

# RUSSIAN THINKING 160 IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS

FROM DRAWING A LINE OF DEFENCE  
TO SEEING A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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# RUSSIAN THINKING IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS

FROM DRAWING A LINE OF DEFENCE TO SEEING A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY



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- Three articles written by Russian foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov and published at the turning points of the Ukraine conflict shed light on how the reasoning on Russia's strategic interests in Ukraine has evolved amid the conflict.
- The meaning of the conflict, as explained in the first essay, is that Russia is drawing a line of defence against Western interference in its sphere of interest.
- In the second essay, the assertion that with the Crimean operation Russia has forced the West to put an end to the Cold War, is reconfigured into a choice that Russia needs to make between the Western or non-Western path.
- Finally, in an essay written after the downing of flight MH17, it is argued that without de-escalation the situation in Donbass will become a threat to Russian national security.
- The evolution of the argumentation shows that some sort of 'reality check' has occurred in the vicinity of the general line. However, while the dangers inherent in the conflict are recognized, Karaganov fails to acknowledge Russia's active involvement in the conflict.

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## Introduction

The metaphor of a pendulum, oscillating between two extreme positions, is used to convey the sense of abrupt and contradictory shifts in Russian politics. Indeed, the revolution in Ukraine in February 2014 can be seen as a jolt that has accelerated Russia's movement off-road: away from a path of interdependency and deeper integration with the West, and towards a course of withdrawal and restricted contact with the world that exists beyond the Russian system. The movement of the pendulum is indicative of deep internal cleavages over the choice of principles upon which Russian society should be organized, and about the *fit* and lack thereof between the incongruent but yet deeply intertwined entities that we recognize as Russia and the West.

To understand the latest, and in many respects unexpected, turn of events, Russia analysts have offered several interconnected yet distinct frames of analysis. Accordingly, the change can be seen as a defensive move – aimed not at enlarging but preserving the domain that is considered vital for Russia's strategic interests. Gauged in this way, the annexation of Crimea plays out as an anomaly, rather than as the first step in the restoration of something akin to the Soviet space. The thrust of the argument advanced by John Mearsheimer, for example, is that the West, in pursuing its policy towards the east, should have taken into account Russia's legitimate national security interests in the post-Soviet space.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, it has been argued that the crisis has set in motion a process that will destabilize the order of the post-Soviet space, and the European security environment as a whole. Although not necessarily incongruent with the view that Russia is defending its 'sphere of interest', it is underlined that Russia's foreign policy has embarked upon an imperialist path. Accordingly, the crisis shows that there is a fundamental mismatch between Russia's

Westphalian-style great power politics and the post-modern European integration policies.

Although the pendulum metaphor captures the genuine sense of unexpectedness created by the annexation of Crimea in February 2014, it is less useful if the task is to understand the evolution of the argumentation legitimizing, but also criticizing, Russia's official line vis-à-vis the Ukraine crisis. A less well-known metaphor of zigzagging seems better suited for this purpose. It suggests that the line between what is rational and what might be termed irrational is not straight but rather a zigzag, emergent in the way in which unwritten, formal and informal rules are woven together in the unsystematizable complex of actual societal life.<sup>2</sup>

What the use of this metaphor purports to say is that the twists and turns in Russia's foreign policy line cannot be derived solely from well-defined principles and goals, but rather the line is emergent in the way in which (un)official, artificial and invented elements of the crisis are present in the discourse. The metaphor is also handy from the methodological vantage point. For although there exists a particular 'semi-instinctive knowledge' about the 'zig and zag' of Russian politics to which the foreign analyst rarely has primary access, the path that emerges as a result of the twists and turns is in itself a 'stock of knowledge' on how to proceed.

The purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at this 'stock of knowledge' and to analyse how the reasoning on Russia's strategic interests in Ukraine has evolved amid the crisis. For this purpose, three

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1 Mearsheimer, J. 'Getting Ukraine Wrong', *New York Times*, March 13, 2014; Mearsheimer, J. 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014.

