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**Neo-Eurasianism in the Kremlin: the influence of Dugin's theory on the foreign policy of Russia (2014 – February 2022)**

## Neo-Eurasianism in the Kremlin: the influence of Dugin's theory on the foreign policy of Russia (2014 – February 2022)

### Abstract:

Kyiv's rapprochement with NATO since 2008, as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, have shaped Russia's foreign policy for the past decade. In this context, internal pressures in the Kremlin play an important role. When establishing its foreign policy, the Kremlin considers the positions and ideologies of influential personalities of the Russian elite. An example is Aleksandr Dugin, one of the founders of Neo-Eurasianism, who introduced his theory to Putin's entourage. This research clarifies whether Neo-Eurasianism represents a determining influence on Russian foreign policy. To this end, the latest Russian National Security Strategy (ESN), published in 2021, is compared with the previous one from 2015. The recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the reasons that have led the Kremlin to undertake such a drastic action are also analysed.

### Keywords:

Neo-Eurasianism, Russian Foreign Policy, the West, Russian National Security Strategy, Ukraine.

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## Introduction

Nietzsche taught us to distinguish between *facta* and *ficta*, or fact and fiction. The German philosopher was surprised at how easily we forget that truth is nothing more than a poetically and rhetorically embellished illusion and that its abuse has made it canonical<sup>1</sup>. Making this distinction in today's politics is an arduous task. Geopolitical dynamics are primarily based on narratives where fact is mixed with fiction<sup>2</sup>. Governments often work to shape these narratives in order to justify their domestic and foreign policy objectives.<sup>3</sup>. However, while these interpretations can be a useful tool for leaders, differing interpretations can also become a trigger for conflict.

Instilling ideas in the minds of a population over time can lead to the slow normalisation of certain behaviours, customs and ideologies. In order to forge a narrative to outline a foreign policy strategy, it is necessary to establish a basis for legitimising it. It is a process that unfolds at different levels, from the political discourse in a country's official documents to the media narrative. In the specific case of foreign policy, in order to identify variations in the objectives promoted by a leader, two factors can be considered: on the one hand, national security strategies that serve to identify variations in the political discourse used to legitimise certain objectives, where a country's threats, challenges, priorities and objectives are exposed<sup>4</sup>; on the other hand, a country's practical actions that go beyond official documents, such as military actions, epitomise a useful tool too.

In the case of Russia, the historically close, albeit fragile increasingly between the US, NATO and its allies transformed Moscow's foreign policy. According to the Kremlin, the West represents the Kremlin's quintessential economic, military and security contender. Indeed, Russia feels a great threat from Western hegemony. A clear example is the influence that the West has been exerting since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 on Moscow's satellite states, particularly in Ukraine. Kiev's rapprochement with NATO in 2008 was the first step in the backlash in relations between Russia and the West. In

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<sup>1</sup> García Sánchez, M. (2021, October 10). *Soldados de Salamina 2.500 años después*. El País.

<sup>2</sup> See Subotić, J. (2016). Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12(4), 610–627.

<sup>3</sup> Bacchilega C. (2015). Narrative Cultures, Situated Story Webs, and the Politics of Relation. *Narrative Culture*, 2(1), 27–46.

<sup>4</sup> See Leszczenko, L., & Tarnavska, O. (2021). Russia's 2021 national security strategy in the context of the state's strategic culture. *Actual Problems of International Relations*, (147), 18–26.

practical terms, this tension resulted in Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In ideological terms, this antagonism resulted in the Kremlin's rejection of any Western influence. On the other hand, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's self-isolation generated growing insecurity in the West, leading to a tug-of-war dynamic.

