in the minds of Russians of all ages, from schoolchildren to old-aged pensioners. We studied three groups: ‘ordinary’ Russians (schoolchildren, students, the military, middle-aged employed people, pensioners); ‘social outcasts’ (street children and homeless people); and State *Duma* deputies. Unequivocal anti-Americanism was featured even within groups that do not watch TV and, consequently, are not directly affected by media and propaganda: homeless adults and children, for example, tended to be very negative in their assessments of the United States, saying that ‘its ideology of immorality, corruption and sleazy politics intends to destroy Russia; [the United States] is unquestionably an enemy’ (Kasamara & Sorokina 2012, pp. 285–86).

Research methods and data

The present study focuses on how Crimea, in particular, has served as an intensifying trigger for a ‘great-power’ vision of Russia. Crimea has become a feature of propaganda stirring strong Russian emotions. Our analysis traces the connection between views about Russia as a ‘great-power’ and views about Crimea’s ‘incorporation’ amongst elite university students.

Our study is based on the methodology of ‘grounded theory’, which puts the empirical evidence before the creation of a theory, and never *vice versa*. Introduced by US sociologists Glaser and Strauss, the method seems at first contradictory to traditional research approaches, where investigations begin by constructing a theory and formulating a hypothesis, before turning to its empirical verification. In a ‘grounded theory’ approach this is reversed: the collection of empirical data becomes the basis for a mini-theory formulation. In the accumulated material, the most significant research elements—markers, codes—are identified and further combined into larger categories, the latter becoming in turn the ground for a single theoretic concept. Hence, ‘grounded theory’ is structured inductively, from simple cognitive operations to more complicated ones (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The mini-theory arising from our qualitative analysis is that the studied group is highly heterogeneous, encompassing distinct visions (predictive scenarios) based on contradictory sets of arguments. This provides a basis for further research using more representative sampling and quantitative methods.

In 2014 we conducted 136 in-depth interviews with students of the three leading Moscow Universities: the Moscow M.V. Lomonosov State University (MSU), National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), and the Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO).¹³ We recruited approximately 45 respondents from each

¹³In 2013–2014 the number of students enrolled at each university was 38,000, 27,500, and 6,000 respectively.

university, of whom around 40% were female and 60% were male. All respondents were studying for undergraduate degrees in socio-economic faculties.

Following the introduction of a unified national exam, where results are sent to the universities by mail, the number of students from the Russian regions has increased at these universities. According to MGIMO statistics, 55% of their admitted students live in Moscow and the Moscow region, while 45% are from elsewhere in the Russian Federation. There are 35 different nationalities represented amongst first-year students.¹⁴

We consider this group of respondents to be of particular interest because they are likely to occupy positions of influence in the future. The selected universities are Russia's top three higher education institutions in the socio-economic disciplinary sector.¹⁵ Consequently, students at these institutions are ambitious and have stronger than average chances of a high-profile future career in the Russian political elite. In particular, MGIMO (which operates under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has traditionally been a talent pipeline for Russian politics. These students differ from 'average' Russian citizens in that they have more opportunities to go abroad as part of their studies; they also have various online resources at their disposal. They generally speak more than two foreign languages; their views, as a consequence, are more susceptible to internationalisation. They are taught by highly qualified staff, including current politicians and active public figures, who may facilitate the reproduction of political values and assist the students' advance into the ruling class (Kasamara & Sorokina 2015). Thus, these students' views are unlikely to be representative of the wider Russian population, but may well be influential in the years to come.

We recruited our research participants through 'snowball' sampling. The degree programme of the interviewees was not taken into account, because it was beyond the scope of our project to explore correlation between the students' attitudes and their major disciplines. The students were not asked directly about their geopolitical attitudes, Russia's role in the world or its relationship with other countries. Rather than using direct questions about these matters, we opted to let them express their geopolitical visions in a broader discursive context. This is a common technique of in-depth interviews aimed at eliciting objective responses. For example, analysing the students' views about 'the incorporation of Crimea' (*prisoedinenie Kryma*)—as the event is officially described in Russian state documents—exposed their understanding of the norms of international law, as well as their attitudes towards various international actors.

Our interviews were conducted between October and December 2014, when current events were intensifying the atmosphere of antagonism between Russia and the West. For example, on 2 November general elections took place in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (*Donetskaya narodnaya respublika*—DPR/DNR) and Lugansk People's Republic (*Luganskaya narodnaya respublika*—LPR/LNR). Russia recognised the results of the

¹⁴MGIMO Statistics, available at: <http://old.mgimo.ru/news/university/document276442.phtml>, accessed 6 July 2016. It is worth mentioning that these are the students with the highest unified national exam rating and those who won various educational contests. The average score required for admission is 90 points (max. 100). The compulsory unified national exam launched in 2006 made it possible to eliminate corruption in university entrance exams and to admit truly talented schoolchildren, not only those with the greatest resources. Moreover, the developed system of different grants supporting gifted school pupils gives a real opportunity to children from poorer backgrounds to study at these prestigious universities.

¹⁵See, 'Kachestvo platnogo priema v gosudarstvennye vuzy RF po profilnyu—2015', Russian Education Ministry, available at: http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/ratings/Platniy_priem_2015.htm, accessed 11 November 2015.

elections, claiming they complied with the Minsk agreements;¹⁶ neither Ukraine nor Western states positively received these results. Throughout the autumn, Western and Ukrainian media were reporting that the Russian government had sent armour, artillery, and combat troops to eastern Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defence categorically denied these accusations.¹⁷ A related development was the European Union's adoption of substantial additional sanctions on investment, services, and trade with Crimea and Sevastopol in December 2014.¹⁸ Another major event—in fact, the most salient one for millions of Russians—was the devaluation of the ruble amidst a slump in world oil prices. On 16 December the exchange rate plunged to a record low against both the dollar and the euro. The value of Russian shares also dropped abruptly, and people were buying up foreign currency in panic. Analysts came to use the label 'black Tuesday' to describe this context.¹⁹ These events provided the backdrop against which the students shared their opinions.

