Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin: 
the Ukraine crisis and the return of geopolitics

STEFAN AUER

I cannot foresee who will take my offering in hand, be it a thoughtful or a practical person, be it a destroyer and annihilator who ignores the asylum I offer. The fate of a book does not lie in the author’s hands, any more than does his personal fate upon which it hinges.

Carl Schmitt, *The nomos of the earth*

Andrey Zvyagintsev’s brilliant film *Leviathan*, echoing Hobbes, depicts life in Putin’s Russia as truly ‘poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. It also shows some of the reasons for this state of affairs. What make people’s lives miserable are vodka and the absence of the rule of law. As the fictional local tyrant, Vadim Sergeyich, in a drunken state tells the main character: ‘Remember this: you’ve never had any rights, and you’ll never have any rights.’ This cinematic account is echoed in scholarship on contemporary Russia. Russia’s ‘kleptocracy’ uses rule by law simply to intimidate its perceived enemies, not to protect its citizens from arbitrary power. Vladimir Putin may be no fan of vodka, but neither is he a fan of the rule of law. Until recently this was mainly a problem for ordinary Russians. However, with Putin’s Russia demonstrating equal contempt for international law, it has become a serious problem for its neighbours, such as Ukraine, and for Europe at large.

The protracted crisis in Ukraine has exposed fundamental differences between Germany, the rest of Europe and Russia. Basic assumptions about contemporary

* I would like to thank Manfred Sapper for his invitation to contribute to an edited volume, in which an earlier and significantly shorter version of this article appeared in German: Katharina Raabe and Manfred Sapper, *Testfall Ukraine: Europa und seine Werte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015). I am also grateful to Niamh Hardiman, Robert Horvath, Kendall Johnson, Ulrich Krotz, Andreas Leutzsch, Nicole Scicluna, Filip Slaveski, Roland Vogt and two anonymous reviewers for feedback and encouragement, and to Brigid Laffan for facilitating a short research stay at the EUI’s Robert Schuman Centre.


2 Andrei Zvyagintsev’s film was released in 2014 and received an award in Cannes and a 2015 Oscar nomination for the best foreign-language film. Not surprisingly, it was more controversial in Russia. While Zvyagintsev was named best director at the Golden Eagle awards (the Russian equivalent of the Oscars), Sergei Markov, a political analyst sympathetic towards the Kremlin, rejected it as ‘an anti-Russian film basically made according to a western order, a cinematic anti-Putin manifesto’. See Shaun Walker, ‘Oscar-nominated Leviathan upsets officials in native Russia’, *Guardian*, 16 Feb. 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/16/leviathan-russian-reaction-oscars-golden-globes, accessed 14 July 2015.


4 A note of clarification is in order here: Europe is more than just the European Union, but the fact that the two terms are used interchangeably both by political actors and analysts is testimony to the EU’s success in presenting
international affairs have been challenged. It is ironic that in seeking to advance our understanding of this new constellation we do well to turn to the insights of a classic, if hugely controversial, German political thinker: Carl Schmitt.

Carl Schmitt was well aware of the dangers of his ideas. Having supported Nazism, he arguably attempted to disown the more troublesome aspects of his political philosophy by the publication of his postwar magnum opus, The nomos of the earth. Schmitt’s writings about Land and Sea from the early 1940s tended to be anti-American, anti-British and anti-liberal: ‘the people of the land’ were presented as somewhat superior to ‘the people of the sea’. In contrast, after the defeat of Nazism, Schmitt started to view the relationship between these two conflicting civilizational impulses as a more symbiotic one. ‘As the possessor of a “universal, maritime sphere”, England became “the protector of the other side of the jus publicum Europaeum, the master of the equilibrium of land and sea, an equilibrium that contained the spatial ordering idea of this international law”.’

Already the First World War, however, had destroyed this order. After the Second World War, Schmitt declared: ‘That is the new Nomos of the earth; no more Nomos.’

The starting proposition of this article is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the established European order—jus publicum Europaeum—is once again challenged. We could say that Schmitt is back as both an actor and an observer. There are three ways in which this provocative proposition makes sense. First, it is fascinating to observe the growing attraction of Schmitt’s political thinking among Russia’s intellectuals, including the likes of Alexander Dugin, who has influenced the country’s political establishment. Second, the behaviour of Putin’s Russia, particularly since 2008, can be best understood through some of the key concepts that preoccupied Schmitt: sovereignty, ‘the political’ and geopolitics.
Third, Schmitt’s philosophy can serve as a point of departure for reflection on the possibility of a more robust response by Europe to the Russian intervention in Ukraine. What Europe needs is a more hard-nosed realist approach, which recognizes that Russian expansionist ambitions can only be constrained by its own readiness and willingness to deploy power both politically, and if necessary, even militarily. In its implicit prescriptions, then, this article echoes Sten Rynning’s recent plea for ‘a type of “liberal power politics” [towards Russia] that charts the narrow path between liberal expansion divorced from power realities on the one hand and power retraction divorced from political purpose on the other’.

