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Russian Outlook

Vladimir Putin's Long—and Very Dangerous—Game

By Leon Aron

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Vladimir Putin is exploiting the Ukrainian revolution—specifically, by manufacturing "crises" in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and nationalist euphoria and anti-Western paranoia at home—to fashion a more repressive and increasingly unpredictable Russian dictatorship for life.
- With the Russian economy heading for recession, the Putin regime's popularity largely depends on Russia's foreign policy successes, which Putin hopes to achieve by humiliating, destabilizing, and eventually derailing Ukraine; by cajoling the West into rejecting sanctions against Russia; and by fueling Russian patriotism.
- The West should, in an effort spearheaded by the United States, aim its sanctions at increasing the costs of the regime's malignant transformation rather than simply attempting to dissuade Moscow from further action in eastern Ukraine.

> But man, proud man,
> Dresst in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
> His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
> Plays such tricks before high heaven
> As make the angels weep
> —William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene 2

The origin of the Russian-made Ukrainian crisis—and the explanation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's handling of it—is certainly not in the alleged threat to ethnic Russians in Ukraine, whose plight Putin suddenly discovered and rushed to alleviate after ignoring it for his previous 14 years in power. Instead, as is common in policies of such scale, Russia's behavior is largely shaped by a conceptual framework within which Putin views the unfolding events.

This framework, in turn, stems from a national consensus regarding the core imperatives of Russian foreign and defense policy that emerged after the Soviet Union's demise. Spanning the political spectrum from pro-Western liberals to leftists and nationalists and from the top of the income structure to the bottom, this agreement represents a kind of line of defense beyond which Russia (and its political leadership) cannot retreat without losing its sense of national pride and, even, national identity. It postulates that Russia should remain a nuclear superpower equal only to the United States, be a great world power, and become the

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central and preponderant nation—politically, militarily, economically, and, if possible, culturally—in the post-Soviet space.[1]

As demonstrated by Russia's chaotic and incomplete (but nonetheless real) progress toward democratization, free markets, and cooperation with the West—including with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, this geostrategic triad is by itself not inherently threatening the post–Cold War status quo or US national interests. Yet starting with Putin's second presidential term (2004–08), his interpretation of these imperatives has been increasingly at odds with that of his predecessor: the nuclear superpowership has become incompatible with any type of European missile defense system, Russia as a great power was largely defined by Putin as a zero-sum contest with the United States, and Russia's centrality in the post-Soviet space has increasingly morphed into dominance and even hegemony, which intended to give Russia veto power over the former Soviet republics' foreign policy orientation and, increasingly, domestic politics. Cumulatively, these revisions amounted to what might be called the Putin Doctrine.[2]

Putin's Two Blunders

The Putin Doctrine shapes the Kremlin's reaction to the Ukrainian revolution and has been largely responsible for the two biggest blunders of Putin's otherwise very lucky political career. Driven to enforce Russia's arrogated mastery over the post-Soviet countries' political orientation, Putin staked Russia's—and his personal—reputation on the pro-Russian but highly unpopular, thieving, and corrupt regime of ousted Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.

Following months of pressure on Kiev in 2013 and the promise of a $15 billion bribe of a loan from Moscow, Yanukovich backed away from the Association Agreement with the European Union. As a result, protests against a bankrupt authoritarian regime quickly evolved into a defense of Ukraine's sovereignty. A rebellion became a revolution.

Similarly, as a result of the doctrine's concept of a great power as the winner in a never-ending shoving match with the West, Putin has hugely upped the political ante of the Ukrainian crisis by defining it, from the very beginning, as a contest between Russia on the one side and the United States, EU, and NATO on the other. Thus, when the revolution in Kiev triumphed at the end of February, Putin faced glaring, self-defined setbacks in maintaining two of his three core national priorities: Russia as a great power and Russia as regional hegemon.

An urgent *revanche*, or at least stanching of the self-inflicted political wound, became imperative: No one defies Russia with impunity in the post-Soviet space! Six and a half years before, Georgia paid with a humiliating military defeat and a de facto annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; now it is Ukraine's turn to be punished!

