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PUTIN'S "GREATER NOVOROSSIYA" – THE DISMEMBERMENT OF UKRAINE?

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On April 17, Vladimir Putin introduced a dangerously expansive new concept into the Ukraine crisis. During his four-hour question and answer session on Russian TV that day he pointedly mentioned "Novorossiya" – a large swath of territory conquered by Imperial Russia during the 18th century from a declining Ottoman Empire. This historic Novorossiya covered roughly a third of what is now Ukraine (including Crimea).

Subsequent comments and actions by Putin and his surrogates have made it clear that the Kremlin's goal is once again to establish its dominance over the lands once called Novorossiya. Furthermore, it is clear that Putin hopes to push his control well beyond this region's historic boundaries to include other contiguous provinces with large Russian-speaking populations.

Most commentators and media are still focusing on Putin's annexation of Crimea and on the threatened Russian takeover of the eastern Ukraine provinces (*oblasts*) of Donetsk and Luhansk. But the far more ominous reality, both in Moscow' rhetoric and on the ground, is that Putin has already begun laying the groundwork for removing not only these, but several additional provinces from Kiev's control and bringing them under Russian domination, either by annexation or by creating a nominally independent Federation of Novorossiya.

Unless the U.S. and its European allies take far more decisive countermeasures than they have to date, [Putin's plan](#)¹ will continue to unfold slowly but steadily and, within a matter of months, Ukraine will either be dismembered or brought back into the Russian sphere of influence.

Putin's convenient and expansive (though historically inaccurate) 'rediscovery' of Novorossiya now appears to include the following provinces in addition to Crimea: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Kherson, Mikolaiv and Odessa. If he can turn this vision into a reality, Moscow would dominate the entire northern littoral of the Black Sea and control a wide band of contiguous territory stretching all the way from Russia's current western boundaries to the borders of Romania and Moldova (conveniently including the latter's already self-declared breakaway province of Transdnistria).

¹ For further information see: [Kraemer, Richard, and Maia Otarashvili. "Geopolitical Implications of the Ukraine Crisis." Foreign Policy Research Institute. \[http://www.fpri.org/articles/2014/04/geopolitical-implications-ukraine-crisis?utm_source=FPRI+E-Mails&utm_campaign=6459aaf404-Otarashvili+and+Kraemer+on+Ukraine+050114&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e8d0f13be2-6459aaf404-168796449#click\]\(http://www.fpri.org/articles/2014/04/geopolitical-implications-ukraine-crisis?utm_source=FPRI+E-Mails&utm_campaign=6459aaf404-Otarashvili+and+Kraemer+on+Ukraine+050114&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e8d0f13be2-6459aaf404-168796449#click\) \(accessed May 1, 2014\).](http://www.fpri.org/articles/2014/04/geopolitical-implications-ukraine-crisis?utm_source=FPRI+E-Mails&utm_campaign=6459aaf404-Otarashvili+and+Kraemer+on+Ukraine+050114&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e8d0f13be2-6459aaf404-168796449#click)



Map Credit: Dim Grits

If all of these provinces are either annexed by Russia or form a nominally independent federation of 'Greater Novorossiya', the population of Ukraine would drop from 46 million to 25 million. This would not only subtract nearly 45% of Ukraine's 2013 population but also roughly two thirds of its GDP, given that the country's eastern and southern provinces are far more industrialized than those of the center and west.²

So far, neither financial sanctions nor international condemnation of Russia's aggressions against Ukraine have had the slightest deterrent effect against Putin's strategy. Instead, he is now steadily undermining Kiev's control of the country's *oblasts* in small slices – currently at the rate of two or three strategic centers per day – the same pace and playbook that enabled Russia to establish total control of Crimea within a matter of weeks.

Given its track record so far, the weak government in Kiev and its even weaker military and security forces are obviously powerless to put a stop to Putin's Novorossiya strategy. Meanwhile, the western powers continue to talk but take actions that are patently having no deterrent value. Unless the U.S. and its European allies can manage a quantum leap in their sanctions and counter-measures, Putin's strategy seems likely to continue to unfold, slowly but steadily, likely without need for any *overt* large-scale Russian military intervention other than menacing moves on Ukraine's borders.