Carl Schmitt’s critique of liberalism can be read profitably by the enemies of freedom as much as by its friends. It is thus not surprising that there has been a veritable explosion of interest in his work in the Anglo-American world, and—to a lesser degree—even in communist China. One of his key insights relevant to the European project today is his deep understanding of the inherently fragile nature of liberal democracy. Its underlying ideology—liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and rationality—has the potential to erode the very political order that it is meant to serve. As liberalism seeks to detach the purpose of political life ‘from questions of meaning’, it paves the way for technocratic governance—a danger that is in Europe further amplified by the EU’s opaque governing structures and lack of purpose. Schmitt’s complex (and at times poisonous) body of political thought is even more relevant to post-1991 Russia.

A note of caution is in order here. My claim is not about causality. This is not an argument about Schmitt giving rise to Dugin who in turn gave rise to the autocracy that is Putin’s Russia. To be sure, Dugin’s influence may have been far less pronounced than he made others believe (including the US administration, which sanctioned Dugin alongside 14 Russian figures considered responsible for the conflict in Ukraine). Just as Carl Schmitt did not quite become the uncontested ‘crown jurist of Nazi Germany’, owing to his allegedly insufficient commitment...
to the party and lack of anti-Semitic zeal,17 Dugin tried and failed ‘to attach himself to Putin’s pet project, the Eurasian Union, by boldly proclaiming that he could become its de-facto theoretician’.18 That said, ignoring the influence of these two controversial thinkers is as unhelpful as overstating their input.19 For the purposes of this article, Dugin serves as a shorthand for the depiction of one of the influential strands of Russian nationalism.20 ‘Do they read Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin?’ Aleksandr Filippov asked rhetorically, only to say that the issue is not about ‘who reads Schmitt, why and to what extent’.21 Instead, what matters are the common tendencies between Schmitt’s arguments and the salient characteristics of the contemporary Russian state. These are plentiful.

‘Look back at Weimar and start to worry about Russia,’ wrote Niall Ferguson some ten years ago.22 The spectre of the failed German experiment with democracy was also invoked by a number of Russian politicians and observers, ranging from westernizers such as Yegor Gaidar, who referred to it back in the 1990s, to proponents of ‘managed democracy’ such as Sergey Markov, a Duma member of the United Russia party, and Valery Zorkin, head of the Russian Constitutional Court, who did so more recently to defend Putin’s increasingly authoritarian regime.23 This is not the place to discuss the virtues and limitations of this comparison. Following Marcel van Herpen’s recent study, it suffices to highlight some geographical and socio-psychological aspects of Russian society reminiscent of interwar Germany, such as the ‘post-imperial pain’ caused by the loss of territory and prestige.24 ‘As in the case of Weimar, the Russian Republic was born as the result of imperial collapse.’25 And just as the elites in the Weimar Republic cultivated the myth of the ‘stab in the back’ that had robbed Germany of victory in the First World War, Russian post-Soviet elites believed they had seen their country ‘sold out’ to the West by the likes of Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin and Yegor Gaidar. Adding insult to injury, they claimed, the West then proceeded to ‘encircle Russia’ with the rapid expansion of its alliances. With the enlargements of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, west European political and

19 In fact, Marlene Laruelle, who castigated the US Treasury Department for sanctioning Dugin, devoted a great deal of attention to his ideas in her monograph In the name of the nation: nationalism and politics in contemporary Russia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
24 Herpen, Putinitism, p. 20.
military structures took over significant areas of territory that used to be under Soviet control. The (failed) attempts of Ukrainians to join these structures via the ‘Orange Revolution’ of 2004 and again in 2013 were perceived by many Russians as provocations, bringing old-fashioned geopolitics firmly back onto the agenda.

Seen in this light, Putin’s Russia has through the recent annexation of Crimea reclaimed not just its ancient territory but also its national dignity. It is ironic that the ideological underpinnings of this new Russian imperialist project, which is directed against the West as its perceived enemy, can be traced back to the anti-western sentiments popular especially among intellectuals in Germany between the two world wars. In other words, today’s Russia is challenging the German leadership of Europe with the help of German ideas of yesteryear. For example, Schmitt’s polemical writings defending continental European culture and civilization against the onslaught of the hostile forces of liberalism represented by the Anglo-sphere resonate strongly with Dugin’s ideology of Eurasia. Indeed, in their assertive claims about Russia’s ‘legitimate sphere of influence’, Russian political elites unwittingly echo Schmitt’s controversial concept of Großraum, which he articulated in 1939 to counter the US Monroe Doctrine. Schmitt argued in favour of ‘a clear spatial order based on the non-intervention of extra-regional powers’ and against ‘a universalistic ideology that transforms the entire Earth into the battlefield for its interventions’. It is not accidental that Russia’s main perceived enemy is the United States, rather than Europe:

In both word and deed, Russia’s ruling elite has shown that its war against Ukraine and annexation of Ukrainian territory are not merely moves in a regional conflict, but instead are aspects of a civilizational conflict with liberal democracy. In Ukraine, the Kremlin is containing the West and above all the United States.