We asked the students how they imagined Russia's future without concentrating on any particular issue. When asked what Russia would be like in ten or 15 years' time, respondents could speak about both foreign and domestic policy without restrictions. The same questions were posed to all the students, who were interviewed individually.

The interviews were held in places comfortable for a confidential talk: in cafes and students' campus hostels. Respondents were guaranteed full anonymity, with the aim of minimising self-censorship. The average duration of an interview was 40 minutes. The interview transcripts ran to 890 pages, processed through the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner.²⁰ All coding was conducted by the authors. We should note that no consistent cross-university differences were observed in the students' answers. The only exception was a tendency for MGIMO students to pay greater attention to international relations in their responses.

Interview results

Through qualitative analysis of the interview responses we were able to divide the students into groups based on their visions of Russia's global role in the years to come. The respondents were generally 'Russia-centric', focused on the challenges facing Russia domestically. Some of them found it hard to predict international developments. As one noted, Russia's annexation of Crimea had been quite unexpected, so there was much uncertainty as to what the future would bring.

¹⁶This is a protocol signed by the leaders of Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia in Minsk, on 5 September 2014. The protocol, signed under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), meant to implement an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine. See 'Protocol on the Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group, signed in Minsk, 5 September 2014', OSCE, 5 September 2014, available at: <http://www.osce.org/home/123257>, accessed 23 December 2016.

¹⁷Lavrov: pravitel'stvo Ukrainy i opolchency dolzhny sami zavershit' process razoruzheniya', Tass Russian News Agency, 8 November 2014, available at: <http://tass.ru/politika/1559011>, accessed 23 December 2016.

¹⁸Hronologiya vvedeniya sankcij i otvetnye mery Rossii v 2014–2015 godah', *RIA News*, 25 November 2015, available at: <https://ria.ru/spravka/2015/11/25/1328470681.html>, accessed 23 December 2016.

¹⁹Rubl' ne poslushalsya CB: evro vyros do 100, dollar—do 80', *Euronews*, 16 December 2014, available at: <http://ru.euronews.com/2014/12/16/financial-crisis-threatens-for-russia-as-huge-interest-rate-hike-fails-to-help->, accessed 23 December 2016.

²⁰QDA Miner is a qualitative data analysis software package for coding text, for example interview transcripts, available at: <https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>, accessed 21 January 2017.

Two distinct visions emerged within the ranks of those students who did share their thoughts about Russia's medium-term future in the international context. Just over half of the 136 respondents envisaged a positive scenario, in which Russia would become one of the leading world powers—or even a global hegemon. These students also extended support to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Roughly one quarter of respondents (26%) saw Russia's future in a negative light—foreseeing decline and an inability to deal with key problems, including corruption and economic inequality. These students, in turn, expressed disapproval of Crimea's annexation. The remaining 20% of students was labelled 'uncertain or undecided', as they were neither entirely optimistic, nor entirely pessimistic about Russia's fate in the next ten to 15 years. The results we discuss below shed important light on the very contradictory geopolitical scenarios that are popular amongst the studied population.

Scenario 1: Russia will be a great country

This first scenario was primarily supported by a group of interviewees who expressed trust in and allegiance to the present political leadership, voiced approval for the political course of President Putin as well as to 'Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation', as it is described in official Russian sources.

This group of students argued that Russia has all the resources necessary to become, at the very least, an equal amongst the leading world powers (China and the United States) or, at the extreme, 'the world hegemon'.²¹ As the 'legal successor of the powerful Soviet empire',²² Russia has achieved notable results on the international arena as its word is now to be reckoned with and it has awakened fear. Currently Russia 'maintains the balance of forces in the world and is the only power capable of resisting the world's aggressors'.²³

Respondents mentioned military power and nuclear weapons as the key resources available to Russia to realise this scenario

Russia is quite powerful as a military state, in terms of its arms industry, battle readiness and even its nuclear defence, and everything concerned with nuclear armament. I think that, even if we imagine that some military action started, the opposing side would hardly be able to offer something that could strongly overbalance our country's strength.²⁴

The interviewees also spoke about the important role of a strong political leader, 'who does not cave in to the interests of other countries but always gives priority to the interests of his own nation'.²⁵ According to these students, 15 years of Putin rule strengthened Russia, so that it is now 'apparently the only counterbalance to America'.²⁶

This first group of respondents expected Russia to establish, in ten to 15 years, a powerful empire oriented towards the East. They stated that Russia would obviously maintain friendly relations with its eastern neighbour, China, which, as one put it, is closer to Russia both in spirit and mentality, and which has already moved far ahead of Western countries: 'And if

²¹Student 35, female, 16 years old, Moscow, 25 October 2014.

²²Student 113, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 10 December 2014.

²³Student 2, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 6 October 2014.

²⁴Student 29, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 22 October 2014.

²⁵Student 34, male, 21 years old, Moscow, 24 October 2014.