It is difficult to discern whether the Putin government's narrative is based on fact or fiction. Beyond external tensions, changing the foreign policy trajectory and initiating a war is undoubtedly the result of a process of internal pressure. Indeed, the decisions a government takes are the result of a lobbying process exercised by various actors<sup>5</sup>. It follows that, in setting foreign policy, the Kremlin takes into consideration ideologies advocated by influential personalities of the Russian elite. One example is Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian political scientist who is considered one of the founders of neo-Eurasianism and who introduced his theory to Putin's entourage. Neo-Eurasianism is based on Russia's opposition to the hegemonic tendency that the West—the US, NATO and their allies—imposes on the rest of the world, limiting Russia's development.

Some authors argue that Dugin represents the mastermind of the Kremlin and that neo-Eurasianism embodies the ideology that drives its geopolitical compass<sup>6</sup>. The present research aims to clarify whether this ideology truly exerts a decisive influence on Russian foreign policy. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated significantly, coming to a complete halt with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The change in Moscow's foreign policy since then has been considerable. To determine whether neo-Eurasianism has driven this shift, the following pages analyse its presence in Russia's latest National Security Strategy (NSS), published in 2021, and compare it to Russia's previous NSS of 2015.

### Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism

Neo-Eurasianism, conceptualised by Aleksandr Dugin, proposes that Russia should lead a Eurasian geopolitical bloc capable of countering US and NATO influence in areas of

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<sup>5</sup> Draca, M., & Grant, W. (2017, September 28). *Department of Economics*. Department of Economics - The University of Warwick.

<sup>6</sup> See Burbank, J. (2022, March 22). *The grand theory driving putin to war*. The New York Times.; Burton, T. I. (2022, May 15). *El "Rasputín de Putin": Quién es Alexander Dugin, El Filósofo Místico de extrema derecha que se hace fuerte en el Kremlin*. infobae.; The Washington Post. (2022, March 23). *Guerra Rusia-Ucrania: Cuál es el Peligroso Plan del Kremlin según El Gurú de Putin*.

interest to the Kremlin<sup>7</sup>. This geopolitical entity is identified with the term “Russia-Eurasia”—a unique civilisational identity led by Russia, spanning vast territory from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. Rooted in traditional values and a distinct identity, neo-Eurasianism suggests that Russia is destined to be the leading geopolitical force in the world, acting as a counterweight to decadent Western liberalism.

Dugin bases this theory on three key principles. First, he highlights the antagonism between Russia-Eurasia and the West. According to him, there is a political struggle waged by the West aimed at restricting Russia's power to act. While competition between the West and Russia is not new, neo-Eurasianism takes this idea to a more ideological and structural level<sup>8</sup>. In this way, it facilitates its dissemination to the public in order to shape possible political actions. This is a useful tool to oppose the West and stop its attempts to destabilise Russia through geopolitical pressure and denigrating propaganda.

Second, neo-Eurasianism advocates a strong defence of traditional Russian values. These values, which include Orthodox spirituality, communitarianism and national sovereignty, are presented as an antidote to the cultural relativism and individualism attributed to the West<sup>9</sup>. It is necessary, according to this logic, to fight to prevent Western values from creeping into Russia's social fabric and avoid falling into decline. In this sense, Dugin argues that Russianness must be protected and promoted as an example of resistance to Western decadence.

Ultimately, the ideology is about Russia's territorial expansion. With this, neo-Eurasianism aims to regain Russian dominance over the former regions of the Russian Empire and the USSR in order to strengthen its geopolitical power. The idea would be to create a common Eurasian civilisation to rival the Western powers<sup>10</sup>. Ultimately, this aspect of the theory represents the most belligerent part of neo-Eurasianism as it advocates and even urges a military stance to annex territories. The result of this patriotic action would be to disrupt the world order and overthrow its competitors.