Dugin and his followers define geopolitics ‘as a science about power and for power’, and perceive the struggle over Ukraine as a harbinger of a ‘Russian spring’.

Here is the disconcerting idea at the heart of this article: what if Dugin’s criticism of the West has some substance? He berates the West, and ‘the “brave new world” of globalization, postmodernity, and postliberalism’ for having no convictions, no beliefs, no values to uphold. He is scathing about liberalism, and argues that its emphasis on individual freedom is vacuous: ‘As for what the purpose of this freedom is, liberals remain silent.’ For anyone even vaguely familiar with the contemporary state of Russian society (let alone Dugin’s semi-fascist ideas), the proposition that Russia should ‘save herself and others’ by relying on ‘Russian

---

26 This is not to deny domestic sources of Russian geopolitics discussed in e.g. Laruelle, ‘Larger, higher, farther north …’.
27 e.g. Schmitt, Land und Meer.
31 Sergei Skvortsov, ‘Ruskaia Vesna’ na Yugo-Vostoke Ukrainy [‘Russian Spring’ in south-east of Ukraine], RIA Novosti, 3 March 2014.
32 Dugin, The fourth political theory, p. 37.
truth’, its ‘own messianic idea’ and ‘its own version of the “end of history”’ would appear bizarre. And yet it is unsettling that the West—particularly the EU—seems incapable of a decisive response to this challenge. Adam Michnik was blunt in his assessment: ‘The European Union—accustomed to peace and quiet—has neither determination nor an understanding of the growing threat. The clichéd faith in the possibility of placating the beast is replaying over and over again.’

Even NATO has seen its influence diminished since 1989, with a changed emphasis on political cooperation rather than military action. As Rynning observed: ‘In this framework of thought, NATO’s Cold War victory defines the end of European geopolitics. Europe is whole and free. Russia may not quite get it, and NATO may have to remain alert on this issue, but in time Russia too will modernize.’ Now we know that Russia did ‘not quite get it’. Instead, it interpreted the EU’s and NATO’s shared commitment to a Europe free of divisions and conflicts as a sign of weakness. Of particular interest to both Russian intellectuals and political leaders is the role Germany has played (and might be playing) in the post-1989 global order. Dugin’s assessment is not flattering. After the Second World War, he argues, Germans lost their freedom and ‘the right to participate in political history’. As a result, ‘today, they are left only with their economy and, in the best case scenario, with a concern for ecology’. All the same, Dugin’s imperial ambitions for Russia envisage Germany as a strategic partner in a revised order, which would enable it to ‘re-enter history as a subject of geopolitics’. In order to challenge Putin’s Russia effectively, I argue, Europe and Germany should indeed reclaim geopolitics for their own purposes, but not along Dugin’s lines.

The Ukrainian revolution and its enemies

True revolutions do not just change the political regime or the composition of the government; they transform the people and their political culture. That’s why Ukraine’s Euromaidan has a strong claim to being a revolutionary movement—a revolutionary movement of a particular kind: non-violent, at least in its inclination, and moderate in its aims. It is a non-revolutionary revolution in the tradition of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 and their coloured successors. It bears the limits of its predecessors, too. As Andrew Wilson observed astutely: ‘Revolutions always disappoint; but few have disappointed more comprehensively than Ukraine’s once-famous “Orange Revolution” of 2004.’

33 Dugin, The fourth political theory, p. 30.
36 Dugin, The fourth political theory, p. 44.
38 Andrew Wilson, Ukraine crisis: what it means for the West (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014) p. 38. This
Disappointing though it may have been, the Orange Revolution was nevertheless followed closely in Russia, as Putin wished to prevent a similar ‘coloured revolution’ from occurring in his own country. In 2008, Russia solidified its authoritarian regime, with Putin bypassing constitutional restrictions on a third presidency by becoming Prime Minister. Continuing to dominate Russian politics, he embarked on a number of policies which ultimately paved the way for Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014. Of particular importance in this respect were Russia’s invasion of Georgia and its successful veto of Ukraine’s aspiration to NATO membership. Another coincidence that was to weaken the West in its dealings with Russia was the global financial crisis of 2008, which morphed into a European sovereign debt crisis in 2009–2010. These developments led the likes of Igor Panarin, a Russian foreign policy expert, to predict the emergence of a powerful ‘Eurasian Union’ led by a truly sovereign leader, gosudar Putin.39

