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Democracy and Geopolitics: Understanding Ukraine's Threat to Russia

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PAUL D'ANIERI, MAY 11 2015

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Russian leaders and western analysts have advanced a number of arguments justifying or explaining Russia's 2014 invasions of Ukraine. Understanding the motivations for Russia's actions is important in the short term because efforts to anticipate the course of the conflict depend on understanding Russia's goals. In the long term, however, finding a durable settlement will depend on understanding what Russia hopes to gain. Moreover, strategy for many states in the region, for the US, and for NATO depends on understanding the scope of Russian ambitions.

Much of the discussion in the west has centred on the question of whether Russia's actions should be thought of as aggressive or defensive. Both of those views see the motivation as primarily geopolitical. In contrast, this chapter focuses on sources of the invasion that are both domestic and transnational: Russia invaded in Ukraine, at least in part, to prevent the transnational spread of revolution from Ukraine to Russia. For post-revolution Ukraine to succeed as a stable, prosperous, liberal democracy tied closely to Europe would fundamentally undermine the claim that Russia cannot succeed as a liberal democracy. Putin's legitimacy rests largely on that claim. If Ukraine could succeed as a democracy, Russians might logically ask themselves why Russia could not do the same. Moreover, the success of the 'revolution of dignity' would demonstrate a method for bringing such change to Russia.

This explanation does not directly contradict geopolitical perspectives, but to the extent that the motivations concerned Ukraine's effect on Russian domestic politics, the implications for future Russian behaviour are different. Either geopolitical explanation would lead us to expect that Russia will seek to stabilise some revised status quo. The domestic explanation leads us to believe that Russia will seek to prevent any level of stability that enables a territorially truncated Ukraine to proceed with domestic reform and closer ties with Europe.

Geopolitical Explanations

The aggressive or opportunistic view sees Russia as having seized upon instability in Ukraine to seize territory that it has long coveted.

The ultimate goal, which has motivated and guided [Vladimir Putin] since he took over the presidency 14 years ago and which he has pursued with remarkable consistency and persistence, is to recover most, if not all, key assets – political, economic and geostrategic – lost in the collapse of the Soviet state (Aron, 2014).

The defensive view sees Russia, alarmed by the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO, as reacting to the threat that Ukraine's revolution would lead to the expansion of hostile European powers into territory that had

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traditionally belonged to Russia, and through which Russia has repeatedly been invaded: 'The United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West' (Mearsheimer, 2014). 'Twenty years of NATO's eastward expansion has caused Russia to feel cornered... the Ukraine crisis was instigated by the West's attempt, last November, to smuggle the former Soviet republic into NATO' (van den Heuvel and Cohen, 2014).

This debate between offensive and defensive, which echoes the debate between 'traditional' and 'revisionist' explanations of the Cold War, is based on an underlying agreement that the conflict is essentially about geopolitics – about whether Ukraine will be part of the East or West, about whether Russia will accept or reject the borders it was left with after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and about whether we are entering a new cold war. In contrast, much of the western literature in recent years has viewed the spread of democracy via popular revolutions without much reference to geopolitics – democratisation simply represented the spread of a universally recognised value.

The Transnational Spread of Democracy and Autocracy

The 'third wave of democratisation' has spawned a large literature on the transnational diffusion of democracy. Much of this literature focused on the role of the EU in promoting democracy in post-communist Eastern Europe. Following the 'coloured revolutions' in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, many analysed the diffusion of revolutionary tactics. In its most simplistic form, it seemed that there was a recipe for overthrowing the corrupt hybrid regimes of the region.

At least since the 2004 Orange Revolution, we have seen a concerted response by Russia and other autocratic regimes. Domestically, autocratic governments, not only in Russia but in Central Asia and Latin America as well, put pressure on NGOs and opposition politicians and created pro-government groups, such as Russia's Nashi, that could be called upon to counter protestors in the street. Moreover, these governments have collaborated to combat the transnational spread of democracy. Autocracy as well as democracy can diffuse, and Russia among others has increasingly sought to promote it (D'Anieri, 2014). By watching each other's examples, they copy successful domestic tactics. By invoking the rhetoric of pluralism, they have sought to counter the notion that one social system is best. By creating their own monitoring groups, they have provided international legitimacy to elections that other groups would not approve.