Considering the fundamentals of neo-Eurasianism, it is clear that it has not only theoretical but also practical implications. Concrete hard and soft power actions by Russia

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<sup>7</sup> Dugin, A. (2016). *Eurasian mission. An introduction to neo- Eurasianism*. Renovem Verlag

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

are transformed into a realistic scenario thanks to the framework offered by this ideology. This thinking can be used to justify concrete actions, such as the annexation of territories or intervention in regional conflicts—both actions undertaken by Russia in the last decade. In this sense, neo-Eurasianism has captured the attention of both international analysts and some of the Kremlin departments. The following sections shed light on how and when these influences began to manifest themselves in Russia's foreign policy.

### **Differences between the influence of neo-Eurasianism in the 2015 and 2021 NSSs**

When analysing Russia's 2021 NSS<sup>11</sup>, Galeotti commented that “much of it is essentially the same as in the 2015 NSS, but the changes are what matter”<sup>12</sup>. The latest version covers not only national security issues, but also, among other things, traditional Russian values—something that was not addressed in the 2015 strategy<sup>13</sup>. This addition creates a dangerous mix in terms of propaganda, aiming to persuade the public that Russia is under attack in a way that touches its population in a very personal way. It is not an exaggeration to say that the changes that characterise the new strategy represent a manifesto for a different era.

For Trenin, it is a strategy defined by increasingly intense confrontation with the United States and its allies as well as a return to traditional Russian values<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, the 2021 NSS shows a progressive shift in the Kremlin's priorities, based on unfounded accusations and fears of the West<sup>15</sup>. What is striking is that the new strategy, unlike the previous one, paints a more alarming picture of the threats that Russia faces from the West and conceptualises them in broader terms<sup>16</sup>.

Along these lines, the intention to protect traditional Russian values has been increasing in both NSSs. The most recent one, in contrast to the 2015 NSS<sup>17</sup>, attaches great importance to the fact that the West discredits its values, mainly through propaganda

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<sup>11</sup> NSS (2021). *The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy*. English translation by Aleksander Olech of the 2021 Russian National Security Strategy. Akademia Sztuki Wojennej.

<sup>12</sup> Galeotti, M. (2021, November 12). *Inside-out: What changing Russian domestic politics mean for NATO*. NATO Review.

<sup>13</sup> Trenin, D. (2021, July 6). *Russia's National Security Strategy: A manifesto for a new era*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Galeotti, M. (2021, November 12). *Inside-out: What changing Russian domestic politics mean for NATO*. NATO Review.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> NSS (2015). *The 2015 Russian National Security Strategy*. English translation of the 2015 Russian National Security Strategy. Russia Matters.

promoted by the Western media. Whereas 2015 employed a discourse that did not directly attack the West, the 2021 NSS adopted more strident terminology, identifying the US and its allies as the source of attacks on Russian values<sup>18</sup>.

After observing Russia's increasingly defensive stance, some analysts began to argue that the 2021 NSS represents much more than an update of the document adopted in 2015. This is the case of Trenin who believes that relations with the West were already compromised as a result of the annexation of Crimea but were still considered salvageable<sup>19</sup>. Despite this, the new strategy introduced irreversible ruptures in relations with the EU. In fact, whereas the 2015 NSS left open the possibility of rebuilding constructive relations with the US and its allies, the 2021 strategy clearly distance itself from the realisation of such a correspondence<sup>20</sup>.

In summary, the increased influence of neo-Eurasianism in the 2021 NSS compared to that of 2015 can be linked to the deterioration of relations between NATO and Russia. It is possible to argue that a crisis formed between the two sides with the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. In an interview for *The Economist*, Professor Mearsheimer opined that, with NATO's rapprochement with Ukraine and Georgia at that summit, Moscow objected to the idea of NATO extending its reach so close to Russia<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, the Kremlin began a process of isolationism.

Putin began creating a narrative that focuses on external threats—NATO—to distract a population increasingly dissatisfied with the country's internal problems<sup>22</sup>. This decline in public support coincided with an increasingly belligerent and nationalistic tone in the Kremlin's rhetoric—in line with the ideals of neo-Eurasianism<sup>23</sup>. These practices alarmed the West and pushed its members to bring NATO out of its 'brain-dead' state, as described by Macron, dispelling the three decades of relative irrelevance after the end of the Cold War<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper, J. (2021, July 19). *Russia's updated National Security Strategy*. NATO Defence College.