Without overstating their importance, it is clear that the numerous advocates of Eurasia must feel vindicated by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its capacity and determination to continue destabilizing eastern Ukraine. Dugin, for example, predicted as early as 2008 that Russian troops would eventually occupy ‘perhaps even Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula’.40 In fact, Putin’s major speech of March 2014, celebrating the takeover of Crimea, centred on the concept of Eurasia and extended an invitation to Germany to support Russian ambitions in Ukraine. Drawing parallels with German unification, Putin felt ‘that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity’. He also argued, citing Kosovo as a precedent, that Russia’s land-grab was perfectly legal:

Pursuant to Article 2, Chapter 1 of the United Nations Charter, the UN International Court agreed with this approach and made the following comment in its ruling of July 22, 2010, and I quote: ‘No general prohibition may be inferred from the practice of the Security Council with regard to declarations of independence,’ and ‘General international law contains no prohibition on declarations of independence.’ Crystal clear, as they say.41

‘[T]he sovereign is he who decides on the exception,’ Schmitt famously argued.42 This is relevant here in two ways. First, the sovereign decides what constitutes the exception. Second, the sovereign decides what course of action is to be taken to deal with that exception. It was Putin and his supporters who succeeded in construing the situation in Crimea as exceptional—claiming that the Russian-speakers there faced an imminent threat from the illegal (and in their view
also illegitimate) government in Kiev. And it was Putin and his military leaders who were able to take the quick initiative, exploiting a power vacuum in Crimea.

Putin was richly rewarded for his bold actions. As Schmitt understood well (drawing on Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*), internal political conflict in a community can be neutralized by a political conflict directed towards the outside world. Filippov, reflecting on the challenges that Putin faced after being appointed prime minister in 2008, echoed Schmitt: ‘Inside the polity there is political neutrality—in fact the absence of politics as such … Radical opponents are quickly identified as enemies, and not just enemies from within the state, but also as the agents of hostile states.’ The result is that domestic politics in Russia has been reduced to technocracy, in which ‘nobody raises any questions about obedience (which the state requires) and protection (which the state promises)’. One of the astounding consequences of Putin’s adventure in Crimea is his approval rating, which soared to 83 per cent in May 2014.

On the other side of the same equation, the crisis over Ukraine further exposed the weakness of the European Union, which has been preoccupied with the eurozone crisis since 2010. Led by the reluctant hegemon Germany, the EU has become increasingly inward-looking and unprepared to face external challenges. The amount of time, political capital and money that European leaders have devoted to Greece, for example, dwarfs all efforts directed to Ukraine. Europe’s relative impotence in relation to its eastern neighbours is further exacerbated by some of the prevalent ideas that have shaped the process of European integration, including the widespread belief among political elites that most conflicts in post-Second World War Europe could be solved by ‘conversation’. To the detriment of their region, west European political leaders, particularly in Germany, neglected geopolitics, creating a power vacuum in the borderlands of the EU and Russia which has been skilfully exploited by the Russian leadership. This new constellation presents a significant danger not just to Europe’s security, but also to its very self-understanding. Partly because *Geopolitik* became ‘the theme that dare not speak its name’, international relations in Europe were to be shaped by the EU’s power of attraction, that is, merely by its normative power.

45 Julie Ray and Neli Esipova, ‘Russian approval of Putin soars to highest level in years’, Gallup, http://www.gallup.com/poll/173597/russian-approval-putin-soars-highest-level-years.aspx. The strong pro-Putin sentiment was corroborated a year later by a Pew Research Center survey according to which 85% of Russians ‘approve the way President Putin is handling the US’ and only 15% of Russians have a favourable view of the US: Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes and Jacob Poushter, ‘In Russia, anti-western views and support for Putin surge’, http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/. Both accessed 14 July 2015.
47 In May 2015, at the time that Greece sought to secure an extension to a massive €240 billion bailout, European leaders at an EU Eastern Partnership summit in Riga pledged merely €1.8 billion for Ukraine.
‘Soft power Europe’ and its limitations

It is the complacent attitude of the West, particularly the EU, that made Russia alarmingly strong in the current conflict. European political elites have largely succeeded in convincing themselves that Europe has entered a post-historical age, in which lethal conflicts no longer occur because fighting is irrational, damaging the interests of peoples engaged in it.