If this happens, not only will the map of Ukraine be dramatically redrawn, but the entire geopolitical balance of Europe will be decisively altered. And, needless to say, the fate of democracy in the region, which has already suffered worrisome erosion in several post-communist countries over the past few years, will be severely compromised.

And, beyond Europe, Putin will have taken a giant step towards creating his new Moscow-dominated Eurasian Union. This is a potentially massive geopolitical and economic bloc stretching through the Caucasus into post-Soviet Central Asia – with obvious negative global repercussions.

² Eastern Ukraine is much more productive than its western counterpart. Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and Odessa all have much higher rates of export and higher average salaries than the western regions. Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk alone make up 35% of the total share of Ukrainian exports while the seven most western regions make up only 7% of the total share of exports. [Vegte, Nils van der. "Everything is annihilated": the split of Ukraine on the basis of economic data \(important text\)..." Da Russophile. http://darussophile.com/2014/02/everything-is-annihilated-the-split-of-ukraine-on-the-basis-of-economic-data-important-text/ \(accessed May 2, 2014\).](http://darussophile.com/2014/02/everything-is-annihilated-the-split-of-ukraine-on-the-basis-of-economic-data-important-text/)

PUTIN'S VISION OF "GREATER NOVOROSSIYA"

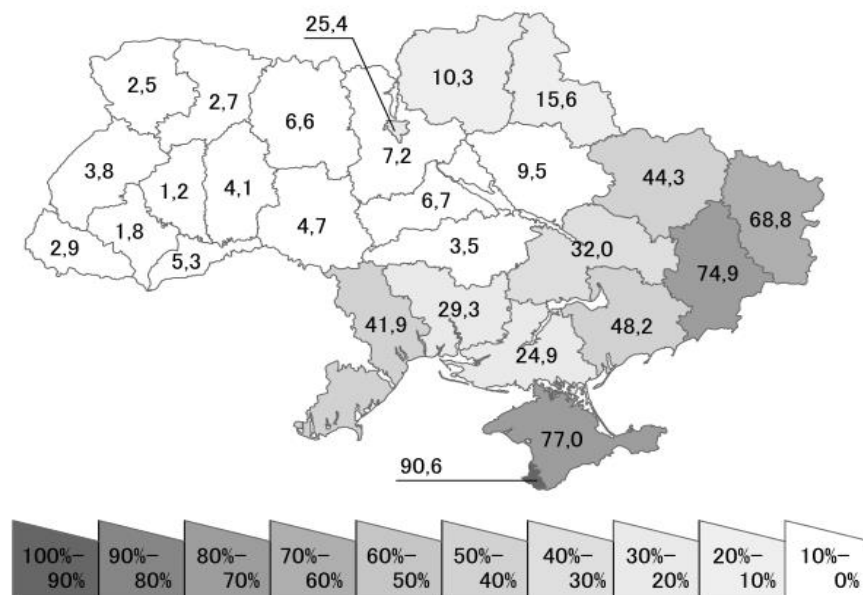
Novorossiya (literally, New Russia) refers historically to a very large section of present-day Ukraine lying north of the Black Sea and stretching from Luhansk and Donetsk in the east to Odessa in the west. Russia, and subsequently the USSR, controlled this region from the 18th century until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. But in the Soviet period it was part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic rather than directly part of Russia.

Ominously, however, on April 17, when Putin evoked the memory of historic Novorossiya, he also exclaimed that only "God knows" why Russia surrendered this region in 1922 to Ukraine.

Just a few weeks earlier, Putin had described Nikita Khrushchev's decision to incorporate Crimea into Ukraine in 1954 in a remarkably similar vein. The analogy seems all too obvious.

Furthermore, as if Putin's concept of correcting historic anomalies were not sufficiently threatening, he quickly expanded his description of Novorossiya to include territories that lie well beyond its actual historical boundaries, most notably by explicitly including Kharkiv – a major city and important *oblast* that was never part of that historic region.

Furthermore, Putin and his hard-line Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, along with the Kremlin's prolific propaganda machine, also regularly attempt to legitimize Russian intervention by focusing on the high number of "Russians" in Ukraine overall. Lavrov has also repeatedly claimed that Moscow has a right to protect Russian "citizens" in Ukraine – thus adding a further argument in favor of defining the new version of Novorossiya quite expansively.