<sup>19</sup> Trenin, D. (2021, July 6). *Russia's National Security Strategy: A manifesto for a new era*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>20</sup> Duclos, M. (2021, August 2). *Russia's National Security Strategy 2021: The era of "Information Confrontation"*. Institut Montaigne.

<sup>21</sup> *The Economist*. (2022b). *Sir Adam Roberts rebuffs the view that the west is principally responsible for the crisis in Ukraine*. *The Economist*.

<sup>22</sup> Galeotti, M. (2021, November 12). *Inside-out: What changing Russian domestic politics mean for NATO*. *NATO Review*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *The Economist*. (2022a). *How Russia has revived NATO*. *The Economist*.

In a scenario of rising tensions between the two sides, Galeotti anticipated that the belief that NATO represented a real threat to Putin could generate the risk of a miscalculation leading to a direct confrontation<sup>25</sup>. His words proved prescient, as the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations culminated in the invasion of Ukraine.

## **Reflections on neo-Eurasianism, Russia and its relationship with Ukraine**

### ***The role of the West***

There is debate over whether the West represents the main compass point for the Kremlin. What is certain is that Russia's ideological and imperialist radicalisation was driven by growing populism. This conclusion can be drawn from an analysis of the EU-Russia relations. More specifically, the EU maintained a relationship with Russia that it had not altered in the years preceding the war with Ukraine. For this reason, the Kremlin would have no reason to feel threatened or provoked by highlighting the role that internal Russian pressure played in provoking military action in Ukraine.

The rivalry between the West and Russia-Eurasia worsened throughout Putin's presidential term. The first Putin was a young, pragmatic and relatively reformist leader. Outwardly, this meant reaching out to the West and even fantasising about Russia one day joining NATO, but this version of Putin is not the one we see today. The political leader, like his ideology, has evolved over the years. His vision is intertwined with the vision of a strengthening of Russian radicalisation that emanates from domestic politics and the demands of the Russian population. Indeed, when the intelligentsia dreamed of putting one of their own in power after the 2011 protests<sup>26</sup>, Putin, on taking over as president in 2012, turned his back on the West. Since then, hope for a lasting peace between the West and Russia has faded.

In the specific case of Ukraine, a number of factors have led to this increased confrontation between the two sides. Starting in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, the

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<sup>25</sup> Galeotti, M. (2021, November 12). *Inside-out: What changing Russian domestic politics mean for NATO*. NATO Review.

<sup>26</sup> The 2011 Russian protests began in response to electoral fraud in the legislative elections of December 4, 2011. See Fernández, R. (2011, December 24). *Miles de Rusos se manifiestan en Moscú en protesta contra el fraude electoral*. El País.

Kremlin began to interpret Western influence as interference in a country it considers its own. More specifically, Ukraine has historically been understood as another province of Russia, and thus the Kremlin constantly wanted to influence and control the country. It is possible to go further and highlight the role of the US and NATO in this framework. The support that NATO and the US gave to Ukraine by offering it the possibility to participate in the Atlantic Alliance and providing arms and military advice infuriated the Kremlin, widening the gap between the West and Russia-Eurasia.

### ***The role of Russia-Eurasia's geographical perception***

Geography has always been a dominant element in the thinking of Russian governments in the years leading up to the war. This assertion is based on consideration of the geographical constitution that characterises Russian territory. The western borders are broad plains connecting Russia with Central Europe, which, from a strategic point of view, characterises a conflict-prone area. Its vastness and potential fragility have long been a source of obsession for Russian leaders, fuelling their instincts for control and authoritarianism. Due to these insecurities, Russia wants to create a strategic depth consisting of a belt of allies or vassal states that distances them geographically from the West. To achieve this goal, Moscow tends to invade and occupy its neighbouring nations, such as Ukraine, which geographically speaking is a plain.