The events of 1989 gave a significant boost to this optimistic narrative. Exactly 200 years after the French Revolution, its most pernicious legacy—the Jacobin exaltation of revolutionary violence—was invalidated by revolutionaries who were proud of not being revolutionary. The radically new accomplishment of the 1989 revolutions was that they were non-violent. I would go as far as to say that the events of 1989 dramatically changed the very meaning of revolution as a political concept. The ensuing ‘coloured revolutions’ sought to transform societies by strikingly moderate means. From Slovakia’s ‘Second Velvet Revolution’ in 1998 to the Serbian revolution in 2000, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in 2004 to the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, they all followed a similar script: an authoritarian leader was challenged by public protests triggered by civil society organizations, social media, students and the like. In appearance these events often resembled rock concerts, or carnivals; in their aims they were about democratization and the rule of law, rather than any radically new ideological projects.

However appealing these methods might have been, they had their limitations. To start with, they could only work against rulers who themselves refrained from violence. Thus it may be questioned whether the more recent revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East—Libya, Egypt, Syria—should be put in the same category. Similarly, the Ukrainian revolution in 2013–14 was far more violent than its predecessor and, sadly, the violence is not over yet. Clearly, there are limits to non-violent power.

How does the EU fit into these developments? To start with, we can simply say that the EU loves non-violent revolutions; it sees its own beauty reflected in them, because the EU defines itself as a non-violent power. This is why many west European intellectuals were quick to assimilate the 1989 collapse of communism into the narrative of European integration. For Jürgen Habermas, these were merely ‘catching up revolutions’. The late Ulrich Beck saw his ‘cosmopolitan vision’ vindicated through developments in the aftermath of 1989, when ‘a military alliance between nuclear powers dissolved almost without a whimper—and without a single shot being fired! 500,000 Russian soldiers peacefully withdrew from Central Europe; the Soviet Empire made a peaceful exit from the stage of

---

world history.’ 54 William Pfaff reached an even bolder conclusion: ‘By 1990 [sic], the Soviet Union was history, the Warsaw Pact states free. What did it? Fundamentally, the EU did it.’ 55 Such accounts ignore the fact that the EU’s role in the collapse of communism was rather marginal. As for ‘renouncing national sovereignty’, the nations of central Europe reclaimed it, liberating themselves from Soviet tutelage. Theirs was a liberal nationalism, which combined a commitment to Europe with a strong sense of belonging to a national community. 56

To be sure, the West influenced the East through the power of attraction, but the East played an important role too. The 1989 revolutions in central Europe reminded west Europeans of the key values that underpinned the project of European integration: democracy and liberty under the rule of law. At any rate, post-communist democratization in central and eastern Europe seemed to have vindicated Europe as a ‘soft power’. ‘In contrast to the United States,’ Andrew Moravcsik asserted repeatedly, Europe is ‘a “quiet” superpower’. 57 Instead of resorting to military means, Moravcsik argued, Europe cleverly employs tools such as ‘European Union enlargement, neighbourhood policy, trade, foreign aid, support for multilateral institutions and international law, and European values’. 58 Yet post-1989 developments in central and eastern Europe reflect the EU’s potential strength as much as they expose its weakness: strength, in that the 2004 enlargement has been a remarkable success story on the whole; weakness, in that the EU’s neighbourhood policy was an abysmal failure.

What is soft power and how does it work? Soft power is the ability of an actor to make you want what it wants you to want without you even noticing. But for this power to work, you need to want it a bit from the outset. In other words, the EU has had an influence in central Europe because the people there wanted to be influenced by it. They desired a return to Europe, as one of the main slogans of the 1989 revolutions put it. As Milada Vachudova convincingly argued a decade ago, enlargement was ‘the EU’s most effective foreign policy tool’, 59 and it is still being used in the Balkans. Undoubtedly, when a country aspires to EU membership and the EU has a credible strategy to offer it, the Union’s power is substantial. The problem occurs when full membership is not on the table, either because the country does not desire it (as with Russia), or because the prospect of it raises difficulties that the existing members do not want to contemplate (size, economic and political backwardness, or a combination of both, as with Ukraine). For these countries, the EU came up with the strategy of neighbourhood policy, which is now in shambles.

Why did the neighbourhood policy fail? The answer is simple: it failed because not all of the EU’s neighbours have behaved as decent neighbours should. While

58 Moravcsik, ‘Europe’, p. 91.
western Europe grew accustomed to living in a post-modern, post-national polity, in which conflicts are settled by committees and negotiations, Russia embarked on a rather old-fashioned imperialist project, in which conflicts lead to violent confrontation.

According to Robert Cooper, a senior British diplomat, Europe managed to create ‘a post-modern order where state sovereignty is no longer seen as an absolute’. Among the key characteristics of this system are ‘the rejection of force for resolving disputes’ and ‘the growing irrelevance of borders’. In a similar way, Moravcsik has consistently argued that Europe’s soft power trumps not only the United States, but all other global competitors. As he put it:

Most European policy goals involve efforts to encourage ongoing long-term reform of countries in the direction of democracy, economic development, and cooperative international relations. Most great powers—even China, Russia, and Turkey, for all their problems—have made enormous strides in this direction since the end of the cold war. This reduces the useful range of (American) high-intensity military capabilities, while increasing the utility of European low-intensity military and … predominant civilian power instruments.61

The numerous rebuttals of Fukuyama’s famous argument about the ‘end of history’ notwithstanding, the liberal internationalist dream that underpins it (and which Moravcsik’s quote above echoes) is alive and well in the West, particularly in Germany.