Russia's Flagging Economy and Rejection of Reform

The imperative of a decisive, game-changing response to the emergence of a West-bound Ukraine was all the more urgent because of a significant and growing erosion of domestic political support for Putin's regime, which stemmed from sharp economic slowdown and the growing public perception of the regime's systemic corruption and incompetence. Both of these circumstances were a product of a fateful choice Putin made in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.

In 2013, Russia's GDP growth slowed to 1.3 percent, less than half of the 2012 rate and the lowest since the 2008 crisis.

The contraction of the Russian economy by almost 8 percent, which followed the plunge in oil prices that accompanied the financial crisis, provided clear evidence of the exhaustion of Russia's economic model, which was based on oil and gas exports and increasing state control of and investment in the economy. Yet the Kremlin rejected the course of action recommended by virtually all of Russia's leading economists (to which the most senior Russian officials, including Putin, continue to pay lip service). This course included deep institutional reforms aimed at radically improving Russia's investment climate in order to forge a truly modern, diversified, and dynamic economy.

As suggested by, among others, Alexei Kudrin, former first deputy prime minister and minister of finance (and reportedly still Putin's personal friend and adviser), these measures include competitive, free, and fair elections; a substantial political opposition as a permanent element of domestic politics; accountability of the state to society; and independent courts and a legal system that "guarantees property rights."[3]

Yet, apparently judging such reforms as incompatible with its political control and corrupt rent-gathering, the Kremlin opted for survival over the country's long-term interests. As a result, by 2013 the Russian economy found itself, in Kudrin's words, "against the wall of underdeveloped economic institutions," with severely constricted opportunities for modernization and sustained growth.[4] According to Minister of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukaev, since the second half of 2012 the country has "exhibited a consistent tendency toward a worsening economic dynamic."[5]

Short of their rising sharply, even high oil prices were no longer capable of making up for these structural deficiencies. According to Kudrin, for the Russian economy to substantially grow, oil prices have to rise by $10–17 annually. At $80 a barrel, the Russian economy would shrink by 3–4 percent.[6] So in 2013, even with the dominant Russian Urals brand of oil selling for $107 a barrel on average, Russia's GDP growth slowed to 1.3 percent, less than half of the 2012 rate and the lowest since the 2008 crisis.

In the first two months of 2014, the ruble fell 10 percent to a five-year low against the dollar (before plunging again after Russia's annexation of Crimea).[7] An estimated 300,000 Russian entrepreneurs are currently in jail for economic crimes (most of them victims of takeovers [*reyderstvo*] by government officials or unscrupulous partners who bribed the courts).[8] In 2013, between 450,000 and 500,000 businesses were forced to close their doors.[9] In turn, capital flight that year reached $63 billion. Before the end of this year's first quarter, outflow had already exceeded that mark, with the World Bank predicting capital flight could reach as high as $150 billion by the end of 2014.[10] In January, first deputy governor of the Central Bank of Russia (Russia's equivalent to the Federal Reserve), Kseniya Yudaeva, warned that stagflation—a period during which rising inflation is accompanied by slowing economic growth—was becoming increasingly likely in Russia.[11]

Public Opinion

Most troubling for Putin must have been public opinion trends throughout 2013 and in January of this year. In the words of Lev Gudkov, Russia's leading independent pollster and director of the Levada Center, "Putin has stopped being a 'Teflon' [president]."[12]

After a sophisticated quantitative analysis of public opinion data, Daniel Treisman, a leading US student of Russian political attitudes, concluded that views of Putin were linked more closely than ever before to the people's perception of the regime's economic performance and were "highly vulnerable to a further deterioration in the economy."[13] Thus, even with no critical coverage of Putin allowed on national television, where around 95 percent of Russians get their news, his 61 percent approval rating in November 2013 was the lowest of his presidency.[14] And only 34 percent of Russians said last year that they trusted Putin.[15] "Trust in Putin is not just falling—there is not even a bottom in sight," Mikhail Dmitriev, one of Russia's leading independent political sociologists, noted last summer, predicting that the level of trust could plunge to as low as 18–20 percent.[16]