The importance of the Russia-Eurasia geographical perception, however, does not seem to have an obvious bearing on the specific case of Ukraine. It is necessary to interpret the revival of the Russia-Eurasia idea as a way to strengthen the Kremlin by conveying the idea that Russia as a power has a legitimate right to control the territories of the USSR and beyond. What this idea underlines again is Putin's pragmatism in employing the ideas that benefit him most. In fact, he uses the geographical aspect of neo-Eurasianism, but not the concept of a Eurasian civilisation to impose himself on his neighbours. By addressing, for example, the idea of a joint civilisation, neo-Eurasianism is transfigured into a political ideology that transcends from and beyond Russian nationalism and imperialism.

Considering this thesis, the Ukrainian case is similarly affected. Eurasia has not played a role in this war since, for the Kremlin, Ukraine is part of Russia, but there is no effort to

create a common Eurasian identity. Moreover, Russia interprets the Ukrainian nationhood as a mistake and the result of a foreign plot; and that is something unjust that must be undone, in the Kremlin's view. Russian nationalists qualify that Ukraine represents Russia's birthplace and therefore has to be part of its territory.

### ***The role of Russian identity***

Traditional Russian values are a tool of the Kremlin that is not directly linked to neo-Eurasianism. In the case of the Orthodox Church, for example, the Kremlin uses it as a tool to promote various political interests. Putin accelerated repression in Russia in 2011 and sought the backing of the Orthodox Church and more conservative positions. Still, Putin places some limits on the Church's power to avoid an accumulation of power that could rival the Kremlin itself.

Putin has more openly embraced nationalist and Orthodox ideologies, and from this also derives his aggression towards Ukraine: this idea stems from the belief that Ukraine is not a country but rather a region of Russia, based on the Slavic spiritual brotherhood of which Russia considers itself the head, the *pater familias*. The issue of Ukraine is linked to Russia's identity, but the values of neo-Eurasianism are not what drive Russia to occupy Ukraine. The idea is simply that Ukraine must be controlled by the Kremlin; otherwise, it poses a threat.

Therefore, the ideals of neo-Eurasianism have not had a significant influence on the decision to invade this country. The narrative employed regarding Ukraine is not a matter of values but of identity—something greater than values themselves, as they are understood through identity. The aim of instilling this mentality in the population is reflected in Moscow's preparations for the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022. In fact, Russian identity has played a role in preparing for this war, focusing more on correcting an error: Ukraine should never have separated from Russia, as it is organically part of the country.

### ***Further Considerations***

In the analysis of Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy (NSS), it is noticeable that

Ukraine, although mentioned only once, was set to play an important role for Russia, which intended to establish “fraternal cooperation” with Kyiv<sup>27</sup>. It is worth mentioning that only Ukraine and Belarus were identified as countries with which Russia intended to establish such cooperation. The Kremlin's decision to focus its relations with Ukraine in this manner seemed to suggest intentions of rapprochement—whether forced or not—between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

A significant difference compared to 2014 is that the population of Crimea identified as Russian, which Russia perceived as a legitimate reason to annex the Black Sea peninsula. In any case, this pro-Russian sentiment was neither then nor is now shared by the rest of the Ukrainian population<sup>28</sup>. This was a factor that, along with the idea that Ukrainians would see Russian troops as their liberators from the yoke of the Ukrainian government, has proven crucial in the current stagnation of the invasion. To prepare for the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow began focusing on rhetoric used for years, based on the narrative of the need to denazify the country, arguing that the Ukrainian government was carrying out an alleged genocide in the Donbas against the pro-Russian population<sup>29</sup>. In other words, the concept of Ukraine's denazification is one of the most significant changes in Russian foreign policy since 2014.