²⁶Student 78, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 19 November 2014.

we manage to succeed in having good relations with China, then we will definitely become a great power, because China in fact has everything we need. If our countries cooperate, we can break forth into world leadership'.²⁷

These students also expressed the view that Russia would be unlikely to normalise its links with the West, predicting the persistence of a most tense relationship between Russia and the United States, as the latter would not want to lose its leading position. Moreover, Russia would have to act as 'the world standard of justice'²⁸ in order to regulate the most complicated issues of international relations, resisting the United States and its aggressive policy:

We will be a leading country, the positive force is Russia, so to speak, and the negative force, so to speak, is America, as if they were a kind of counterbalance to each other, and it will be very interesting to watch this situation. We are already rising, and we will finally dominate.²⁹

Those offering this vision, interestingly, did not see the EU as a serious international player in the future: for these students, the EU would soon cease to exist, as 'Europe is undergoing degradation now',³⁰ and is therefore in no condition to overcome a wide range of economic and political problems. Russia, as a consequence, would face a wave of European migrants who would come in search of a better life.

These students expect Russia to play the role of a policeman on the international arena, helping weak groups of individual and weak states while keeping other influential nation-states in check. Students in this group claim that they see Russia as a great power that will continue expanding its sphere of influence and dictating its own rules of the game internationally, as 'a strong state can afford to interfere with other states' affairs with impunity'.³¹

The United States as a major threat

The vision of Russia's 'hostile encirclement' was widespread amongst the supporters of Scenario 1. As a core component of their geopolitical vision was represented by a negative image of the West, this group of students made frequent references to 'Western influence' and to 'the hostile policy of the West'. Analysis of the interviews shows that by 'the West' the respondents primarily meant the United States. When speaking about countries like Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, they preferred the terms 'European countries', or 'European Union'.

The students generally held very stereotyped views of the purposes and tasks of major international organisations, including the United Nations and NATO. They could not explain either the history of these institutions' foundation, their missions, or key membership. As a result, NATO was usually associated with the United States, and its goal was exclusively interpreted as a hostile policy towards Russia: 'I think NATO is some kind of mistake; they do everything just to scare Russia. A war is a terrifying thing, no doubt'.³²

²⁷Student 70, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

²⁸Student 29, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 22 December 2014.

²⁹Student 78, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 19 November 2014.

³⁰Student 80, female, 20 years old, Moscow, 20 November 2014.

³¹Student 117, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 12 December 2014.

³²Student 53, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 4 November 2014.

The students believed that the United States had been Russia's main foe since the Soviet era, and regarded the weakening of Russia, or even its breakdown, as the main objective of the US government. Some students said that the United States wanted to repeat the scenario of 1991, as 'the American government played a significant role in the USSR's collapse'.³³

The United States' hostility towards Russia, in the respondents' views, had several explanations. First, the United States sees Russia as a major international rival, as today 'only Russia can resist the aggressive policy of the States'.³⁴ Second, the respondents were convinced that the United States was interested in Russia's huge natural riches, as they considered the economy of the United States to be 'totally reliant on natural resources'. Mineral largesse, they added, could have been a great help for the US government in its struggle against the economic crisis:

The United States is facing a crisis now, and we know that crises are always (a pause) smoothed by, let's say, military actions. Some wars, some world conflicts, some oil bases takeovers, and so on. Russia is abounding in its natural resources, and this is, so to say, a very valuable target for America.³⁵

Many of the students did furthermore argue that the United States was trying to destabilise Russia politically as well as economically. One student said, for instance, that the US government had strongly interfered in the economic policy of the Russian Central Bank:

Well [a pause], I suppose I am not a very good specialist in law, in the constitution, and so on, but, as many people say, there are many laws in our constitution that, so to say, make obstacles for the freedom of actions of the Russian Federation. I mean, as they say, the United States imposed them on us, including our constitution. Besides, the Central Bank of Russia is totally dependent on the United States, and that is not so good.³⁶

In contrast to their negative attitudes to the United States, this group of students expressed a view of European countries that could be described as indulgent rather than hostile. The students believed that the EU, due to its economic, political, and military dependence on the United States, was just afraid of counteracting the United States government. European leaders, they said, performed the role of stooges in the hands of the United States president. In their responses, these students remarked that, in their views, public opinion in most European countries is actually favourable towards Russia. These students went on to say that European leaders imposed sanctions upon Russia because of pressures exerted by the United States, and in spite of the attitudes of the general public in their countries. Below is an example of one such student opinion:

Germany, for example, has no negative feelings towards Russia but as the European Union and NATO are sponsored by the United States, I think, they are just frightened, they are afraid of getting rid of the United States's influence, they are scared to say their word and to put America where it belongs, in this case. What I do not like in Russia is the fact that it cannot do anything to help other

³³Student 88, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 25 November 2014.

³⁴Student 102, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 3 December 2014.

³⁵Student 29, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 22 December 2014.

³⁶Student 13, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 12 October 2014.

countries to send America about its business, because all see clearly that America is interfering in other countries' affairs, America has penetrated in all the states, where it could manage to get in. Russia, probably, does not have enough courage to do that.³⁷

The majority of the students admitted that a partnership between the leading world players would be preferable to permanent struggle. However, fear is seen as a serious barrier to productive dialogue. According to the respondents, European countries are afraid of the United States, and the United States and the EU are in turn afraid of Russia, due to the latter's nuclear arsenal:

For many states, even for the United States, Russia is an indispensable partner. It is not a matter of international politesse, nor rules of etiquette. It is because Russia really scares people. And one cannot say exactly, whether it is [fear of] a new Soviet Union, or a real fear of Russia's nuclear power, which is enough to put an end to international relations altogether [laughing].³⁸

The interviewees also spoke about the strong Russian Army out-rivalling the United States military: 'Americans are even afraid that, if something happens, God forbid, they may not even knock out our army without being prepared, because we have been working and having in mind that, if nobody helps us, we will manage to do everything by our own'.³⁹

Students who supported Scenario 1 and spoke of Russia's hostile encirclement tended to express positive arguments about Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation. We identified seven such arguments, which are outlined below.