In 2013, Putin was admired by 2 percent and liked by 18 percent of Russians (the corresponding numbers in 2008 were 9 and 40 percent, respectively), while 23 percent were either "wary" of him, could say "nothing good" about him, or plain detested him; 22 percent were either "neutral" or "indifferent." Asked in August 2013 if they thought Putin was guilty of abuses of power, 52 percent of those surveyed answered "undoubtedly" or "probably" yes (13 percent were convinced that it was not true while 18 percent thought it did not matter, even if true).[17] Perhaps most alarming to the Russian president was that more than 50 percent of Russians did not want him to run again in 2018.[18]

With Putin's personal popularity central to the people's attitude toward the regime as a whole, attitudes toward the authorities continued to fall.[19] Among those asked in 2013 whether the Russian political elite cared more about Russia's welfare or strengthening their own power, 26 percent of the respondents agreed with the former statement and 62 percent with the latter.[20] More than 80 percent of those surveyed called government officials and politicians "rapacious," "without conscience," and "not respecting law or ordinary people."[21]

"Foreign policy is the only thing that works," the former head of a leading think tank told me in Moscow this past January. That is, as of early 2014, it was only in foreign policy that the regime could reasonably be certain of successes that could boost Putin's and, by extension, the regime's popularity and legitimacy.

The *Revanche*: Three Objectives

"The Ukrainian revolution did not signify Putin's loss just in the area of geopolitical influence," writes Kirill Rogov, a top Russian independent political expert. "[It was] a clear and alarming hint at the systemic crisis" of two quite similar post-Soviet regimes, both of which relied on high

rates of economic growth to justify the "restoration of hierarchical political orders" under the guise of stability.[22] When growth slowed down, the "orders" in both countries started being questioned.

In the next few months to a year, the absolute priority in Russian foreign policy will be given to three tightly entwined objectives. Punishing, humiliating, destabilizing, and eventually derailing a Europe-bound Ukraine is the first of these goals. In its pursuit, Russia has thus far insisted that any progress on key Western demands to ease military pressure on Ukraine and to recognize the interim government in Kiev be tied to a constitutional federalization in Ukraine and an autonomous status for eastern and southern Ukraine.

If Moscow succeeds, regardless of whether many or most Ukrainians (and even ethnic Russians) want this (and the polls show they would not), like a small cavalry of Trojan horses, the cities and towns controlled by the Russian special forces and their ethnic Russian supporters will almost certainly become de facto Russian protectorates. The Kremlin could then tear Ukraine apart by whipping up protests and calls for secessions a la Crimea.[23] The second goal is to intimidate and cajole the West into rejecting any escalation of sanctions (and into aiding their gradual dilution and removal). Finally, and most importantly, the Kremlin needs to prolong for as long as possible the current rally-around-the-flag effect or, synonymously, the rally-around-the-president effect.

The March 18 Speech vs. the Iron Curtain Speech

All three targets were engaged in Putin's March 18 speech to the Federal Assembly and Russian political, economic, and cultural elite. The oration's leitmotif was intense hostility toward the West: according to Putin, the West "preferred to be guided not by international law in its practical policies, but by the rule of the gun" and wished to "drive Russia into the corner." Putin traced this enmity toward Russia as far back as the 18th century. In the post-Soviet era, Putin averred, Russia "has always been deceived, has always been [confronted with] decisions made behind its back."[24]

It is allegedly in accordance with this nefarious practice that the West engineered the Ukrainian crisis aimed "against Ukraine, Russia, and the integration of the Eurasian space" and "threw in a well-equipped army of militants" (Putin used the term *boeviki*, which is the official Russian designation of Muslim terrorists on the Russian territory). With the motherland thus under mortal threat, anyone opposing its defender and savior in chief is, naturally, a "fifth columnist" and a "national-traitor" [*natsiional-predatel*], in contrast to the "patriotic mood" of and "national unity" among ordinary folk.