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2 As far as the author of this paper knows, the zigzagging metaphor was first used by Isaiah Berlin in an essay published in 1952, where he argued that it is fundamental in understanding 'the general line' upon which the viability of the Soviet system rested. Later, Lilia Shevtsova used this metaphor in her book *Putin's Russia* (2005) to describe the oscillations of Russia's pro-Western foreign policy under President Putin. Personality and luck are also important elements in Thane Gustafson's book *Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia* (2013), although he does not tie them together in quite the same way as suggested by the zigzagging metaphor. See Pynnöniemi, K. *New Road, New Life, New Russia: International transport corridors at the conjunction of geography and politics in Russia* (2008) for a discussion on zigzagging from a methodological/heuristic vantage point.



Sergei Karaganov. Photo: karaganov.ru.

consecutive articles<sup>3</sup> published at the turning points of the crisis, and written by well-known foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov,<sup>4</sup> will be scrutinized. In these articles, Karaganov explains Russia's strategic interests in Ukraine for domestic and foreign audiences, but maintains a critical distance from the official line. It cannot be ruled out that he has some influence in the formation of the 'general line', yet it is more plausible to suggest that these texts reflect the hopes and fears of Russia's state-oriented (*gosudarstvennost'*) foreign policy elite.

The categorization of Karaganov's texts into one foreign policy school or another, or 'box of ideas', is not the issue here. It is suggested, however, that he could be located at the centre of the wide continuum of the political spectrum, which has remained

the dominant approach of Russian foreign policy since the mid-1990s. As Jeffrey Mankoff puts it in his 2009 book on *Russian Foreign Policy*, 'centrism' concerns the 'eclectic borrowing of ideas and initiatives from the other, more ideologically coherent camps', those of Russian nationalism and Eurasianism.<sup>5</sup> Although Mankoff is not referring specifically to Karaganov here, this description seems to hit the nail on the head. The context in which Russia's foreign and security policy is formulated has changed considerably since 2009, but the insight into the centrist continuum is still valid.

Accordingly, it should be emphasized that the three texts discussed in this paper do not represent the whole spectrum of Russian thinking on the Ukraine crisis. Nevertheless, they provide enough material to analyze how the crisis is framed, and how the main arguments presented to legitimize but also criticize Russia's actions in the crisis have evolved.

The analysis of this argumentation purports to acknowledge similarities and differences vis-à-vis the Western mainstream debate, but it should be underlined that the paper does not provide a systematic comparison between interpretations of the crisis presented by Russian authors and those put forward in the Western debate. Moreover, the paper does not probe the anatomy of Russia's actions in the Ukraine crisis, or subsequently, the factors that have led to the escalation of the conflict into what can be described as international civil war or a local

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3 The articles analysed here include Karaganov, 'Time to End the Cold War' (08.04.2014, *Izvestiya*); 'Europe and Russia: Preventing a New Cold War' (07.06.2014, *Rossiia v Globalnoi Politike*, elaborated version of previous article); 'How to avoid a second Afghanistan' (28.07.2014, *Vedomosti*). For comparison, see Lukyanov: 'Setting the table for a Newer World Order' (26.04.2014, *Rossiia v Globalnoi Politike*); 'One Floor Higher' (07.06.2014, *ibid.*); 'Vladimir Putin faces dilemma over Ukraine of empire or nation-state' (06.08.2014, *ibid.*); 'Putin has Stumbled in Ukraine' (11.08.2014, *ibid.*). All the articles are available in English at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

4 From 1992 until December 2012, Karaganov was Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a private organization of 200 heads of business associations, prominent politicians, leading figures in the military, foreign policy, media and culture. Since 2003, Karaganov has been a member of the Advisory Committee of the Security Council of the RF, and until 2013 was an advisor to the Presidential Administration on foreign policy.

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5 Mankoff, J. 2009. *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

war in the Donbass region in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Within these limits, the paper aspires to contribute to a better understanding of the lines of thought used in framing Russia's actions during the crisis.