Map credit: Alex Tora

PUTIN'S MOTIVES AND RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY

Vladimir Putin's Ukraine strategy is driven by three goals: survival, empire and legacy.

First and foremost, Putin sees the fate of Ukraine as an existential issue both for himself and for the authoritarian regime that he and his inner circle have gradually rebuilt over the past fifteen years. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was a deep shock to Putin because of the echoes it created in Russia and because Ukraine seemed to be on the brink of becoming a major source of longer-term "democratic diffusion" right on Russia's long southwestern border. Fortunately for Putin, however, the luster of this revolution quickly wore off once its leaders gained office and failed to live up to their reformist promises. From the start there was infighting between Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko; reforms were postponed; the Ukrainian economy spiraled downward and corruption remained rampant.

By the time Yushchenko's presidency ended in 2010, many voters had come to see Viktor Yanukovich as a preferable alternative. Yanukovich also reportedly benefited from substantial financial and "political technology" support from Moscow. For Putin, Yanukovich was a promising alternative to the western-oriented "Orange" leaders, since he seemed likely to maintain strong trade and financial ties with Russia, show proper deference towards Moscow and, above all, keep Ukraine out of NATO. But it turned out that too many Ukrainians were unwilling to follow the Putin/Yanukovich script.

When Yanukovich fled Kiev on February 21, it must have seemed to the Kremlin that a second wave of the Orange Revolution had taken control of Ukraine. Putin no doubt trembled with fury – but also with fear.

Putin's second driving motive for going all out to reassert as much dominance as possible in Ukraine combines his goals of restoring a Russian empire and of burnishing his personal legacy. It is abundantly clear that Putin seeks to restore Russia to its former imperial glory, and in so doing to secure for himself a place in history as one of the greatest Russian leaders of all time. In a 2005 speech, Putin famously stated that "the breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century."³

Putin's comments on the Soviet Union, taken together with his current vision of Novorossiia, should make it crystal clear to the West that the crisis in Ukraine is not a small-scale conflict, nor simply an internal political problem between eastern and western Ukraine. Rather, a de facto war for control of Ukraine has begun – and Ukraine, in turn, is only a part (though a very important one) of Putin's strategic plan to re-establish Russian hegemony over as much as possible of the former Soviet Union, and thus to reassert Russia's role as a major global power.

REPEATING THE CRIMEA PLAYBOOK, PROVINCE BY PROVINCE

Although his strategy in Ukraine is highly ambitious, Putin is clearly convinced that the most effective tactic is to proceed one stealthy step at a time. He will avoid overt military intervention if at all possible so as not to shock the western powers into genuinely painful countermeasures. Putin is clearly repeating the Crimea pattern in eastern Ukraine, having already established de facto control of over a dozen key locations in its most important eastern province, Donetsk. This is Ukraine's most industrialized *oblast*⁴, with a population of 74.9 percent Russian speakers and very strong industrial ties to Russia.



³ Bolton, John. "Did Vladimir Putin call the breakup of the USSR 'the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century?'" *PolitiFact PunditFact*. <http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/mar/06/john-bolton/did-vladimir-putin-call-breakup-ussr-greatest-geop/> (accessed April 30, 2014).