Arguments for taking Crimea

Correcting the historical record was a key argument expressed in favour of the decision to annexe Crimea. The students were sneering about, and questioned the legitimacy of, the decision of Nikita Khrushchev (in 1954) to attach the territory of Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. One said that Khrushchev, then the leader of the USSR, 'first had a drink, and afterwards decided to give Crimea to them as a present';⁴⁰ another said that 'native Russian territory [Crimea] fell into the clutches of the Ukrainian highest ranks'.⁴¹

The students claimed that the territory of Crimea had never belonged to the Ukrainian people, suggesting that the Crimean Tatars or the Turks might have rights to it, but never the Ukrainians. Some interviewees emphasised that in Crimea, 'in the place of Chersonesos, the Russian Prince Vladimir the Great [in the tenth century] had been baptised'.⁴² Crimea, as a consequence, is to be considered the very 'cradle of Russian civilisation'.⁴³ Respondents also argued that Russia had protected and fought for the territory of Crimea throughout its history, particularly stressing the battle to defend Sevastopol during the Crimean War of 1853–1856.

Such detailed historical references may be explained through the lens of the influence exerted by Russian mass media. Prior research, interestingly, found high levels of historical

³⁷Student 53, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 4 November 2014.

³⁸Student 14, male, 17 years old, Moscow, 12 October 2014.

³⁹Student 70, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

⁴⁰Student 49, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 3 November 2014.

⁴¹Student 70, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

⁴²Student 122, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 15 December 2014.

⁴³Student 133, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 22 December 2014.

ignorance, even *vis-à-vis* twentieth century history, amongst comparable cohorts of students (Kasamara & Sorokina 2015). Only a few students surveyed in our previous study could explain who Nikita Khrushchev was: when recalling what he was famous for, they could only mention that he had planted corn and once banged his shoe on some desk (Kasamara & Sorokina 2015, p. 140). This is an example of the low levels of historical knowledge amongst the Russian youth: Lev Gudkov discussed at length this issue in his 2010 study of historical knowledge in Russia. According to Gudkov, historical ignorance provides fertile ground for the development of myths and stereotypes in society (Gudkov 2010).⁴⁴

Crimea's strategic significance represented the second major factor mentioned by the students to justify the annexation. They referred to Crimea's unique geographical position, which grants control over the Black Sea, thus making it of important strategic significance for Russia. Historically, Russia had a naval base there:

Crimea is the perfect military foothold for having total control over the Black Sea, simultaneously being a perfect base to control the economic situation in the countries of the Black Sea coast. It is a perfect staging ground, a transit point of a very important strategic location.⁴⁵

Some respondents said that Crimea would continue to play that vital role in the future of Russia. This, in their views, would profoundly change the distribution of influence in the world, giving Russia the opportunity to exercise control over 'the alignment of forces in the Black Sea region'.⁴⁶ Some students suggested that it was safer and much quieter to live in Russia, because there is 'no chance of American missiles appearing' on that territory in the immediate future.⁴⁷ Some students admitted that one could possibly argue endlessly about the economic and political reasons for Crimea's annexation but they insisted that the reasons for this action were mainly related to Russia's national security, and to the fear that this national security would be compromised by Western influence in Ukraine. In an attempt to illustrate this point, one student drew a parallel with the United States and its interests: 'similarly, no doubt, if one just imagines that Russia had put its missiles in Mexico, America would hardly be very happy about it'.⁴⁸

A third factor offered by the students to justify Crimea's incorporation was the need to help the people of Crimea avoid the fate of those facing war in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. Many students related the military conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea to the collapse of the USSR: they viewed the end of the Soviet Union as a tragedy because of the emergence of new state borders that ended up dividing families, leading to the issues faced

⁴⁴According to a VTsIOM poll, about 70% of young Russians has no clear associations regarding 1937, the time of the Stalinist purges (see, '1937 god v pamyati rossiyan', Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), 22 October 2007, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9000>, accessed 21 January 2017). The younger generation also has a very vague understanding of Soviet policy in Europe. For example, about 60% of young people said that they had never previously heard about Soviet troops entering Czechoslovakia in 1968 (see, '40 let sobytiyam v Chexoslovakii', Public Opinion Foundation, 8 August 2008, available at: http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/socium/hist_ro/sss/d083223, accessed 21 January 2017). Some 47% of student-aged Russians could not remember the date of the beginning of World War II (see, 'Znaynt li rossiiane istoriyu Otechestva?', Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), 27 October 2009, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=241&uid=12670>, accessed 21 January 2017).

⁴⁵Student 117, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 12 December 2014.

⁴⁶Student 39, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 28 October 2014.

⁴⁷Student 69, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

⁴⁸Student 101, male, 22 years old, Moscow, 3 December 2014.

today by the population of Ukraine. The students said that Crimeans had never been part of Ukraine and had always considered themselves Russians.

According to the respondents, it was necessary to protect the interests of Crimea's Russian population, who for a long period of time had faced discrimination from Ukrainians. Many interviewees said that they had relatives and friends in Crimea and, therefore, knew first-hand the real problems and misfortunes that the Russian people encountered there. One student identified a specific problem, namely a Ukrainian law that granted the Russian language regional status, causing discontent in Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine. Besides, they added, Ukraine had never been seriously engaged in the development of the region: problems with transport connections, the gas and water supply, and infrastructure had not been solved until recently.