The paper is structured chronologically, starting with an essay first published in early April where Karaganov explicates the reasons that prompted Russia to annex Crimea. The second essay, published in early June (around the time when the fighting intensified in Donbass), shows how the argumentation evolved, but also the ways in which Karaganov maintains distance from the official rhetoric on the resurrection of the 'Russian World'. In the third essay, published after the downing of Malaysia Airlines MH17 over rebel-held territory in Donbass, the argumentation changes course again and focuses on the threats and dangers that the conflict poses to the Russian regime. The last section draws attention to the twists and turns of the argumentation as it evolves in response to the events on the ground, and to fluctuations in the official line.

### The crisis as the grand finale of the Cold War

Those who are well-versed in the Russian debate of the 1990s on NATO enlargement could point out with a certain irony that there is nothing extraordinary or even surprising in the arguments put forward to explain Russia's reactions to the events in Ukraine. J. L. Black, Professor of Russian and Soviet history, concludes his detailed study on Russian views on NATO expansion somewhat prophetically: 'as a result of its startling inability to understand Russian resentment of expansion, NATO has provided a convenient backboard against which angry Russians of all strata can vent their spleen'. Professor Black's

suggestion, back in 2000, was that it was incumbent upon NATO to 'comprehend fully the Russian understanding of NATO expansion eastward'.<sup>7</sup>

The reasoning adopted about the roots of the conflict in Ukraine and the Crimean operation presented in more detail below recycle all the familiar tropes of argumentation from the 1990s. It is thus argued that Russia has been ignored and cornered. The West has not been a serious partner in dialogue, but has instead repeatedly lied to Russia. Most importantly, the Ukraine crisis demonstrates that Russia can, and is determined to change the ground rules.

Although not every twist and turn in Russia's foreign policy line can be attributed to feelings of irritation or being left out, it seems plausible to argue that they play a certain role here. The background of irritation can be traced to Russia's self-understanding of its historical role in Europe, which has two main pillars: the understanding that Russia is nothing unless it is a great power, coupled with the persistent but often unrewarding quest to be recognized by others as a great power.<sup>8</sup> These 'pillars' are recycled and flexed in both the official and policy argumentation, and clearly present in Karaganov's texts as well.

In the essay titled 'Time to End the Cold War in Europe', published after the annexation of Crimea, Karaganov presents his principal argument as follows: 'Russia's main goal is to put an end to the unfinished Cold War that the West has continued waging de facto'. The core problem in the relations between Russia and the West was not Crimea's accession to Russia, as Karaganov describes the event, or even Ukraine's future, but 'Moscow's determination to change the rules that the West has imposed on it for the last 25 years'. Being forced to follow the rules rather than make them, the country did not have the room for manoeuvre it should have had, or was entitled to as one of the great powers.

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6 This paper analyses the situation as it existed until early August 2014, and the escalating of the conflict into warfare is consequently not discussed. Analyses of new generation warfare, or hybrid warfare, should be consulted for this purpose. See Berzins, J. 2014. *Russia's new generation warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defence Policy*, National Defence Academy, Center for Security and Strategic Research; Norberg, Johan, Ulrik Franke and Frederik Westerlund 'The Crimea Operation: Implications for Future Russian Military Interventions', in *Rude Awakening: Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*. Edited by Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen and Gudrun Persson, FOI, June 2014.

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7 Black, J. L. 2000. *Russia Faces NATO Expansion: Bearing Gifts or Bearing Arms?* NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. p. 242.

8 See Neumann, I., V. Pouliot 2011. 'Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in Russian-Western Relations over the Past Millennium', *Security Studies*, 20:1. See also e.g. Smith, H. 'Domestic Influences on Russian Foreign Policy', in Freire M., R. E. Kanet *Russia and its near neighbours*, London & NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Furthermore, Karaganov argues that Russia's interests and objections have been 'flatly ignored' and it has been treated like 'a defeated power, though we did not see [ourselves] as defeated'.

