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Russian Journal of Economics 2 (2016) 146–161

Russian Journal of Economics

www.rujec.org

What is Russia trying to defend?☆

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Abstract

Contrary to the focus on the events of the last two years (2014–2015) associated with the accession of Crimea to Russia and military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, in this study, I stress that serious changes in Russian domestic policy (with strong pressure on political opposition, state propaganda and sharp anti-Western rhetoric, as well as the fight against "foreign agents') became visible in 2012. Geopolitical ambitions to revise the "global order" (introduced by the USA after the collapse of the USSR) and the increased role of Russia in "global governance" were declared by leaders of the country much earlier, with Vladimir Putin's famous Munich speech in 2007. These ambitions were based on the robust economic growth of the mid-2000s, which encouraged the Russian ruling elite to adopt the view that Russia (with its huge energy resources) is a new economic superpower. In this paper, I will show that the concept of "Militant Russia" in a proper sense can be attributed rather to the period of the mid-2000s. After 2008–2009, the global financial crisis and, especially, the Arab Spring and mass political protests against electoral fraud in Moscow in December 2011, the Russian ruling elite made mostly "militant" attempts to defend its power and assets.

JEL classification: F51, P21, P27.
Keywords: Russia, transition economy, model of economic development, Ukrainian crisis, elites, ideology.

☆ The earlier version of this article was published in Russian as: Yakovlev A. The meaning and purpose of militancy. *Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike*, 2015, Vol. 13, No. 6, pp. 119—134. This paper was prepared as part of research project supported by the HSE 2015 Program of Fundamental Research and reflects the discussion at "Militant Russia" panel organized by Prof. Silvana Malle in June 2015 as part of the annual conference of the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies (CREES) of the University of Birmingham.

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Peer review under responsibility of Voprosy Ekonomiki.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ruje.2016.06.003

1. Introdution

The term "Militant Russia" recently offered by S. Malle (2015) as a characteristic of contemporary Russian policy has Latin roots and means activeness in maintaining certain ideas and principles (following the logic of the expressions "militant materialism" or "militant church'). Malle used this concept to explain the phenomenon often described in Russian media and social networks using the image of "Russia rising up from its knees." However, the question remains as to what exactly Russia is trying to defend with its policy, which is presently regarded by many people in the world as aggression.

In this article, I present my personal opinion about the causes of Russia's "militant turnaround" in its relationships with the West and the factors underlying it at different stages — before the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, after the Arab Spring of 2011, and after the events in Crimea and Ukraine in 2014. I will also analyze shifts in the social structure of Russian society that occurred during the 2000s and changes in patriotic sentiments of the general public that transpired after Crimea's accession to Russia. This is the basis for considering the factors and resources that Russia could employ for development in conditions of economic sanctions and international isolation. In the final section, I will also highlight the key challenges and risks encountered by the Russian authorities and Russian society after the accession of Crimea and the beginning of the military conflict in Ukraine.

2. Prehistory of the "turnaround" in Russia's relations with the West

It may seem at first glance (especially from the perspectives of external observers) that the dramatic change in Russia's domestic and foreign policy is connected first and foremost with the events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014. However, in my opinion, fundamental policy shifts began much earlier, as early as the mid-2000s. Moreover, the basic concepts underlying this "new political course" changed over time and have undergone at least four different stages. My vision of the general characteristics of these stages is presented in Table.

Although the first stage in Table is characterized predominantly by partnership relations with the West, it is crucial for understanding the further development pattern. One of the key events of this stage was *ensuring Russia's economic independence.* For nearly fifteen years prior, neither the Soviet Union nor, later, Russia could collect a sufficient amount of state budget revenue to finance its own expenditure commitments. This led to the need to attract Western loans that, given the related conditions and terms, were perceived as an instrument of pressure on the Soviet and, later, the Russian government.[1]

The devaluation of the ruble in August 1998 created incentives for investment and production growth. Rapid economic growth later became sustainable owing to the strengthening of the state's capacity and formation of "common rules of

[1] At the same time, Russia as a country was running a current account surplus with the exception of two or three quarters before 1998. Thus, it was not a question of the country's external position as such but rather the government's inability to collect taxes.