Some of the students said they particularly appreciated Russia's act of nobleness of incorporating Crimea and thus helping the region avoid armed clashes, which erupted, on the other hand, in Luhans'k and Donets'k regions. The students said Russia had acted to protect the interests of the Russian population—'the people living there needed help and protection'.⁴⁹ As for the referendum, the students considered it 'a fully legal action, on a legal basis'.⁵⁰ In their opinion, the citizens of Crimea had chosen independently the country they wanted to live in; Russia's behaviour was 'a completely legitimate act supported by the peaceful population'.⁵¹ This group of respondents felt sure that 'it was when Russia finally came that Crimea started its way back to normal social and economic life'.⁵²

A fourth argument related to Crimea's future as a potential tourist destination that could match 'the best resorts in southern France'.⁵³ The students thought that, with the annexation, tourism would develop and 'all the investments now being made by Russia in the Crimean peninsula would soon be repaid'.⁵⁴ 'Crimea is not about politics, it is about love, wine, recreation and raising the future generation', one student said.⁵⁵ When talking about the tourism industry in Crimea, the students often used the word 'resort' (*kurort*), a term that is reminiscent of the Soviet era.

The fifth argument mentioned by the students was that Crimea's annexation was a 'victory' for Russian foreign policy. One respondent observed that the annexation was 'of important historical significance not only for Russia but for the whole world',⁵⁶ as 'geographical boundaries had remained the same' for a long time.⁵⁷ Given the rarity of such events, the students considered it 'an ambitious triumphal political success',⁵⁸ and a serious achievement of Russian diplomacy:

Russia succeeded in resisting Western countries and was able to stand its ground, to show that both the Russian authorities and the people had their own viewpoint, their opinion, that they were confident and were not going to cave in and give up their positions.⁵⁹

⁴⁹Student 72, male, 21 years old, Moscow, 15 November 2014.

⁵⁰Student 30, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 22 October 2014.

⁵¹Student 129, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 19 December 2014.

⁵²Student 122, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 15 December 2014.

⁵³Student 115, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 11 December 2014.

⁵⁴Student 31, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 23 October 2014.

⁵⁵Student 101, male, 22 years old, Moscow, 3 December 2014.

⁵⁶Student 37, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 27 October 2014.

⁵⁷Student 38, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 27 October 2014.

⁵⁸Student 130, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 19 December 2014.

⁵⁹Student 31, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 23 October 2014.

Some respondents admitted that, by annexing Crimea, Russia had violated the norms of international law. They were not, however, inclined to explain the negative reaction of the international community to these events in terms of international law and legitimacy. One student added that the United States had not recently scored any notable international success, so the geopolitical changes of 2014 provoked a particular feeling of envy towards Russia:

Now we see how envious of us the other countries are: for instance, the United States. You may speak as much as you like about their evil plans or something like that, but, compared to our country, they do not have that considerable progress in the diplomatic theatre which we have, that is why they are now just furious and pit other countries against Russia.⁶⁰

Some respondents saw expansionism *per se* as a positive justification for Crimea's annexation. They felt it was good for Russia, which they saw as an empire, 'to enlarge its territories at the expense of its neighbours',⁶¹ since, in their views, a state's power is predominantly manifested through territorial acquisition. A policy of 'territorial acquisition'⁶² towards the former Soviet republics raises Russia's international authority, injecting 'the population with a feeling of fellowship'.⁶³ A student furthermore argued: 'It raises our authority, it demonstrates that we have the right to have an influential say on the international arena, it confirms a kind of historical justice'.⁶⁴

Some students said that they were eagerly waiting for Donetsk and Luhans'k regions to join Russia, as, 'although it might sound quite cynical, Russia would profit by these acquisitions'.⁶⁵ One observed: 'The regions of Donetsk and Lugansk will be like a temporary bridge: either to locate our bases, or troops, maybe for the transit of goods, I don't know, anything. As for me, I think it's just a window'.⁶⁶

The seventh argument supporting Crimea's annexation is related to Russian national pride and patriotism. In the responses of students, this argument was also closely linked to ideas of revival of empire. Respondents mentioned that, for a long period of time, Russia secured no significant achievements comparable to those of the USSR. Russian citizens had therefore nothing to be proud of, as Russia suffered many geopolitical defeats. As explained by one student:

Frankly speaking, we have recently been just losing our lands, throwing them about left, right and centre. And now our history gives us a chance to get back all the losses, and I think I'm proud of that. Our president, to put it simply, was so smart to huddle that job through and to take Crimea, it's an achievement.⁶⁷

This group of students said in their interviews that, for today's Russian citizens, it was much more important to know that their country was a great power and be proud of its international

⁶⁰Student 32, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 23 October 2014.

⁶¹Student 11, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 11 October 2014.

⁶²Student 128, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 18 December 2014.

⁶³Student 113, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 10 December 2014.

⁶⁴Student 129, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 19 December 2014.

⁶⁵Student 43, male, 17 years old, Moscow, 30 October 2014.

⁶⁶Student 51, female, 20 years old, Moscow, 4 November 2014.

⁶⁷Student 103, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 4 December 2014.

success than ‘to consume European cheese’.⁶⁸ One respondent claimed that it was ‘those who know the difference between the Dor Blue cheese and Camembert who are starving now’,⁶⁹ while the majority of the population was living a happy life:

There is no possible way to feed the Russian folk in the physical meaning of the word: no matter how hard we may be showered with Finnish milk and Swedish seafood, we can be satisfied only when feeling truly involved in our history. The Crimea and the Olympics—this is what it means to belong to history.⁷⁰

One respondent remarked that the incorporation of Crimea had inspired communities across Russia. Students had been ‘worried about Crimea and took it to heart’.⁷¹ During the first week after the event some greeted each other with the words ‘Crimea is ours!’ instead of ‘Hi!’, even though they admitted it might have sounded odd.