A similar feeling of irritation has surfaced in official statements, for example in President Putin's speech<sup>9</sup> on March 18, 2014 at the official inauguration ceremony to mark the incorporation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into Russia. Putin reiterated that Russia had tried to engage in dialogue with the West, only to realize that decisions had already been made and Russia had been presented with a 'fait accompli'. Explicating the reasoning behind his decision to make Crimea a part of Russia again, Putin argued that the West had driven Russia into a corner. 'We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, continues today', he explained. As a consequence, 'Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from'.

In concrete terms, the question concerned the security of Russia's Black Sea fleet and the status of the port of Sevastopol. As explained by Putin, the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO would have meant that 'NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would pose not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia'. It is not the aim of the present analysis to discuss how likely or unlikely this alleged possibility would have been.

Instead, what should be noted in this connection is that with these statements, Putin clearly put the ball in the West's court. It is argued that Russia did draw the line, which the West ignored at first, and then subsequently crossed. In this situation, Russia had no alternative but to act. Referring to this situation metaphorically, President Putin stated: 'if you compress the spring to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this'. With this metaphor, Putin perhaps wanted to suggest that the Russian reaction was inevitable – it was not a calculated or haphazard move but something that was *bound to happen*. Here, Karaganov's interpretation seems to converge with the official line.

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9 President Putin's speech at the Kremlin on March 18, 2014, <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6889/print>.

Contrary to mainstream interpretations of the Crimean operation put forward in the West, Karaganov represents it as a victory – a final nail in the coffin of the Cold War. According to him, the best scenario would be 'a peace treaty' that will end the Cold War and lay 'the foundation for a convergence of Europe's soft high-tech power and Russia's resources, robustness and willpower'. In Karaganov's view, the creation of a 'Union of Europe' or 'Greater Europe' from Vancouver to Vladivostok would offer a solution to the core dilemma: how to establish a new status quo in Europe.

The best possible scenario he has to offer for Ukraine is that the country's formal integrity (without Crimea) will be preserved, and it will be granted a semi-official 'neutral' status between the EU's and Russia's spheres of interest. The least agreeable scenario, on the other hand, would entail that 'Russia will have to make it impossible or prohibitively expensive for the West to unilaterally extend its sphere of influence into *regions* that Moscow considers vital to its national security'.

Karaganov does not name these regions nor speculate whether Russia's unilateral action in Crimea will be repeated in one form or another in the post-Soviet space or beyond. Instead, he clearly rejects what he calls the 'maximalist agenda', namely the incorporation of a bigger part of Ukraine into Russia in one form or another. This scenario is in his view 'unrealistic and prohibitively expensive' *until* Russia becomes 'a wealthy, efficient state' and thus attractive for Ukrainians to join.

### The missing 'imperialist' rhetoric

Karaganov's dismissal of the 'maximalist agenda' brings to the fore an important difference between the official line and the reasoning he adopts in his essays. He does not advocate the revitalization of the Russian World. In contrast, the official line has incorporated rhetoric about the *Rusky Mir* – the existence of a greater 'Russian World' that transcends Russia's state borders. Speaking at a conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, Putin elaborated on the contours of this world by stating that compatriots are 'those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community', namely not necessarily ethnic

Russians but individuals who ‘consider themselves Russian people’.<sup>10</sup>

Putin’s statement should be viewed in the context of the historical dilemma of the Russian state identity. This dilemma has two main elements: the identification of the Russian state with the national-romantic doctrine (the Russian state as a representative of ethnic Russians, *russkii*), or the consolidation of the state identity around imperial roots (primary identification via language use rather than ethnicity, *Rossiiskii*). The third factor in this equation is Russia’s geographical position: a vast, cold country with few natural borders, situated at the periphery of the major world trade routes. Simply put: Russia’s geographical position is a richness but also a vulnerability. Consequently, Russia is simultaneously inclined to secure its borders (as *buffer zones* or *barriers* for the core regions) and to facilitate the optimal flow of the main trading materials in the world markets. One of the active participants in the public discussion in Russia, former Kremlin political technologist Gleb Pavlovsky, has recently warned that the very notion of a ‘boundary’ has been delegitimized in the course of the crisis and the Russian leadership does not recognize, and therefore is not bound to, any limits (concerning its actions). It might be prudent to keep Pavlovsky’s remark in mind when we analyze the emergence and evolution of the ‘Russian World’ idea in the official lexicon.