Russian commentators compared Putin's March 18 rhetoric to Winston Churchill's famous 1946 speech in Fulton, Missouri, in which the former British prime minister used the Iron Curtain metaphor to highlight the deep and permanent division of Europe that followed the Stalinist Soviet Union's occupation of Eastern and Central Europe and the establishment of Soviet satrapies there. "It is clear that the history of the country and, in a certain sense the world, has been divided into two periods: pre- and post-Crimean," wrote the prominent daily *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. "The relationships of great powers are being hastily revised—in the spirit of the Cold War of the mid-20th century."[25]

The speech was also marked by vulgarity that was unprecedented not just for post-Soviet Russia but also for Soviet Russia. Never in the worst days of the Cold War did a Soviet leader, including Stalin, resort to, for instance, a term for forced sexual intercourse [*nagnuli*], which Putin used to describe the alleged pressure by the United States on the world community in general and the International Court in particular in connection with the Kosovo referendum on independence from Serbia.

Even more jarring were the rhetorical parallels with Nazi propaganda, especially in connection with the 1938 annexation of Austria and of the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. Among these eerie echoes was the betrayal of Russia and ethnic Russians by both Soviet and post-Soviet leaders before Putin. Putin singled out the Bolsheviks' giving Russia's southern provinces to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Nikita Khrushchev's handing Crimea over to Ukraine, and, although not mentioning him by name, Yeltsin's abandoning ethnic Russians outside Russia "like a sack of potatoes." Other echoes from the late 1930s included the historic victimhood of ethnic Russians at the hands of the relentlessly hostile outside plotters (the West), citizenship defined by language and ethnicity, and, consequently, Russia's right, indeed obligation, to interfere in the internal affairs of neighboring states to alleviate the alleged plight of its compatriots.[26]

Toward a New State Ideology?

Together, these beliefs are very likely to become central to a new, post-Crimea state ideology. The emergence of

this deeply reactionary (in a classic sense) creed coincided with—and in many ways may have been a response to—mass anti-Putin and prodemocracy rallies in all of Russia's largest cities in winter and spring 2011–12. As I noted last year, these new official beliefs came to include a rejection of Western values, a selective recovery of Soviet symbols and ideals, an ultraconservative interpretation of the Russian Orthodox faith and its role as a moral cornerstone of the Russian state, "militarized patriotism," and the notion of Russia as a unique civilization with exclusive predestination.[27]

In the intervening months, all these elements have been retained and strengthened; the rejection of Western values has morphed into an almost hysterical anti-Americanism. As Russia was annexing Crimea, a talk show host on Russia's second-largest television network, the state-owned Rossiya 1, proudly reminded viewers that Russia was the only country in the world capable of "reducing the United States to radioactive ash."[28] Three months before, host Dmitri Kiselev (who had also suggested that the hearts of gay men who have died in car accidents be torn out of their bodies and burnt rather than used as transplants) was elevated by Putin to become, in effect, Russia's propagandist in chief as head of the newly created, mega propaganda agency called Rossiya Segodnya. (Two years before, Alexei Pushkov, another professional anti-American propagandist and television host who suggested on air that 9/11 could have been the work of the US government, was made chairman of the State Duma committee on foreign affairs.)[29]

The West's Allegedly Implacable Enmity

As some observers pointed out, the notion of the West's permanent and relentless enmity toward Russia in the fiery rhetoric of Putin's March 18 speech echoed the writings of the nationalist Russian philosophers of the last century, especially those of Russian emigrant Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954). The Kremlin is reported to have given regional governors the assignment of reading Ilyin's works during the 2014 winter holidays.[30] The policies of Western nations, Ilyin wrote in a 1950 article, were informed by an

> absurd fear of a unified Russia and inveterate enmity towards the Russian monarchy and the Eastern Orthodoxy. We know that Western nations don't understand and don't tolerate Russian identity. . . . They are going to divide the united Russian 'broom' into twigs to break those twigs one by one and rekindle with them the fading light of their own civilization. . . . They need to . . . destroy [Russia]: a plan of hatred and lust for power.[31]