Scenario 2: Russia in decline

A very different vision of Russia’s future was expressed by a second group of our interviewees, most of whom criticised the current Russian authorities and did not approve of Crimea joining the Russian Federation. This group of interviewees believed that Russia was facing serious issues that were deteriorating quite rapidly, in a process that would eventually lead to Russia vanishing from the political map of the world. By some measures, these students felt that Russia was comparable to poor African countries—one of the students said Russia could be described as a ‘Snowy Nigeria’: ‘I think that today’s Russia may be called “Nigeria in snow” [*Nigeria v snegakh*]. Unfortunately, many of its political, economic, social and cultural indicators bring our “great” country into line with another “even greater” country—Nigeria’.⁷²

Students within this group said that Russia’s major problems were mainly connected to its economy, which remains almost totally dependent on natural resources, hence marginalisation of technological production. As one respondent put it:

For the past 15 years the country has been completely addicted to the oil pipe, and most of our currency exchange revenues come not from the export of, for example, some complex technical products, but exactly from selling hydrocarbons, gas, natural resources. Such a model is fragile, very short-term, and sooner or later is doomed to failure.⁷³

Russia’s demographic context tends to aggravate its economic problems. Some respondents stressed that Russia’s death rate was ‘greatly and consistently exceeding the birth rate’,⁷⁴ a fact which would soon result in a lack of labour. The quality of human capital is going down, they added: education and culture are deteriorating and ‘the population is on a downward path’.⁷⁵ A problem mentioned frequently in the interviews related to Russia’s extreme

⁶⁸Student 85, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 24 November 2014.

⁶⁹Student 107, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 6 December 2014.

⁷⁰Student 107, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 6 December 2014.

⁷¹Student 58, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 7 November 2014.

⁷²Student 28, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 21 October 2014.

⁷³Student 107, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 9 October 2014.

⁷⁴Student 12, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 11 October 2014.

⁷⁵Student 116, male, 21 years old, Moscow, 11 December 2014.

corruption, resulting in ‘a lack of proficiency, a lack of competence in many fields, a lack of mutual respect, and a lack of culture, in the broadest sense of this word’.⁷⁶ The interviewees emphasised regretfully that Russia nowadays had no appropriate political elite that could take responsibility for the country’s future and offer an effective recovery strategy for overcoming the crisis. One said:

Everything that is going on now is just a collapse. Our government’s policy which is being conducted now will never facilitate Russia’s growth, quite the contrary, this policy will make us plunge deeper and deeper and will, in the end, ruin the remains of the state.⁷⁷

This group of respondents suggested that, in ten to 15 years, Russia would become a weak and uncompetitive state on the verge of collapse, because ‘its population will be small, while its territory and problems—big’.⁷⁸ The most pessimistic students said that Russia had no chance of preserving its territory within its present boundaries, due to the emergence of separatist sentiments in Siberia and in the Russian Far East. Russia may therefore ‘follow the way of the Soviet Union: may cease to exist as a federation, and, probably, split into some autonomies’.⁷⁹ One student added: ‘I think it is quite possible that Russia may split into several states, though I can’t say anything about the territories and their size. Perhaps Siberia, where separatist movements have been in progress recently, will exist separately’.⁸⁰

These students also linked Russia’s collapse to the territorial claims of China, which has eyed the underpopulated lands of Siberia and the Russian Far East for a long time. In this regard, the respondents articulated various scenarios: either Russia could voluntarily ‘lease out some of its territories’ to its eastern partner,⁸¹ or the Chinese would gradually inhabit the Russian territory, and then would organise a referendum there, like in Crimea. One student said:

It is all very unclear, when the future of the Far East is forecast, where the Chinese have a physical and economic stranglehold. They just go and emigrate there, they inhabit the territories which we fail to develop, no matter how hard we try. Much is being said about it: it is high time to save the Far East, to raise it from its knees. In fact, nothing is being done there, all business is run by the Chinese, and there are more and more of them there. Why not organise a referendum in 15 years about their incorporation into China, as we did in Crimea? We just prompted the Crimeans: hold a referendum, and we will host you!⁸²

Japan, ‘which is going to take the Kurils’,⁸³ is another international player that the students identified as claiming Russian territories. Interestingly, the students connected Russia’s split with territorial claims from eastern neighbours, not Western ones.

⁷⁶Student 120, male, 19 years old, Moscow, 13 December 2014.

⁷⁷Student 74, female, 17 years old, Moscow, 17 November 2014.

⁷⁸Student 115, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 11 December 2014.

⁷⁹Student 121, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 14 December 2014.

⁸⁰Student 24, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 18 October 2014.

⁸¹Student 69, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

⁸²Student 44, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 30 October 2014.

⁸³Student 12, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 11 October 2014.

According to interviewees within this group, in ten to 15 years the political map of the world may be very different. Russia, apparently, will not be able to preserve its territorial integrity, as one student predicted:

Russia will split into small fragments, only the western part will be left: Moscow, St Petersburg and their neighbouring regions. People's life in these regions will not change drastically, it will be almost the same as it is now: a huge social stratification gap—they will be either exceedingly rich or exceedingly poor.⁸⁴

Respondents within this group expressed the view that the negative image of the United States, and the West more generally, in Russian society was being shaped by the mass media, with 'the image of a foe' being a key element in state propaganda. These students did not express any anti-American feelings and remarked that they would like to continue their education in Europe or in the United States. They interpreted Crimea's annexation negatively.