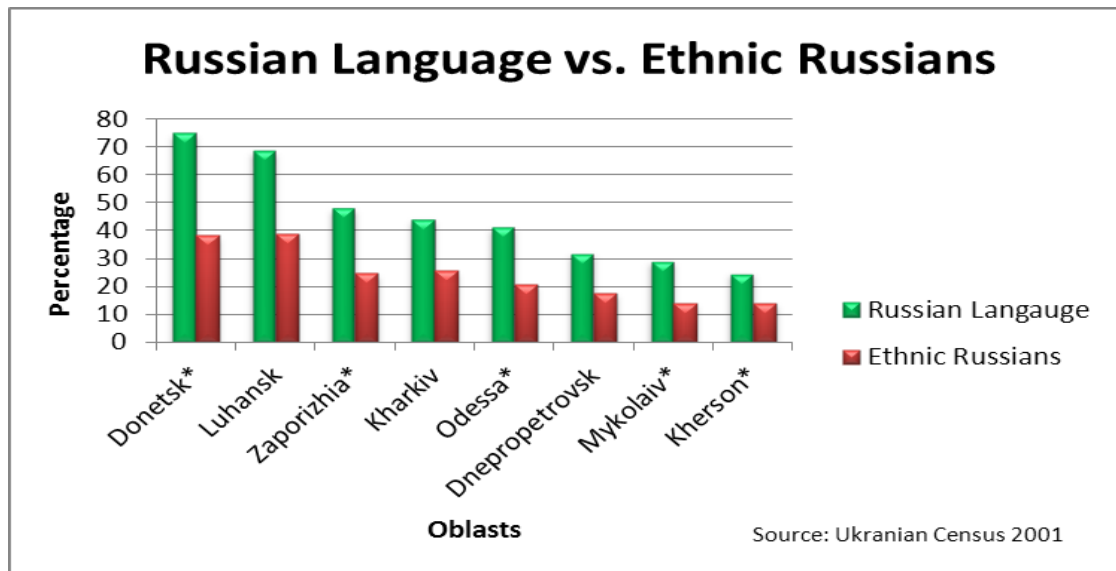
⁴ Out of all the regions in southern and eastern Ukraine that pro-Russian separatists have infiltrated, Donetsk is the most economically significant. Donetsk accounts for 22 percent of Ukraine's GDP. It also has "12 percent of Ukraine's natural resources, including 45 percent of coal, aluminum, and ferrous metals, 46 percent of its steel production, and 13 percent of Ukraine's energy production, all while making up less than 10 percent of Ukraine's population." *Larwood, Zane. "Why Donetsk Will Be Next." Fordham Political Review*. <http://fordhampoliticalreview.org/why-donetsk-will-be-next/> (accessed May 2, 2014).

The next three *oblasts* most immediately threatened by Russian stealth takeovers are Luhansk with 68.6 percent Russian speakers, Zaporizhia with 48.2 percent. Kherson with 24.9 percent also belongs on the immediately endangered list, despite its lower percentage of Russian-speakers, because Russia needs to control it along with Donetsk in order to create a “land bridge” between Russia and Crimea. A further “favorable” factor from Moscow’s viewpoint is that Kherson – along with Donetsk, Zaporizhia and part of Luhansk – falls largely within the boundaries of historic Novorossiia.

Beyond these four provinces, there have already been major Russian incursions into the two contiguous provinces of Luhansk and Kharkiv (which has a 44.3 percent Russian speaking population). And, as mentioned earlier, Putin has also proclaimed publically, even though inaccurately, that Kharkiv is part of Novorossiia.

To the west of the six *oblasts* mentioned above are Mykolaiv and Odessa, which have 29.4 percent and 41.9 percent Russian speakers, respectively. The strategic port city of Odessa has already seen the same type anti-Kiev agitation and organization of a secessionist movement that are the hallmarks of the Crimea playbook. Christian Caryl, an American journalist and editor of Foreign Policy’s Democracy Lab, has recently interviewed Odessans who are excited about the prospect of an autonomous Novorossiia state. He quotes one citizen as exclaiming, “A population of 20 million, with industry, resources. With advantages like that, who needs to become a part of Russia? By European standards that’s already a good-sized country.”⁵

LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY AND ATTITUDES



In claiming a Russian right to intervene in these eastern and southern provinces, it is clear that Moscow will use a maximalist definition of “Russians”. This means counting the number of Russian speakers rather than the number of ethnic Russians.⁶ This is to Putin’s advantage, since the number of *ethnic* Russians in these provinces is much

⁵Caryl, Christian. "Novorossiia Is Back from the Dead." *Foreign Policy*. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/17/novorossiia_is_back_from_the_dead_putin_russia_ukraine (accessed April 30, 2014).