The very existence of the European Union is meant to have refuted geopolitics as a useful theoretical lens through which to view power relations in Europe. According to Stefano Guzzini,

the EU has staked its reputation on being an anti-geopolitical unit. In the memorable phrase of Ole Wæver, ‘Europe’s other is Europe’s past’, the EU being a peace organization, a ‘civilian’ or ‘normative’ power, aimed precisely at overcoming the militarism and nationalism, historically associated with classical geopolitical thought that had plagued Europe’s early twentieth century.63

Similarly, J. Peter Burgess, a proponent of critical geopolitics, bought into the widespread optimism about ‘the grand geopolitical and civilizational project of European construction’. ‘A new nomos is emerging,’ Burgess wrote, building on Schmitt, but one ‘characterized by a dialectical mix of “limited” universality and local particularity, espousing a multi-cultural flux of values, which have a systematically blurry connection to territory, which function in the global economy

60 Robert Cooper, The postmodern state and the world order (London: Demos, 1996).
and which are, moreover, protected by a security agenda that reaches beyond the “traditional” inter-national space of Europe.’

In contrast to Europe, Putin’s Russia is both more old-fashioned and more post-modern. This requires explanation. Russia’s stance towards Ukraine is old-fashioned, following Schmittian, or even Machiavellian, prescriptions about power politics. The takeover of Crimea was surely an excellent example of Schmittian Landnahme, imposing order on a territory that was—if only for a while—indeed in flux. Yet this occupation was also remarkably post-modern, if we understand this term to include decentring of traditional concepts of the subject as an autonomous source of action. Applying the concept of an autonomous subject to states, it makes sense that wars are usually conducted by uniformed soldiers who embody the state’s power and authority. Not so with Putin’s twenty-first-century (continuing) invasion of Ukraine. Russia practises ‘a systematically blurry connection to territory’ by invading its neighbouring country with soldiers who are not what they seem—their uniforms have no insignia, and though they look and speak like Russians from Russia, they are presented to the outside world as Ukrainian Russians. The argumentative strategies used by the Russian leadership in its defence are at times comical, as when claims are made that if any Russian soldiers are indeed active in Ukraine (a suggestion that had been strenuously denied initially) they are on holiday there.

What is unfolding in Russia’s interaction with Ukraine is a new kind of warfare, which appears to fuse two distinct driving forces of politics identified by Schmitt through the metaphor of Land and Sea: order associated with the Landnahme and the chaotic freedom of a pirate associated with the boundless sea. Russian military tactics employ the logic of pirates, who pretend to follow the international rule of law. The conflicting principles of Land and Sea are thus merged into one.

This is not to deny the EU any influence over its eastern neighbourhood. The Ukrainian crisis illustrates Europe’s power of attraction too. The 2013 Maidan protests in Kiev were triggered by President Yanukovich’s abandonment of the association agreement negotiated with the EU. Later, in February 2014—in one of the decisive moments of the crisis—the foreign ministers of Germany, Poland and France (Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Radek Sikorski and Laurent Fabius) negotiated a compromise solution that exposed Yanukovich’s weakness, precipitating his hasty escape. Whether and when the actor was the EU rather than Europe was always ambiguous, as was the usage of EU symbols. The flipside of this

---

64 J. Peter Burgess, ‘The evolution of European Union law and Carl Schmitt’s theory of the nomos of Europe’, in Fabio Petito and Louiza Odysseos, eds, The international political thought of Carl Schmitt: terror, liberal war and the crisis of global order (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 187. Burgess’s optimism is to a large extent predicated on the assumption that the EU—despite the 2005 defeat of its constitutional treaty—has developed a robust constitutional order. As Christian Joerges and Nicole Scicluna demonstrated more recently, this order is now under severe strain: Joerges, Europe’s economic constitution in crisis; Nicole Scicluna, European Union constitutionalism in crisis (London: Routledge, 2015).

65 Schmitt, Der Nomos der Erde.

66 Even the EU Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, was able to see the manifold meanings of EU imagery in the Maidan. He observed in late 2013: ‘When we see in the cold streets of Kiev, men and women with the European flag, fighting for that European flag, it is because they are also fighting for Ukraine and for their future’: Andrew Byrne, ‘EU’s response to Ukraine crisis highlights limits to power’, Financial Times, 8 May 2014.
story is that so far at least the EU appears ineffective in attempting to contain Russian efforts to destabilize Ukraine. Whether the current ‘Normandy format’ that consists only of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine is adequate can be questioned, particularly against the background of public opinion in both west European countries, which shows great reluctance to deploy power.67 The success of the Minsk agreement is at any rate doubtful.