From this perspective, the lines between domestic, transnational, and international/geopolitical blur. Because changes in regime type can have enormous geopolitical impacts, the spread of particular regime types, or the resistance to them, becomes a geopolitical tactic. If the West, in viewing democracy as a universal value, underestimates this, Russia clearly does not. Putin sees the spread of promotion of democracy as aimed against Russia's interests. Thus, Putin has pointed to what he sees as the hypocrisy of the US position on Crimea. In the case of Kosovo, Putin argues, the US stated that the secession of a territory could be legal even against the opposition of the state from which it was seceding (Putin, 2014a). By alleging a double standard, Putin hopes to demonstrate that US talk of international law and democracy is a geopolitical weapon, not an actual principle.

Sources of Putin's Legitimacy

Vladimir Putin has based his legitimacy on several claims. Not least of these is the argument that he has been constitutionally and democratically elected. That he sees value in this source of legitimacy is shown by the fact that he took the trouble of passing the presidency to Dmitri Medvedev for a term. Clearly, however, he understands that his claim to democratic legitimacy differs from that made in western democracies, because he and his team have constructed an alternative conception of democracy, which they have called 'managed democracy' or 'sovereign democracy,' similar to what Guillermo O'Donnell has called 'delegative democracy' (O'Donnell, 1994; Kubicek, 1994).

'Managed democracy' consisted of three pillars: control of other political institutions by a powerful presidency, control over mass media, and control over elections (Petrov, 2005). While the first of these was put in place, at least on

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paper, by Boris Yeltsin as early as 1993, the latter two were initiated during the early years of Putin's rule. Important early steps included the takeover of much of Russia's independent media and the abolition of elections for regional governors. The key was the weakening of institutions with sources of legitimacy independent of the presidency.

The term 'sovereign democracy' was elaborated upon by Vladislav Surkov, an advisor who has held senior positions in both Putin and Medvedev governments (Sakwa, 2011). While there was never any precise definition of 'sovereign democracy,' or more specifically of how 'sovereign' democracy differed from other forms, it appears that the word 'sovereign' in this formulation had both domestic and international connotations. Domestically, the state was to be dominant, and thus relatively autonomous from society. In contrast to the western notion of 'popular sovereignty,' 'sovereign democracy' assumed that the state leads the people, rather than the other way around. Internationally, the term appears to mean that Russia's notion of democracy is to be defined solely on Russian terms, and that international or transnational claims on what democracy should mean in Russia are rejected as interferences in Russia's internal affairs. To simplify, Putin's autocracy is legitimate because it is necessary: it has created and maintained internal order in a Russia that had nearly collapsed under a regime based more on western notions of democracy. It has also protected Russia against a hostile West that has used democracy promotion as a tool to weaken it. In sum, while 'sovereign democracy' sounds like a theoretical construct or an ideology, in practice it turned out to be a very particular proposition: that only Vladimir Putin could maintain Russia's internal stability and prevent its humiliation by hostile external forces.

A second source of legitimacy, in the eyes of many analysts, is the growth of Russia's economy. Growth in the Russian economy under Putin, in contrast with the collapse of the 1990s, justifies Putin's methods of rule. More broadly, the performance of autocratic regimes like Russia and China contrasts with stagnation in the US and Western Europe. It also contrasts with poor performance in Ukraine.

How Ukraine Threatens Putin's Legitimacy

Ukraine threatens Putin's claim that Russia western style democracy is inappropriate for Russia. In this respect, the widespread Russian view that Ukraine is 'really' part of Russia is particularly dangerous. If Ukraine is indistinguishable from Russia, and Ukraine can establish a European style democracy – and even aspire, however unrealistically, to EU membership – why could not Russia?

When a pro-western and anti-Russian Viktor Yushchenko looked likely to win the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, Russia threw considerable weight behind the campaign of Viktor Yanukovich. The subsequent Orange Revolution demonstrated Russia's fears: in Ukraine, a pro-reform and anti-Russian government came to power in place of a pro-Russian one. In Russia, people angered over cuts in social benefits took to streets. While Putin's government was able to resist these protests, they led to several new steps, including the formation of the new Nashi pro-government youth organisation and the doctrine of 'sovereign democracy.'