⁶ The Russian term *русские* (*russkiye*) refers to all ethnic Russians, regardless of whether they live in Russia or hold Russian citizenship. Russians are an East Slavic ethnic group who speak the Russian language. However because Russian was the official language and the medium of education in the Soviet Union, many ethnic Ukrainians, Belarusians, Bulgarians and Jews in Ukraine still speak Russian as their primary language. While eastern Ukraine has a considerable *ethnic* Russian population (although less than a majority in every region except Crimea - which has 58% ethnic Russians), that does not necessarily mean that all these ethnic Russians are in favor of joining the Russian Federation. According to recent poll by the Ukrainian Newspaper *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, less than one-third of the population of Luhansk and Donetsk actually support joining Russia. However, Putin will not hesitate to claim that he is protecting Russians (not just ethnic Russians) from the “fascist” government in Kiev to justify his meddling in the region. *The Economist Newspaper*. "Faltering, but fully legit." *The Economist*. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/04/ukraines-government> (accessed May 2, 2014).

lower than the number of Russian *speakers*. Furthermore, not only do many Ukrainians living in the east and south acknowledge Russian as their native tongue, but an additional significant percentage speak the language fluently, which Moscow could well use as a further rationale either for the annexation of these provinces or to create an enlarged version of Novorossiia that would in fact be subservient to Moscow.

Beyond fueling ethnic and linguistic differences to justify Russia's incursions into Ukraine, Putin is working systematically to create a permanent rift between eastern and western Ukrainians based on pre-existing differences of perspective and attitude, and by building upon manufactured confrontations and grievances.

Recent public opinion polls conducted by the Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization show that the linguistic and ethnic divisions between western and eastern Ukraine also correlate with the two regions' viewpoints on a variety of issues including: Russia's military excursion in Crimea, the EuroMaidan protests that ousted Yanukovich, and the upcoming presidential election on May 25.⁷ According to the poll, over 94 percent of western Ukrainians believed Putin's actions in Crimea constituted an invasion, while only 44 percent of eastern Ukrainians believed the same. In fact, 45 percent of eastern Ukrainians believed that the referendum in Crimea on joining Russia is a legitimate right of the residents of Crimea to express their opinion about the future of Crimea.

Sixty-six percent of citizens in western Ukraine said they viewed the Euromaidan events positively while only 7 percent of citizens in eastern Ukraine said the same. While 34 percent of citizens in western Ukraine said they would vote for Petro Poroshenko, the "chocolate oligarch", in the upcoming presidential election, only 7 percent of eastern Ukrainians agreed, and 11 percent said they would vote for Serhiy Tihipko, a former member of Yanukovich's Party of Regions who has taken a pro-federalization stance.

Perhaps most importantly, 59 percent of citizens in eastern Ukraine are already in favor of joining Russia's Customs Union as opposed to 20 percent who are in favor of joining the European Union.

The total population of Putin's ideal Greater Novorossiia (Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, Kherson, Dnepropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Odessa, and Crimea), would be approximately 21 million. This would be a sizable potential addition to the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan, which would give Putin's Russia even stronger economic leverage against the European Union.

Russian journalist Yulia Latynina views Putin's tactics in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as a new military strategy, in which the government controls and distorts information to cast Russia and the pro-Russian separatists as the victims. She argues that this "is far more important than achieving a military victory. To come out the winner in this scenario, you don't have to shoot your enemy. All you have to do is either kill your own men — or provoke others into killing them — and then portray it as an act of aggression by the enemy with all of the attendant media spin."⁸ Due to this media spin, all of the Ukrainian government's attempts at diffusing the situation in the eastern provinces have horribly backfired.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MOLDOVA AND BEYOND

Even assuming that Putin achieves his ambitious vision of a Greater Novorossiia, there is no guarantee that Putin will stop at Odessa. In fact, the contrary seems likely. Moldova would also be directly threatened. In March, the separatist de facto government in Transdnistria asked to be incorporated into the Russian federation.⁹ Putin could thus easily repeat the same tactics that were successful in Crimea and are working in eastern Ukraine, in Transdnistria. This breakaway region would become independent from Moldova and possibly join the Novorossiia federation.

⁷ Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization, "Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine: April 3-12, 2014", International Republican Institute,

<http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20April%20Survey%20of%20Residents%20of%20Ukraine%2C%20April%203-12%2C%202014.pdf>

⁸ Latynina, Yulia. "Russia's New War Technology in Ukraine | Opinion." *The Moscow Times*.

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russias-new-war-technology-in-ukraine/498729.html> (accessed April 30, 2014).