It is Putin’s Russia, rather than the EU, that has perfected the confluence of soft and hard power. To be sure, the entire process was triggered by the public mobilization of Ukrainian citizens, which in itself was a marvellous example of soft power. But even Putin’s empire-building has had—at least in its appearance—some ‘velvet’ elements. This is the intriguing story told by Robert Horvath, in his timely monograph Putin’s preventive counter-revolution.68 While the Ukrainian revolution of 2004 lost its way, it attracted the most unlikely followers. In response to the threat of democratic ideals infecting Russia, Putin and his ideologues engineered a veritable ‘velvet counter-revolution’.69 The spectre of a Moscow Maidan was to be kept at bay by state-sponsored public mobilization, which gave rise to a nationalist project with distinctly imperial dimensions.

Putin adopted a dual strategy. One aspect was rather old-fashioned: a crackdown on opposition movements, increased control of the media, restrictions on civil society organizations and the like. The other aspect was fairly novel. The public space was crowded out by fake spontaneity engineered by political technologists surrounding Putin. Among the most famous and consequential was perhaps the Nashi movement, which prided itself on having staged an alternative ‘Moscow Maidan’, pre-empting the coloured revolution in Russia.70 It was through mimicking the methods of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution that Putin and his followers succeeded in solidifying their autocratic regime under the banner of ‘sovereign democracy’. This has been a distinctly nationalist project, ‘reinforcing national borders against Western soft power, and nurturing the patriotic sensibility of a new generation of youth’.71 Echoing this logic, I would argue that a ‘preventive counter-revolution’ culminated in the ‘velvet occupation’ of Crimea in 2014. Domestic counter-revolution was thus exported into Russia’s neighbourhood, posing a significant challenge to the existing international order. As Lilia Shevtsova noted: ‘In an irony of history, the Kremlin’s efforts to keep things the same at home—to prop

---

67 According to the Spring 2015 Pew Global Survey, there are no majorities in favour of upholding ‘Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which requires NATO members to defend an ally with armed force if necessary’. Only 38% of Germans and 47% of French would support such military operations. In contrast, a clear majority of Poles and US citizens support the idea. See Simmons et al., ‘In Russia, anti-western views and support for Putin surge’.


70 ‘Nashi leaders boasted that the movement’s first show of force, the choreographed spectacle attended by 60,000 youths in Leninskii Prospekt, was a “Moscow Maidan”. This may have been hyperbole, but it was also an acknowledgement of indebtedness to their ideological adversaries’: Horvath, Putin’s preventive counter-revolution, p. 208.

71 Horvath, Putin’s preventive counter-revolution, p. 208.
up the personalized system of power and the domestic status quo—have turned Russia into a revisionist power abroad. Just as the Russian preventive counter-revolution employed tools strikingly similar to those employed by the ‘velvet’ revolutionaries of 1989 and the ‘coloured’ revolutions that followed, the Russian invasion of Crimea mimicked, or even ‘satirized’, the West and its past justifications of various humanitarian interventions, particularly the NATO-led invasion of Kosovo.

Putin’s strategy has not been without success. It is revealing in this context that the leaders of the 2014 ‘Umbrella movement’ in Hong Kong, which displayed striking similarities to non-violent revolutionary movements elsewhere, including Ukraine, felt obliged to distance themselves from the legacy of the coloured revolutions. In an open letter to President Xi Jinping, the student leaders stressed that their movement ‘is definitely not a colour revolution or its alike, but rather a movement for democracy’. This marks a partial propaganda victory of the enemies of democratization in Moscow and Beijing. The Russian critique of coloured revolutions has found keen followers among Chinese communist ideologists, who claimed that the Umbrella movement was simply an instrument of foreign domination, particularly by the United States. As the official Chinese Communist Party newspaper, the People’s Daily, commented:

The results of America’s ‘Color Revolutions’ have hardly been a success. The ‘Arab spring’ turned to be an ‘Arab winter’ and Ukraine’s ‘street politics’ have resulted in secession and conflict. There is little evidence of any real democracy in these countries, but the US turns a blind eye.

To label any of these ‘coloured’ revolutionary movements ‘American’ is grotesquely inaccurate, but there is no denying that they have not been all that successful. If anything, however, not less but more western assistance was needed. Ukraine in mid-2015, for example, urgently needed economic support on a scale commensurate with its size and geopolitical importance. Even the question of delivering weapons to improve its defensive capacity vis-à-vis Russia should not be off limits.