However, when Putin oversaw the falsification of the 2011 parliamentary election, protests re-emerged on a much larger scale. In having Dmitry Medvedev step aside in 2012, so that Putin could resume the presidency, Putin left no doubt as to who was in charge, regardless of who held which office. The point was not just about the sovereignty of the state, but about Putin's leading role in it. In both instances, it appeared as though Putin understood that unless his dominance was widely understood, there was a danger that some elites might challenge his role (see Hale, 2014).

However, falsifying the 2011 elections brought its own problems, namely protests in the streets that resembled the protests that had set off the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose revolution in Georgia. These protests, welcomed and encouraged by the United States, represented a genuine challenge to Putin's power, and while he was able to beat them back, it appears that he continues to perceive such a threat.

The events in Ukraine in 2013-2014 reinforced that threat. It is unclear whether Putin really believes what he says about the role of the EU and US in fomenting the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich (2014b) – though the presence of Senator John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland on the Maidan made the accusation more

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plausible. The prospect was that Ukraine would, with the aid of the EU, begin turning itself around. If so, it could become an attractive model for Russians, and a very different model than the one Putin has been insisting is the only one available. Putin expressed this candidly in November 2014, stating,

In the modern world extremism is being used as a geopolitical instrument and for remaking spheres of influence. We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called colour revolutions led to. For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia (quoted in Korsunskaya, 2014).

Implications

To the extent that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was driven by the fear of 'contagion' of popular revolution, what impact does it have on the future of the conflict? In contrast to a solely geopolitical understanding of the conflict, this view would lead us to focus less on either the territorial questions or on the relationship with Europe and the US, and more on the situation within Ukraine.

If we focus primarily on territory, whether we see Russia's motivations as aggressive or defensive, then the logical goal is the establishment of some new territorial status quo in Europe. Whether that means consolidating the gains of 2014, or expanding further, the goal would be to obtain eventual acceptance of the new boundaries. With Crimea, that already may have been achieved. Even a defensive interpretation might expect Russia to seize a land corridor linking Crimea to Russia, or even to go all the way to Transnistria, seizing Odessa along the way, and cutting off Ukraine from the Black Sea. Any territorial expansion beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the September 2014 ceasefire line would be to further challenge Europe, and possibly to demonstrate how little it could do to prevent Russia from pursuing its objectives. A more limited solution would be a quid pro quo in which Russia agreed to maintain the new status quo in return for Europe keeping Ukraine at a distance. Something similar to this has been proposed by two prominent American strategists, Michael O'Hanlon and Jeremy Shapiro (O'Hanlon and Shapiro, 2014).

If Russia's actions in Ukraine have been motivated more by fear of revolutionary contagion, as hypothesised here, then Russia's strategy going forward might look very different. It will not be enough to hold Crimea and Donbas if what is left of Ukraine becomes a functioning democracy. Russia does not necessarily need to seize more territory, but it does need to prevent Ukraine from stabilising. By freezing the conflict – but maintaining the potential for it to reignite quickly – Russia can ensure that investors shun Ukraine, that the government is distracted from other endeavours, and that self-organised military forces retain their strength at the expense of the Ukrainian state.

Mearsheimer (2014) advocates some form of neutralisation of Ukraine – citing the model of Austria in the Cold War. If the conflict is entirely geopolitical, that might work. But if it is also about Ukraine's domestic politics and their implications for Russia, such a result would likely be unacceptable to Russia. A deeper problem with neutrality is that it is much harder to do in the post-Cold War world than in the Cold War world. Building a functioning liberal democracy in Ukraine almost certainly depends on close ties with the European Union – both for support of reform, and for strictly economic reasons as well. Competing in Europe on uneven terms with members of the EU, Ukraine's economy would almost certainly stagnate – forcing it to cut a deal with Russia.

The overlap of domestic, transnational, and geopolitical factors will make the conflict extremely difficult to resolve. For Russia to feel secure with regard to Ukraine, Ukraine needs not only to be territorially truncated or geopolitically neutralised; it needs either to be controlled by Russia – and autocratic – or to be dysfunctional. If neutralisation is not a viable strategy, then renewed stability would depend either on the West acquiescing in renewed Russian control of Ukraine, or on Russia accepting the loss of Ukraine (minus Crimea and the Donbas). It is more likely that a non-cooperative result will emerge, in which Russia may limit its military activity, but will continue to ensure that Ukraine cannot do what is needed to prosper or join Europe.

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