However, the most significant change lies in Russian propaganda regarding Ukraine's political landscape. Since 2013, the development of Ukrainian politics has been a constant topic in televised debates on Russian state media, where events in the neighbouring country have been systematically ridiculed. Kremlin-controlled channels are part of the government's propaganda machinery, to which the Russian population has been continuously exposed. News bulletins and political debates have presented a distorted image of Ukrainians, dehumanising them and reducing them to a society of thieves, abusers, rapists, and ultimately, Nazis<sup>30</sup>.

Nevertheless, this disinformation campaign has backfired on the Kremlin itself. Russian

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<sup>27</sup> Olech, A., & Pińczak, L. (2021, July 5). *Key theses of strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation (2021)*. Research Gate.

<sup>28</sup> See Twining, D. (2022, May 6). *Opinion | what Ukrainians think about the war with Russia*. The Wall Street Journal.)

<sup>29</sup> Kirby, P. (2022, May 26). *Donbas: Why Russia is trying to capture Eastern Ukraine*. BBC News.; Kupfer, M., & Waal, T. (2014, July 28). *Crying genocide: Use and abuse of political rhetoric in Russia and Ukraine*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>30</sup> See McFaul, M., & Honcharuk, O. (2021, December 1). *Opinion | the best response to Russia's threats is a closer relationship with Ukraine*. The Washington Post.; Remnick, D. (2022, February 26). *Putin's Bloody Folly in Ukraine*. The New Yorker.

policy towards Ukraine has become hostage to its own disinformation. Specifically, after portraying Ukraine as a dysfunctional state in the years leading up to the war, the Kremlin was forced to confront the reality of a nation that proved to be far more resilient than expected in the face of Russian troops.

Another key factor was the change of presidents in Ukraine. One of the reasons that led to the preparation for the invasion was the Kremlin's disappointment with the government of Volodymyr Zelensky, who advocated for Ukraine's closer integration with the West, particularly through NATO and the EU. As a result, the Kremlin's aspiration to strengthen cooperation between Kyiv and Moscow and maintain control over the country's situation faded when the current Ukrainian president replaced Petro Poroshenko.

Furthermore, Moscow was convinced that the United States and its allies were not capable of responding decisively to an act of aggression against Ukraine. It was precisely this perception of a divided and weakened West that emboldened Russia to take increasingly risky actions. Russia's open opposition to the West can be interpreted as a miscalculation by the Kremlin, which expected to see the end of Western hegemony and, in turn, Russia's resurgence as a dominant force over former Soviet states that had fallen under US influence. The Kremlin's main objective was, precisely, to restore this sphere of control.

## **Conclusion**

This study recognises the limitations that Russian National Security Strategies (NSSs) may have in understanding the influence of a theory like neo-Eurasianism on Kremlin foreign policy. These documents are the result of cooperation between various sectors of the Russian government, meaning they are constrained by their respective political commitments. Consequently, the ability to express unfiltered thought is limited. After analysing Russian NSSs, it can be concluded that neo-Eurasianism has not played a fundamental role in preparing the February 2022 conflict in Ukraine. Dugin is not the mastermind of the Kremlin, but at the same time, he is not irrelevant either. Within the Kremlin's ecosystem, his ideas have gained traction in certain strategic debates. Nevertheless, what truly influences Russian foreign policy is Putin's pragmatism.

The primary goal of the Russian president's policy is to maintain power at any cost. This

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mindset leads Moscow to utilise certain aspects of neo-Eurasianism in its foreign policy while discarding others that are not deemed useful for Russia's interests. The most illustrative example is the Kremlin's recent approach to negotiating an end to the war with the United States, contradicting all the anti-Western propaganda it has pushed throughout the conflict. Putin did not foresee the scale of the military and economic response led by the West. This miscalculation has placed him in a position where political pragmatism has become essential in managing a situation that initially seemed under control but now presents risks to Russia's internal stability and its international projection of power.

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