Arguments against Crimea's annexation

Amongst the arguments students mentioned against Russia's annexation of Crimea, the most often mentioned related to economic concerns. According to one student, Russia's economy is in a very precarious state, and the annexation therefore makes little economic sense: 'the effect of acquiring some square kilometres, in addition to the vast territories of our already large enough Motherland, is hardly comparable to what we are losing'.⁸⁵ Another student said that 'the game our leaders had started was not worth the candles',⁸⁶ and claimed that, given Russia's economic state at the time, the acquisition of the territory of another poor region was ultimately not very profitable. Another student remarked:

It is the same as with the USSR, where all the money from the centre went to other regions. Again the same: our money is not spent on our needs, it is being invested in Crimea. Pension savings have been frozen for two more years. I am a person who is working and I do not like it when the money that I can spend is directed somewhere without asking me about it. Now it is being suggested that scholarship payments for first-year-university students should be ceased in order to help the students of Crimea. I absolutely do not like it.⁸⁷

These students were very pessimistic about the prospects for domestic agricultural production, which might increase due to the ban on food imports. In fact, 'Russian agriculture is facing hard times',⁸⁸ and the situation is getting worse and worse year after year, some students said. The students also had little hope for the policy of import replacement, remarking that the government ought to have thought about protectionism in advance if they were so concerned with supporting the domestic manufacturers. One student said:

⁸⁴Student 103, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 4 December 2014.

⁸⁵Student 135, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 23 December 2014.

⁸⁶Student 3, female, 17 years old, Moscow, 7 October 2014.

⁸⁷Student 21, male, 22 years old, Moscow, 17 October 2014.

⁸⁸Student 36, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 25 October 2014.

Now we are told that the imposed sanctions will not have any negative effect on our economy. But I can hardly imagine that. I am not a big economic specialist, frankly, but we have an economy based entirely on exporting products, and suddenly it gets cut. And we hear: ‘Wow, that’s fine! Now we can develop our home production industry, we can make our domestic economic progress’. I wonder what was stopping us before, why couldn’t we conduct a policy of, for instance, protectionism? Was it inevitable to get a wakening cuff first, and only then start doing something?⁸⁹

A second argument against Crimea’s annexation was based on international law. They said Russia had no right to rely on the results of the Crimean referendum, because it was the Ukrainian government, and not the Supreme Council of Crimea, that had the authority to call the vote, which should have also been extended to the entire Ukrainian electorate and not just one region. They said that Russia ignored the rules of the game established by the international community, and there was no legal basis to speak of any justified historical record, because other states also had territories that they had possessed once. One student said:

Maybe we should give Kaliningrad back to Germany, as it is in fact Koenigsberg: Kant died there, it is Prussia, a very important place for Germany, probably even more important than Crimea for us. Yet we are not going to do that, and they are not going to demand it from us, because we agreed that the frontiers would remain as they were. And suddenly, in the case of Crimea, we simply let those rules go hang.⁹⁰

The students stressed that Russia’s arguments were far from logical and reasonable, because if the main language spoken by local people was the crucial factor, then Russia might again violate international law by expanding into other Russian-speaking regions located in neighbouring states:

Crimea is not our territory. Of course, it is inhabited by the Russian population, but there are lots of such territories now. Kazakhstan, for example, especially those districts which are close to the Russian border. The city of Karaganda is very close there, where the population is mostly Russian-speaking. There is a territory which is not part of our state, even though all its citizens speak Russian. Apparently, it is Belarus. But that does not mean we should start talking about its annexation.⁹¹

A third argument expressed against Crimea’s annexation was the effect on Russia’s relations with Ukraine. The respondents underlined that Russia had behaved unpleasantly (*nekrasivo*) towards a ‘brotherly people’. They said that the referendum could have been held at a peaceful time, not ‘on the sly’,⁹² when ‘close neighbours had problems’.⁹³ As one student said:

It should not have been done so ... in a Soviet manner, I may say, moreover, accompanying all that with those political statements declared by our president and other government officials: ‘Ukraine is our fraternal state, we support Ukraine’, and so on. And when your ‘fraternal’ country is in chaos and faces a civil war, you just take a piece of it Well, I don’t know This is not right, at least from a moral point of view.⁹⁴

⁸⁹Student 69, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 14 November 2014.

⁹⁰Student 18, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 15 October 2014.

⁹¹Student 64, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 11 November 2014.

⁹²Student 20, male, 22 years old, Moscow, 16 October 2014.

⁹³Student 106, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 5 December 2014.

⁹⁴Student 71, male, 21 years old, Moscow, 15 November 2014.

In their interviews, the students often emphasised the ethical aspect of the problem and characterised the whole situation as unpleasant. One compared the case of Crimea to ‘stealing potatoes from the garden of your neighbour, whose house was on fire’.⁹⁵ Another student explained:

From the moral point of view it is not normal. Why am I worried about ethical norms? Because the Ukrainians won’t forgive us. And that will be a problem. I wouldn’t like to wake up one day and learn that half of my country has been separated. I wouldn’t be happy about that, I would be irritated, and I wouldn’t forgive that. How could you forgive, if you were having a headache, but, to cap it all, your leg was cut off? It hurts.⁹⁶

These interviewees admitted that Crimea had, in fact, been stolen from Ukraine, thus Russia on its own had made a serious enemy right near its border. They recollected how much preparation had preceded the referendum in Scotland, with one saying that ‘a week to organise a referendum in Crimea’ meant it was just for appearances.⁹⁷ Some of the students thought the results of the referendum had been fabricated. They also said talk of reuniting families was not reasonable and ‘could not serve as a reason for the annexation of another state’,⁹⁸ because ‘nothing prevented contacts between relatives’⁹⁹ living in different states—as the borders had been open.