Whether intended or not, Putin's speech was also consonant with major elements in the thinking of Alexander Dugin, Russia's most prominent advocate of what might be called national-imperial totalitarian socialism. A proponent of Eurasianism as Russia's only appropriate civilizational choice and the world's only cultural and geopolitical counterweight to the West, Dugin is also a reported admirer of the SS and Nazi practices and was one of the organizers of the National-Bolshevik Party in the 1990s.[32] Putin's second term (2004–08) coincided with Dugin's rise to national prominence: Dugin was appointed to be a professor at Russia's most prestigious public college, Moscow State University, and became a frequent guest on national television, neither of which would have been possible without the Kremlin's endorsement.

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From the beginning of the Kiev protests, Dugin portrayed them as a Western plot against Russia: "Again and again: the main enemy is the USA, NATO, and liberal ideology. This is a mortal and absolute enemy."[33] He thrilled to Putin's response, especially the annexation of Crimea, as the beginning of a "real revolution," the "end of liberalism and the beginning of patriotism," and the liquidation of Russia's fifth column (groups allegedly seeking to undermine the Kremlin, such as Echo Moskvy, the sole remaining opposition national radio network). Internationally, Dugin perceived the Russian president's Ukrainian policy as a "challenge to the unipolar world, dominated by all the components of [everything that is] evil [in] the world."[34]

Toward a New Regime: The Iranization of Russia?

Yet perhaps the most troubling, and most lasting and consequential, development for Russia and the world, heralded by Putin's speech, may be the beginning of a new regime. Emerging from the feverish and deafening

propaganda, the imperial-patriotic euphoria, and anti-Western paranoia he whipped up through Crimea's occupation and annexation is a blueprint for a far more repressive, openly messianic, imperial, revisionist, militarized, and explicitly anti-Western—especially anti-American—political system. This permanent-mobilization arrangement would be designed to secure Putin's popularity, loyalty, and legitimacy even as the country's greater isolation and ossified institutions are almost certain to result in economic decline, which may have already started, and in a lower standard of living. This regime's domestic and foreign policies will serve as the foundation for a presidency for life, or reign of the father of all Russians, defender of the nation, and protector of the motherland.

On March 18, Putin's cult of personality, which has been carefully constructed for years, suddenly came into full bloom.

The familiar Soviet-era combination of ideological imperatives with, at best, a middling and, at worst (and more likely), increasingly backward and recession-prone economy creates its own almost irresistible momentum toward political and institutional hardening of the regime. With the country already entering a period of "long economic stagnation," as described by prominent political economist Evgeny Gontmakher, Russia can implement and sustain Putin's new agenda only by redistributing the budget in favor of the military-industrial complex and the sectors whose loyalty is politically vital to the new order—uniformed military, government bureaucracies, and pensioners—while ripping off the rest of society.

Coming on top of the already-planned cuts to health care and education, such a social policy cannot, in Gontmakher's view, be maintained without "an all-out brainwashing" by mass media (first and foremost by national television channels), restricted access to the Internet, still heavier "constriction of every attempt at civil self-organization independent of the state," further "clericalization of life" (that is, increased influence of the official Russian Orthodox Church), and a "tough" ideological control over the educational system.[35] Another Russian observer summarized this evolution as a "wholesale program for a new Russian autarchy"—complete with its own "national" electronic payment system, Internet, and Global Positioning System, and disconnected from the rest of the world—that is a "program for the Iranization of Russia and its return to totalitarianism."[36]

An Autocracy with ICBMs?

The dangers of such developments to Russia and the world are as obvious as they are many. But perhaps the greatest danger comes from yet another core feature of the new regime: a highly personalistic dictatorship. Evinced by thunderous applause and standing ovations on March 18 was Putin's elevation to a much higher and exclusive plane of the Russian officialdom. His cult of personality, which has been carefully constructed for years, suddenly came into full bloom.