It can be speculated that the absence of ‘imperialist rhetoric’ in Karaganov’s articles is linked to the fact that he speaks the language of the realist tradition in international relations, whereby countries are understood as ‘black boxes’ on the board of great power politics. Another plausible explanation is that he, like many other Russian thinkers, considers this new trend to be a dangerous one for Russia. For example, prominent foreign-policy thinker Fjodor Lukyanov<sup>11</sup> has pointed out that due to the Ukraine crisis Russia has switched from the great-power

logic to the ‘national-romantic path’, and consequently ‘collided with insurmountable difficulties’. Speaking in favour of ‘Putin the pragmatist’, Lukyanov complains that ‘bringing ideology into politics, especially romantic nationalism, commits a leader, tying his hands’.

What can be found in Karaganov’s text, however, are the seeds of argumentation for an ‘ideological turn’ in Russia’s foreign and security policy line. The ‘ideological’ in this connection amounts to an open anti-Western position and representation of Russia as *primus inter pares* of non-Western countries. In Karaganov’s second essay, titled ‘Europe and Russia: Preventing a New Cold War’, the main ingredients have been preserved but the argument is turned on its head. Russia was not determined to change the rules, Karaganov explains. It was ‘the Western world that *perceived* Russia’s speedy actions as an attempt to reformat international relations that have long been the exclusive domain of the West’.

In this situation, Russia was ‘forced to endanger its relations with the West’, to put its economy, and what is even worse, ‘the survival of its political regime and the country itself’ at risk. In exchange, Russia is *demanding* a change in the ground rules – and in so doing, ‘speaks for the entire Non-West’. While Russia has relinquished any hope of joining the West in the foreseeable future, it has not yet ‘*decided* whether to move in an anti-Western or anti-European direction either’, Karaganov writes.

### A reality check after MH17

As argued above, Karaganov interprets the Crimean operation as the *beginning of the new era*, a turning point after which the Cold War would finally be over. Later, in an article published in early June, he recycles the previous text but puts a different spin on this argument. Russia is not unilaterally changing the rules, but demanding them to be changed. With the downing of flight MH17, a new twist emerges, which was until then an overlooked aspect of the conflict, namely the cascading effects of Russia’s proxy war in Donbass for the country itself.

In a third essay titled ‘How to avoid Afghanistan II’ Karaganov maintains that ‘Russia has succeeded in winning the first phase of the crisis’ and has ‘put an end to the military and economic political

10 Putin, Vladimir. Speech at the conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, July 1, 2014, Moscow, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22586>.

11 Lukyanov inherited Karaganov’s position and is the current Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy and editor-in-chief of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*.

expansion of the West into the sphere of Russia's vital interests'. However, with the continuation of the conflict, coupled with the Russian elite's failure to either propose or implement 'any liberal (or anti-liberal) development programme while the economic downturn continues', Russia may not be able to 'take advantage of this victory'. Although Karaganov asserts that 'the US is trying to engineer a second Afghanistan for Russia', his main message in the article is rather straightforward: the "international political crisis around Ukraine" is no longer about the redrawing of the rules of the Cold War, but has become a threat to the regime itself. According to Karaganov, the 'increased flow of refugees and infiltration of saboteurs and terrorists will directly threaten the regions bordering on Ukraine and Russia's sovereignty and security'. Therefore, a choice has to be made: either to resolve the conflict or let it escalate further.