This group of students recognised that Crimea had become an ideological victory for the authorities, as it supported the achievement of record approval ratings. No one, however, understood yet that the annexation represented a big defeat, as it is the authorities who will profit from Crimea, not the people, one student said. Other students argued that Crimea’s annexation seriously damaged the moral state of Russian society, as it awakened its imperial ambitions at a time in which most Russian citizens are on the brink of poverty. ‘The PR-event of Crimea’s incorporation’¹⁰⁰ triggered the spread of destructive flag-waving patriotism. In the words of one student:

The advance of Russian imperialism and preserving ‘great-powerness’ are being imposed again. And here Crimea has become an apologist for the process, which is both mean and silly, on the one hand, and extremely negative and depraving, on the other hand. If people do not want to understand that violating the sovereignty of another state means that they also become the perpetrators of a crime, if they allow their authorities to commit such crimes, then it is just they who will be responsible for that.¹⁰¹

Some students also underlined that Russia already had plenty of national and interethnic problems: the Caucasus, ‘some arguments with Bashkortostan and Tatarstan’,¹⁰² and wider problems with other states within the Commonwealth of Independent States. Crimea just added new problems to those already existing, one student said.

⁹⁵Student 109, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 8 December 2014.

⁹⁶Student 99, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 2 December 2014.

⁹⁷Student 9, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 10 October 2014.

⁹⁸Student 94, male, 17 years old, Moscow, 28 November 2014.

⁹⁹Student 36, female, 18 years old, Moscow, 25 October 2014.

¹⁰⁰Student 74, female, 17 years old, Moscow, 17 November 2014.

¹⁰¹Student 7, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 18 November 2014.

¹⁰²Student 33, female, 19 years old, Moscow, 24 October 2014.

The deterioration in Russia's relations with the West was another argument against Crimea's annexation. Many students remarked that they wanted to go abroad for holidays, business trips, and training: they did not want, in other words, to 'live behind an iron curtain'.¹⁰³ One student said she could not share the total elation regarding the takeover of Crimea:

I would not like to live in a country where there is a wall separating you from other countries and preventing you from going abroad, from participating in educational exchange programmes. And, if it all finally turns out to be as bad as that, of course, I will regret that Crimea now is part of Russia.¹⁰⁴

Some students said that it was hard to understand why so much money had been spent on the Olympic Games in Sochi in order to create a positive image and 'increase the investment attractiveness of Russia',¹⁰⁵ given that just several months later the foreign policy of Russian leaders would profoundly alter that image and 'break the relationship with former partners'.¹⁰⁶

The results presented above have demonstrated the association between optimism/pessimism about Russia's future and supportive/critical views of Crimea's annexation. Our research also identified a group of 'the undecided' (20% of the interviewees), who were not unequivocally optimistic or pessimistic about the future, nor did they take a clear stance on Crimea.

Conclusion

Our research revealed contrasting geopolitical visions amongst students at Russia's leading universities. The dominant vision includes 'hostile encirclement', faith in Russia's future as a great power and support for the annexation of Crimea (this vision is also most common within wider Russian society). Only a minority of students expressed an alternative vision of Russia in decline, failing to compete with other countries and ignoring important norms of international law—these were the students who disapproved of Crimea's annexation.

The high level of support for Russia's political leadership and its foreign policy demonstrates the effectiveness of state propaganda, which intensified deeply-rooted great-power aspirations within the wider Russian population, and its younger segments in particular. Since students today do not remember the Soviet-era 'economy of deficit' that was exacerbated by large expenditures in the name of great-power status, they may be even more susceptible than older people to the state's great-power narratives and ambitions, without having a reference point for the economic losses that such ambitions may bring about. These students may also romanticise Russia's bygone greatness without having an understanding of everyday life in Soviet times. Overcoming the loss of past 'greatness' is a long-term, and very complicated task. Nostalgia for 'greatness', and the desire to restore it which we discovered among the elite students in our research, is likely to characterise the next generation of Russia's political leaders.

¹⁰³Student 1, female, 17 years old, Moscow, 6 October 2014.

¹⁰⁴Student 76, female, 17 years old, Moscow, 18 November 2014.

¹⁰⁵Student 135, male, 18 years old, Moscow, 23 December 2014.

¹⁰⁶Student 126, male, 20 years old, Moscow, 17 December 2014.

The prevalence of negative attitudes towards the United States and the students' vision of Western countries as rivals of Russia indicate that, ultimately, students feel Russia is isolated on the international arena. Their concern regarding this isolation shows that they take Russia's relationship with this part of the world very seriously, and that they do not have an inward-looking mindset. The students' constant deliberation about Russia's place in relation to the United States and Europe points to the fact that they believe decisions made by Western leaders have great consequences for Russia, and to the fact that they are prone to comparing Russia's role in the world with the role of the United States. Additionally, if we consider consumer behaviour and popular culture consumption amongst Russia's youth, we will see many similarities to young people living in Western countries. In this sense, students in Russia are, to an extent, integrated into the international political and economic system and do not believe that Russia can isolate itself from Western actions and influences. In order to build on our findings, it would be fruitful to conduct further qualitative empirical studies on the deeper meanings students attribute to the concept of 'great power'. Our findings so far have indicated that it is possible that the students' great-power aspirations, albeit very emotional, do reflect above all their wish to feel involved in safe, mainly verbal actions of collective self-conviction with regard to national greatness, and not a desire for personal involvement in the military-oriented aspect of Russia's geopolitical expansion. Moreover, it is likely that attachment to the idea of Russia as a 'great power' is not a way in which students try to set Russia apart but, rather, could represent an alternative shape through which students imagine Russia alongside other important actors on the international arena.

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