

Ukraine's Future and Putin's Eurasian Past

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CHRISTOPHER P. ISAJIW, APR 14 2014

The clichés that history has a tendency to “repeat itself” and that “the more things change, the more they stay the same” ring true in the case of Vladimir Putin's Russia and his relationship with Ukraine. Putin acts towards Ukraine, much like John Kerry has alluded to, in a 19th century way, as if he was a Tsar and Ukraine a vassal state to be held in thrall to his regime. In stark contrast, contemporary Ukrainians, as reflected in the recent events of the popular uprising of Kiev's “Euromaidan” movement that ousted former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, want a modern and democratic Ukraine, free of corruption and Vladimir Putin's dictation of their future via pro Russian suzerain-like leaders. Vladimir Putin fears the outcome of the Euromaidan revolution, as a pro-Western Ukraine that is a member of the EU and possibly NATO, is antithetical to Putin's “Eurasian” dreams for Ukraine.

A vast majority of Ukrainians have repudiated Putin's attempts to drag them into Russia's “Eurasian” customs union via the responses of the interim transitional government in Kiev. The majority of Ukrainians hope to more firmly root Ukraine's economic and political future closer with the EU. Putin, however, has other plans for the country, as shown by his renewed aggression of “invasion” and ultimate illegal annexation of Crimea. Also, there are ongoing attempts by Russia to agitate a similar scenario in eastern Ukraine, along whose border Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops. This has resulted in a sort of reigniting of old U.S. vs. Russia Cold War tensions. It has also arguably cost Vladimir Putin's government in political and economic terms in the forms of sanctions, expulsion from the G8, and a pummeling in the Russian stock market. Additionally, rather than isolating and dividing Ukraine from the U.S., the EU, and institutions like NATO, it has instead created growing support for Ukraine as the U.S. Congress, the IMF, and the EU gradually approve and extend economic and political aid to the beleaguered nation.

A recurring theme of Vladimir Putin is his view of Russia as a *Velikaya Derzhava* or “great power”. It is a view that holds the central axiom that Russia's rightful place in geopolitics is as a great power that uses its influence on the world stage to further its own power. Jeffrey Mankoff, author of *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, contends that the term *Velikaya Derzhava* was first used by Vladimir Putin in his early first term in office. It is in essence an anachronism born of Russian reaction to the political and economic instability of the 1990's, and nostalgia for the lost power and prestige that Russia had during the Soviet Union. It is the well-known Putin's saying that described the “end of the USSR as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century”. Putin also has proclaimed that “Ukraine is not even a state”, a statement that speaks for itself in terms of reflecting Putin's ultimate opinion towards Ukraine's national sovereignty and right to self determination.

Russian foreign policy under Putin concentrates on keeping Ukraine within Russia's hegemony. Russian identity as manipulated by the Putin regime is also a problem of Russia's longstanding imperial history, both Tsarist and Soviet, and its self perception and self identification as a rightful power of global status and influence. It views neighboring countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova as its “near abroad” and “sphere of privileged interests”. Outside of Russia's naval base in Syria, Crimea and the forementioned countries are about the only places Russia wields any immediate military power. Russia still wields considerable economic power due to its natural gas and oil.

The reality of modern day Russia is that it is still a fading power with tremendous internal social problems. Russia has the world's third-largest heroin abuse rate and accounts for a third of all heroin deaths worldwide, feeding into a demographic disaster that experts say will drain one million people from the workforce every year until 2017. The World Health Organization says heroin use has fueled Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic, one of the fastest growing in the

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world. Alcoholism, pollution, and poverty, together with a fall in birth rates, underpin U.N. projections that the population will shrink to 116 million by 2050, from 143 million (2010 figures).

In some ways the question of Russian identity is still predicated on the geographical extent of the old empire (whether Tsarist or Soviet), rather than any notion of a modern state. As pointed out by Dmitri Trenin in his book *The End of Eurasia*, Russia's problem is that it is in the middle of an identity crisis. The Russian Federation cannot exit from this "old empire" without risking, to a certain extent, its territorial integrity and identity. This is especially true of how Putin sees Russia and its place in the world. This is perhaps the most salient explanation for the motivation behind Putin's current actions in Crimea, and potentially future actions against Ukraine or its neighbors.

