Inside the Head of Vladimir Putin

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In March 2014 Russian troops invaded Crimea, an autonomous republic of Ukraine in which 15,000 sailors of the Russian Black Sea Fleet are stationed. What was the Russian president's thinking in escalating a world crisis over the past week? Why has a politician, whom many considered to be a rational actor, chosen to intervene in Ukraine. Analysing the mind of the Russian president is not a simple task. His statements are often contradictory. He maintains, for example, that Ukraine's new leaders should have adhered to the deal brokered by the European foreign ministers on 21 February that would have entailed former president Viktor Yanukovych remaining in office until new presidential elections in December 2014. Yet Russia took no part in that discussion nor did it sign that agreement, and perhaps even more significant, it has not advocated the return of Yanukovych, despite the fact that the latter has fled to Russian territory. President Putin also maintains that because of the collapse of the EU-brokered deal, Russia is no longer bound by the terms of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, by which Russia, the United States, and the UK committed themselves to guaranteeing the security of Ukraine after the latter gave up its nuclear weapons to Russia.

In essence, according to this line of reasoning, the Euromaidan leaders carried out a coup. Yet it was precisely as this deal was being debated that the ex-president reportedly ordered his troops to use live ammunition on the protesters, carrying out a massacre on the square. Consequently, Yanukovych lost his majority support in the parliament as many of the Regions Party MPs deserted to the opposition. He then fled the scene.

Putting these illogicalities aside, what else do we know about Putin's thinking on the situation in Ukraine? What could have prompted him to flout the Budapest Memorandum and perpetuate and give new credibility to the old canard of Russian aggression against Ukraine? If we assume for the moment that we are inside Putin's head, then it might run something like the following:

The Western powers refused to accept Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union last November in Vilnius. That decision came after my meeting with the Ukrainian president in Moscow on 9 November. Thus, they financed and openly supported a mass protest in the streets of Kyiv during which violent protesters, organised by Western Ukrainian nationalist extremists, set afire their own police with Molotov cocktails. As evidence of US involvement one can cite the following: John Kerry and Victoria Nuland were overheard in a phone conversation choosing the next government of Ukraine; and Senator John McCain appeared in the Maidan, standing, outrageously, alongside the Svoboda leader Oleh Tiahnybok, a man whom even Yushchenko had thrown out of Our Ukraine over a decade ago for his racist views on Russians and Jews.

Once the 'mobocracy' had attained the removal of Yanukovych, it elected its own government composed mainly of supporters of Euromaidan, and one devoid of any members of the Regions or Communist Parties, the parties traditionally supported by Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainians. Moreover, the interim Cabinet promptly banned the

controversial language law that had permitted Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine to conduct business in their own language. The Fascist leaders in Kiev had declared war on Russian and Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine.

But to understand fully Putin's perspective, one would need to delve deeper. Here is a politician that would fit neatly into what Lenin perceived as the Russian chauvinist of 1922 when the Soviet Union was first forming: an adherent of the view that Kyiv – or more correctly Kiev – is the ancestral and founding city of the Rus', the East Slavic nation that accepted Christianity in 988 and eventually divided into three component parts of the same family: Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, united by the Russian Orthodox Church.

On several visits to Ukraine over the past years, Putin has made it plain that in his view, Ukraine is not a foreign country. One can take that further. In his view, it is not even a country, but rather, to cite what Metternich said about Italy in 1847, a 'geographical expression'. It is an anomaly that derived from what the Russian leader perceives as the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

During one visit to Kyiv he made reference to the Treaty of Pereiaslav in 1654, when Russia and the Ukrainian Cossacks under Bohdan Khmelnytskyi signed a treaty in a war against the Poles. Ironically, it was on the 300th anniversary of that treaty that Nikita Khrushchev, in what some sources have described as a drunken moment, chose to give Crimea to Ukraine as a 'gift' from Russia.

It is of course quite reasonable to give a prized possession to one's brother. But if that brother subsequently leaves home and then renounces all family ties (Ukraine in 1991), the gift becomes a theft.

For Putin, Crimea, and especially its port of Sevastopol, is sacred Russian soil. The port suffered two great sieges after its conquest in 1783: one in the Crimean War of 1854-56; and another during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 against Hitler. Sevastopol is one of the original Hero Cities designated by Stalin in May 1945, alongside Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Odesa. Equally important Crimea is the one place in Ukraine that he can recognise as ethnically Russian – though that recognition is offset by a striking lack of recognition for the rights of the Crimean Tatars, deported by Stalin at the end of the war and still struggling for their rights today.

It is still unclear though what the Russian leader really hopes to gain from intervention. His statements do little to clarify the issue. Having secured all the main Crimean military bases, he declared on 4 March that there had been no invasion and no order to attack. Yet the actions of the mysterious forces who took over the parliament in Simferopol, the airport, and military bases followed his own request to the Russian Duma to deploy troops across the Ukrainian border.

What is clear is that nothing in Vladimir Putin's world will ever be the same. Already the freed Yulia Tymoshenko, a presidential candidate, has declared that she would remove the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol at the earliest opportunity. The Americans are talking of asset freezes and trade embargos. The EU will discuss the crisis on 6 March, and even the Germans, who are most reluctant to sever ties with an important trading partner, may be wavering. The man who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering peace in Syria will surely never been seen in the same light again by his G8 or EU partners.

Moreover, he has managed to convince sceptics of what some Moscow detractors have tried to claim for years: that Russia in essence has retained its imperialist outlook, and is a predatory state that seeks to swallow its neighbours: that it operates less like Russia and more like Rossiya, seeking to regain its lost empire. Such comments until recently sounded far-fetched. Putin single-handedly has succeeded in giving weight to even the most outlandish of such claims.

Perhaps such policies worked in Chechnya in 2000 and Georgia in 2008; they seem doomed to fail in Ukraine because for once, the Russian president followed his heart rather than his head. Ukraine's residents may or may not be disturbed by the events of November-February in Kyiv; but there is no evidence whatever that anyone sought or welcomed a Russian invasion. Whatever the outcome of the Crimean crisis, it is difficult to see where the lengthy political career of Vladimir Putin, one of the most self-obsessed and egotistical leaders of the contemporary world,

goes from here.

About the author:

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