⁹ "Transnistria territorially tempting to Russia." *Euro News*. <http://www.euronews.com/2014/04/23/transnistria-territorially-tempting-to-russia/> (accessed April 30, 2014).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the potential impact of this scenario on the weak remainder state of Moldova or, for that matter of the putative rump state of central and western Ukraine. Suffice it to say that, if Ukraine and the West do not act decisively against Russian “irredentism” in eastern Ukraine, any state in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or Central Asia with a Russian speaking minority could well be at risk of either dismemberment or of de facto Russian domination as the price of avoiding it.

CAN PUTIN BE STOPPED?

It is hard to envision any realistic scenario whereby the current Ukrainian government in Kiev might stop this slow and steady dismemberment of the country. Given pro-Russian separatists’ success in seizing government buildings all across eastern Ukraine with impunity, what options does the current Ukrainian government have?

If Ukraine can manage to make serious military efforts to counteract the gradual slicing off of its provinces, Moscow will blame the resultant bloodshed on Western-instigated “fascists” in Kiev and would likely intervene militarily to assure the victory of the pro-Russian separatists whom they are currently instigating and assisting with semi-covert military support. Putin has already expressed indignation towards Ukraine’s miniscule “anti-terrorist operations” in the east and has called these actions a “grave crime.”¹⁰

Given Ukraine’s likely ineffectiveness in dealing with Russia’s incursions into its territory, what options does the West have in dealing with Russia’s increased aggression and imperialistic ambitions?

The U.S., its NATO allies and the European Union are left with two basic options. The first is to continue the current pattern of de facto acquiescence. The West can continue its current course of public condemnation and minor punitive economic and financial sanctions that stop short of really serious pain on either side. If so, Putin will almost certainly ignore the West’s sanctions, despite their toll on the Russian economy. He will thus move steadily ahead with his plan to either separate and federalize eastern and southern Ukraine, or incorporate it into Russia.

The alternative is for the West to undertake truly deep and thus mutually painful economic sanctions that would sharply reduce Russia’s oil and gas exports and revenues, decimate foreign investment and wreak havoc with that country’s economy. This would require going very far beyond the half-hearted European support for intensified sanctions against Russia that we have seen so far, especially among European countries with strong trade ties to Russia.¹¹

And, given the insulation of Putin and his ruling elite from economic pain, there would also need to be a strong show of military resolve. The U.S. would need to at least double the number of its forces stationed in Europe (currently only 66,000 vs. 400,000 during the Cold War) and NATO would have to move several thousand European, Canadian and American troops to the eastern borders of Poland and the Baltic republics, and to northeastern Romania.

As of now, the West has not committed a substantial number of troops to the defense of Eastern Europe, despite its treaty obligations to defend these NATO members. On April 23rd, the U.S. sent 150 American troops, with 450 more expected to join them, to Poland as part of a military exercise.¹² However, these 150 troops are dwarfed by Russia’s 40,000 men stationed at the Ukrainian border.¹³ From Putin’s expansive perspective, these micro-exercises are derisory at a time when he has held military exercises near Ukraine involving troops in the tens of thousands. Putin will not be deterred by anything short of a commensurate show of resolve by the Western powers.

¹⁰ Resneck, Jacob, and Olga Rudenko. "Putin issues new threat as pro-Russia forces mobilize." USA Today. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/04/24/ukraine-russia-crisis/8085459> (accessed April 30, 2014).

¹¹ The Economist Newspaper. "Limp wrist diplomacy?." The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2014/03/europe-russia-and-sanctions> (accessed April 30, 2014).

¹² FOX News Network. "US troops arrive in Poland for exercises across Eastern Europe amid Ukraine crisis." Fox News. <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/04/22/us-troops-arrive-in-poland-for-exercises-across-eastern-europe-amid-ukraine/> (accessed April 30, 2014).

¹³ Botelho, Greg, Laura Smith-Spark, Jim Sciutto, Hada Messia, and Anna Rappard. "Russia's Sergey Lavrov: U.S. 'running the show' in Kiev 'without any scruples'." CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/23/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/> (accessed April 29, 2014).

Unless and until the West takes a seriously strong stand against Putin's undeclared war against Kiev and commits to keeping Ukraine united and independent, Putin will continue on his present path of stealth conquest. He will implement his own vision of Novorossiya as a step towards re-establishing a "Greater Russia" – one that continues its aggressive expansionism well beyond Ukraine and in which he plays a major role on the world stage dedicated to undercutting the West and its democratic values.

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