Karaganov outlines four options available to Russia in this situation. First, an implosion of the regime along the lines of 1991 and under the banner of 'new political thinking'. No details are provided on the sequence of events in this scenario, but the idea seems to be that further aggravation of the situation in Donbass will pose a direct threat to Russia's current regime. Second, a status quo in Ukraine that may, in the case of yet another 'black swan' event, lead to what Karaganov labels the 'Afghanistan II' situation. Here again, details are scarce but reference is made to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, which consequently undermined the stability of the Soviet regime itself. Third, the Afghanistan II scenario proper, which means an escalation of the conflict and a massive invasion of Ukraine in the hope of bringing Kiev to its knees. Karaganov writes that 'this scenario is so dangerous that accepting it is inadmissible'. Fourth, a difficult but preferable scenario, according to Karaganov, is to declare that the minimum objectives have been achieved – 'NATO will not enlarge, Crimea is ours' – and it is high time to 'cash in' the victory. Therefore, the only remaining goal is to prevent Russia from being drawn into a local war with Ukraine.

As an active policy, Karaganov suggests that Moscow's 'reiterating and active pursuing of its line towards the economic and political integration of the Asia-Pacific countries' is a 'crucial element of successful withdrawal' from what has become a 'blind alley of the Ukrainian crisis'. Russia's Far

Eastern development programme is a cornerstone of this policy. The inability to actually implement this programme is 'impermissible', but Karaganov does not elaborate on the factors ingrained in the current Russian system that prevent it from achieving the expected result. Nor does he explicitly evaluate the pros and cons of the policy line he has been advocating towards the crisis in Ukraine. His argument is, however, consistent in seeing the crisis in the light of the Cold War thinking, rather than interpreting the events as an example of Russia's 'new imperialism'. There is a very fine line between these two frames of analysis that is emergent in each zig and zag of the official policy line, as well as in the general thinking in Russia. Understanding this zigzagging remains a task for further analysis.

## Conclusion

It can be argued on the basis of this analysis that Sergei Karaganov's essays fit within the general contours of the official interpretation of the crisis, although they maintain a critical distance from the official line. The 'defensive' line of reasoning vis-à-vis the Ukraine crisis translates here as a *grand finale* of the Cold War – not its return. Although clear about the meaning of the crisis for Russia, the texts are less indicative of what the crafting of the new rules for the post-Cold War Europe would mean, besides a recycling of the slogans United Europe or Greater Europe.

The West is described in the texts as an actor facilitating events targeted against Russia. In addition, the West is seen as a source of irritation – as a key Other onto which Russian foreign policy thinkers attach mostly, but not only, negative expectations. It should be noted in this connection that in each of the three essays Karaganov speaks for, not against, the continuation of the 'new round of reforms' in Russia, which he sees as an indispensable part of any future trajectory of the country. The content of the reforms is not what seems to worry Karaganov, but rather that there is little evidence that *any* reforms are actually being implemented at the moment. Karaganov pins his hopes on the active pursuit of economic and political cooperation with the Asia-Pacific countries.

Although Karaganov saw the Crimean operation as a *beginning of the end of the Cold War*, it seems



plausible to argue that with the downing of MH17 on July 17, 2014, a new twist was added to this argument. Without rejecting his basic starting point, Karaganov's text published after the event can be read as a warning. Russia's ability to craft the 'Russian World' out of thin air was no longer in doubt, but neither were the dangers inherent in the application of the non-linear methods. This 'danger' to Russia's national security is recognized as a direct consequence of the critical and worsening situation in Donbass. Yet this explanation falls short in addressing the consequences of the non-linear politics for the Russian regime.

Moreover, although critical on how the crisis has evolved, Karaganov does not address *the official line* as being a part of the problem. Thus, what is clearly missing from the argumentation is an acknowledgement of Russia's active involvement in the conflict, without which it would not exist in its present form. In these texts there is no word, and not even a hint of the fact that the official parlance has been used in creating a space for the emergence and consolidation of a double reality: be it a 'peaceful green man' in Crimea or a 'DNR' fighter in Donbass. On the other hand, the evolution of the argumentation shows that some sort of 'reality check' has occurred in the vicinity of the general line. This is perhaps not the opening that the West is hoping for from Russia, but it is at least a short zag in the direction of a proper dialogue.

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