This is a historical first. Never before has there been an autocracy with a fleet of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). As of January 2014, Russia was estimated to have 1,700 nuclear warheads deployed on 489 strategic launchers, including 311 ground missile systems, 7 strategic submarines capable of carrying 112 missiles, and 66 heavy bombers capable of carrying 200 long-range cruise missiles and bombs.[37]

Stalin's regime was of course a highly personalistic dictatorship armed with an atomic bomb, but he did not have missiles. The Soviet Union under Khrushchev had only a handful of highly unreliable first-generation ICBMs. (To compensate for this deficiency, Khrushchev moved short-range missiles to Cuba within an easy range of the United States, and provoked the Cuban missile crisis). In addition, for all of his erraticism and ebullience, Khrushchev was constrained by the Politburo elite, which in the end fired him for the Cuban escapade, among other manifestations of "voluntarism."

Mao Zedong, like Stalin, was domestically unconstrained but had no strategic delivery vehicles. Leonid Brezhnev did have long-range missiles, but his was definitely a collective leadership regime—the largely conservative gerontocracy of a wary Politburo—seeking only low-risk targets of opportunity. Today, North Korea is a highly personalistic totalitarian regime but has only a handful of strategic missiles, the flight length and precision of which are still uncertain. Finally, China is busily perfecting its long-range delivery vehicles, but its regime is currently more like a classic oligarchy, with the leader rigidly limited to two five-year terms, selected and to a large extent controlled by the elite.

Putin has upended the almost 70-year standard of a state having political control over strategic nuclear weapons. Confronting and containing a personalistic and,

as it certainly appears today, assertively revisionist regime is a challenge the West has never faced before. The task of improvising a response to this evolution is made more urgent still by Moscow's concerted effort to modernize its Strategic Missile Forces (SMF). The implementation of the $770 billion, 10-year rearmament and modernization program, made public by Putin in February 2012 during his reelection campaign, will fully equip SMF with new, fifth-generation strategic missiles by 2021.[38]

Among the new weapons is the Yars-M ICBM that can carry up to 10 independently targeted warheads.[39] Another new missile is a single-warhead Topol-M ICBM with a range of 7,000 miles. Capable of evasive maneuvers and of deploying decoys, it is designed explicitly to evade current or planned US missile defense. (By contrast, the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review called for reducing each Minuteman III ICBM missile to only one warhead to "enhance stability of the nuclear balance by reducing the incentive for either side to strike first.")[40]

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On an Escalator with No Exit

Along with single-handedly redrawing Europe's post–Cold War map (and perhaps igniting the first large-scale invasion of a European country since 1939–40), Putin appears to have used the Ukrainian revolution as an opportunity to overhaul Russia's political order by creating a regime that would be considerably more repressive, aggressive, and unpredictable—an autocracy with hundreds of strategic warheads. Future US and EU sanctions, therefore, should aim to curb the malignant transformation of the Putin regime rather than solely to dissuade Moscow from further action in eastern Ukraine (such as sanctions against the life blood of the Kremlin—the energy sector—and more biting financial sanctions). And because Putin's personal popularity is tied directly to the Russian people's attitude toward Russian authorities as a whole, imposing higher economic costs on the policies with which he is so clearly associated will likely begin eroding his standing and, with it, the legitimacy of his emerging presidency for life.

In the words of Kirill Rogov, "The gauntlet which Putin has thrown down to Russia and the world can be called historic—and this history is only beginning."[41] That history may turn out to be longer or shorter, but it is not likely to adapt or evolve; once established, such regimes rarely do. They only become more rigid and ossify. Completing, post–Crimea annexation, the inextricable merger of his physical existence with that of his regime, Putin has stepped on the dictator-for-life escalator from which only physical demise, whether peaceful or violent, provides exit. One can only hope that whatever it will be, this eventuality will not add to Russia's long list of tragedies—this time in a country with hundreds of strategic nuclear warheads.

Notes

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