**Concluding remarks**

Europe ‘lives under the gaze of the more radical brother ...’ The Russians are the new ‘ascetics’ who are willing to forgo the ‘comfort’ of the present for control of the future. They will dominate their own nature for the sake of dominating external nature in others. If European intellectuals continue to indulge their passively aesthetic enrapture with the

---

72 Shevtsova, ‘Russia’s political system’, p. 173.
status quo, they abdicate their duty and privilege to lead, and they invite domination by their more radical brother.\textsuperscript{77}

This seems a fitting description of Russia in mid-2015. Though economic sanctions have had a serious impact on Russia’s economy, this is not reflected in any decline in the popularity of its political leaders—if anything, people appear to have rallied around Putin in defiance of western pressure. Conversely, not just European intellectuals but political leaders too have failed to pay anything like enough attention to the most serious challenge to Europe’s peace since the end of the Cold War. Yet the passage above is John P. McCormick’s summary of Schmitt’s application of his \textit{Großraum} theory to ‘Central Europe as Anti-Russia’, not his musings about contemporary Europe. The EU is \textit{not} and shall \textit{not} be a Schmittian \textit{Großraum}. This article is emphatically \textit{not} trying merely to reverse the argumentative strategy of the Russian proponents of Eurasia. This would feed into Dugin’s ideal of continental Europe being divided between Germany’s and Russia’s spheres of influence. In fact, this is one of the reasons why any talk about Russia being ‘promised’ by Germany (and the West in general) that NATO would not expand to the east must be dismissed as a pernicious myth. As Mark Kramer demonstrated, the claims made about such an undertaking are based on conflicting accounts of negotiations leading up to German unification in 1990, at a time when ‘NATO expansion was simply not even an issue’\textsuperscript{78} But even if such an agreement \textit{had} been made, despite all the archival evidence that Kramer marshals in support of his argument, the idea that Germany and Russia would agree on what sovereign nations in central and eastern Europe are to do for decades to come in terms of their choice of alliances is misguided. Such an undertaking would have been illegitimate.

Returning to Ukraine between Europe and Russia: it seems at times that the few people in the West, particularly in Germany,\textsuperscript{79} who think in geopolitical terms are those who defend Putin and his aspiration to imperial greatness. Two former German chancellors, Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, exemplify this attitude, but there are also many journalists and academics outside Germany echoing the claims of Russian propaganda. Tariq Ali decries ‘the recent demonisation of Putin’\textsuperscript{80} John Mearsheimer deplores ‘the liberal delusions that provoked Putin’\textsuperscript{81} and Richard Sakwa argues that the conflict in Ukraine ‘rests on the consciences of the current generation of Atlantic and Eastern European leaders’, which by ‘demonizing’ and ‘encircling Russia’ caused ‘a mimetic cold war’.\textsuperscript{82} These and similar accounts deny agency not just to the Ukrainian people, who


\textsuperscript{79} e.g. Gabor Steingart, ‘Der Irrweg des Westens’, \textit{Handelsblatt}, 8 Aug. 2014.


\textsuperscript{81} John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin’, \textit{Foreign Affairs} 93: 5, 2014, pp. 77–89.

were at the heart of the Maidan movement, but also to the political leaders in Moscow.

What I advocate here is a more muscular liberalism that can stand up to Putin’s Russia. Generations of European intellectuals, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jürgen Habermas, conjured the possibility of a world in which all conflicts might be solved by communicative rationality. The EU is meant to have embodied these ideas. But we do not live in such a world. That’s why we too need to think of our values and interests in a more traditional way. In response to Russia’s geopolitical ambitions, we need our own geopolitics.\(^83\) We must not be ashamed to think about power, and even to project power—soft and hard.

It is regrettable, though understandable, that Schmitt’s explosive ideas have been more successfully deployed by the enemies of freedom than by its friends. Chantal Mouffe’s call to think ‘with Schmitt against Schmitt’\(^84\) has been heeded by an array of critical theorists directing their anger mostly towards the liberal democratic West, rather than its challengers elsewhere.\(^85\) There is a fundamental difference between Putin’s Eurasian Union and the European Union that is worth restating. While the former aims to subjugate other nations, the latter is meant to enable them to pursue self-government. That’s the Europe for which the Ukrainian demonstrators fought; the Europe to which the Velvet Revolutionaries of 1989 aspired. Europe needs to live up to the challenge of Putinism if its project is to survive. Which brings me to one important aspect of Schmitt’s \textit{Großraum} concept worth pondering: the idea that no political project is sustainable without a set of underlying values and convictions. It is in this spirit that Timothy Snyder’s recent plea for more European support for the government in Kiev is to be understood: ‘Ukraine has no future without Europe, but Europe also has no future without Ukraine.’\(^86\)