The contrast presented by the putative victors of "Euromaidan", the Ukrainian people themselves, and their interim government is reflected in the fact that while Putin, through his proxy Yanukovich, was trying to coerce the people of Ukraine further into Russia's hegemony, the majority of Ukrainians themselves want Ukraine to be part of the European Union and have closer political, economic, and social ties with the EU. The interim government of President Turchynov and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk is forging ahead as best as it can with its hopes to join the EU, defend itself, and prepare for the democratic elections in May 2014. This is also despite the anti-Ukrainian propaganda being perpetrated by Putin, labeling the Kiev government as being "anti-Semites" and "fascists". This utilizes Russian Soviet nostalgia by conjuring up images of "The Great Patriotic War" and painting Russia as a liberator of their ethnic Russian brethren who live on Ukrainian soil, and equating it to the World War II struggle against fascism and the Nazis. Also by using anti-U.S. and anti-NATO rhetoric, the Kremlin blames the United States for fomenting the Euromaidan movement, and sees Western powers meddling in domestic Russian affairs as well.

Claims of fascism and anti-Semitism have been largely disproven as false by Ukraine's Jewish leaders, and actually asserted to be of Russian *agent provocateur* origin. Amongst the paramilitaries used to enforce Putin's will in Crimea are self-styled Serbian "Chetnik" ultranationalists who were well known Nazi collaborators during WWII. It is interesting to also note the alarming level of current anti-Semitic sentiment in Putin's Russia itself. While the right wing Ukrainian group "Pravi Sektor" (The Right Sector) was a present force during the Euromaidan movement, and therefore played right into Putin's claims of fascist elements, recently Kiev's transitional government has taken steps to curb their power.

In Ukraine's eastern regional unrest, President Turchynov has accused Russia of using "political tourists" who are really Russian citizens and agitators specifically brought over by the FSB and Russian special operations to stage the disruptive protests. In most recent developments, in several cities in Eastern Ukraine, the masked, well-armed paramilitary "pro Russian gunmen", again widely thought to be Russian special operatives (either military or secret services) have stepped up the seizure of police and administrative buildings. This has prompted, initially, a halted military response from interim President Turchynov, followed by the promise of a wider military operation if the militants do not lay down their arms and leave the cities. Turchynov has also said he favors a national referendum on giving parts of Eastern Ukraine greater political autonomy, and asked for UN Peacekeepers to help monitor the situation there.

These recent developments further complicate the dilemma for the interim government in Kiev, and for the U.S., NATO, and EU. Both NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power have contended that the unrest in Eastern Ukraine has the hallmarks of a well planned, equipped, and executed Russian special operation aimed at fomenting discord, confusion, and conflict. Whether Putin's ultimate objective is a repeat of the Crimean takeover or to create a pretext to move in with the 40,000 plus Russian forces amassed on Ukraine's Eastern border seems still unclear. At the very least, as contended by David Kramer, President of Freedom House, Putin's plan is to continue to disrupt the interim government and the interference of the U.S. and EU, by using all the tools at his disposal. Thus, even if Putin falls short of a full invasion, he can disrupt the planned May 25th elections and undermine the legitimacy and authority of the interim government by continuing to foment crisis.

The disruptive operations currently underway in Eastern Ukraine, plus the amassed troops, the "energy weapon" threat of raising gas prices, and disrupting the Russian gas supply to the EU are all part of Putin's plan to continue to

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exert his power and influence in Russia's "sphere of privileged interests" as he sees them. Ultimately, Putin has, thus far – in the short term, at least – given himself the luxury of having the option of executing several scenarios of his vision for Ukraine's Eurasian future.

Therefore, the battle for Ukraine's future still rages on, caught between two opposite poles of a more Western future on the one hand, or Putin's Eurasian past on the other. In which direction Ukraine's future goes depends much on how strong a response the U.S., NATO, and EU continue to proportionately escalate to deter Putin's continued and seemingly unabated aggression. It also depends on the strength of the response of the interim government in terms of its ability to deter Russian aggression, specifically at this point in time by exerting control over the situation in Eastern Ukraine, and proceeding with the May 25th elections. It is clear that the interim government cannot stand alone in the face of a full military, economic, and political press against it by Russia, and therefore needs the help of its allies, and stronger deterrence and guarantees from the U.S., EU, and NATO against further aggression and subjugation of Ukraine's sovereign rights and territory.

About the author:

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