

WHAT PUTIN REALLY FEARED IN UKRAINE

By Chris Miller



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What are Vladimir Putin's goals in Ukraine? What prompted the Kremlin to annex Crimea, foster an insurgency on its own border, and provoke the region's most dangerous crisis since the end of the Cold War? Most analysts have assessed Moscow's policy through the perspective of Russia's enduring interests in Ukraine, whether cultural, economic, or strategic. But a narrative based on such long-term interests explains only part of the Kremlin's behavior. One of Putin's most underestimated goals in Ukraine is to defend his own position in Russia's domestic politics. This 'interest' dates back not centuries, but to a series of anti-Kremlin street protests that broke out in Moscow in late 2011.

Russia does, of course have serious long-term interests in Ukraine. Russia's Black Sea Fleet is based in Crimea. Its heavy industries, especially the military-industrial complex, have close ties with firms in Ukraine's east. Millions of Russian speakers live in Ukraine. Above all, say those close to the Kremlin, Moscow fears that Kyiv will seek to join NATO, threatening to place American troops on Russia's borders.

On their own, these interests do little to explain the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. The Black Sea Fleet might justify Russia's annexation of Crimea, but it sheds no light on why the Kremlin has fanned the flames of insurgency in Eastern Ukraine. The two countries' business links are significant, but Moscow's actions in Ukraine provoked Western sanctions that inflicted economic damage far out of proportion from what Russia stands to lose from closer ties between Ukraine and the EU. Ukraine has many Russian speakers, but Moscow has generally ignored Russian communities in other post-Soviet countries.

The Kremlin says its main goal is to stop Ukraine from joining NATO, and many Western analysts believe that Russia is justified in thinking that post-Maidan Ukraine would seek NATO membership, thereby threatening Russia's core interests. Yet there are two reasons to question the importance of NATO in Russian thinking.

The first is that, after Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, NATO membership for Ukraine was not a serious possibility. Major European powers, including France and Germany, were opposed. The Obama administration had not pushed the issue. And public opinion in Ukraine did not support NATO membership. Indeed, the war on Ukraine has led to an increase in public support for NATO membership in Ukraine

The second reason is that Russia's interpretation of the threat posed by NATO has changed several times in recent decades, as European security structures and Russia's domestic politics shifted. At the height of the Cold War, NATO presented a straightforward military threat to the Soviet Union. But by the end of the 1980s, the danger of war had subsided. By the early 1990s, Russia's leaders no longer saw NATO primarily through a military lens.

Indeed, NATO and Russia settled most of their differences, signing the NATO-Russia Founding Act and publicly declaring that they “do not see each other as adversaries.” Putin even suggested that Russia might seek to join NATO.

Today, that is inconceivable. Russia’s leaders again see NATO as a direct threat. But despite heated rhetoric, Russia’s leaders still do not see NATO primarily in military terms. Putin does not seriously fear a nuclear strike or a military invasion. Instead, Moscow opposes NATO expansion for the same reason it opposes EU enlargement: it knows that membership in NATO and the EU helps facilitate the establishment of stable, Western-style democracies. Such an outcome in Ukraine would encourage similar efforts in other post-Soviet states, reducing Russian influence. More worrisome to the Kremlin, it would provide a dangerous model for opposition movements within Russia itself.

The turning point in the Kremlin’s view of NATO and the EU—and the turning point in Putin’s foreign policy in general—came in December 2011, as tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets to demand clean elections and an end to Putin’s autocratic rule. This was the first serious threat to Putin’s hold on power, and he took it personally. The protests shifted the balance of power in the Kremlin toward more conservative forces, and led Putin to redefine his definition of the Kremlin’s security interests. Now, Putin realized, his greatest threat was not foreign powers, it was the middle class Russians who took to Moscow streets demanding political change.

In this context, the overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 was not simply a setback for Russia’s foreign policy. It also provided a dangerous example to Putin’s opponents at home. Alexey Navalny, the Putin opponent who stunned analysts by winning nearly a third of the vote in Moscow’s mayoral election in 2013, publicly embraced the Maidan protests, describing them as a “popular uprising” against “corrupt authorities.” Navalny celebrated Yanukovich’s fall, drawing parallels between corruption in Ukraine and Russia, and implying that the Maidan movement could serve as a model for Russians seeking change.

Navalny has not been the only Putin critic to embrace the Maidan or to suggest that it holds lessons for disaffected Muscovites. A stream of liberal journalists and activists visited the Maidan. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil tycoon who was pardoned this winter after a decade in prison on politically motivated charges, not only visited Kyiv, he also traveled to Donetsk in an apparent sign of support for Ukrainian unity. “There is a completely different Russia,” Khodorkovsky explained—a Russia that, if conditions were right, might sympathize with the Maidan’s goals.

Putin appears to agree, fearing that the Maidan’s successes in Ukraine could mobilize Russia’s opposition. Since the revolution in Kyiv, the Kremlin has sharpened its campaign against domestic dissent. Russia’s independent TV channel, Dozhd, which provided even-handed coverage of the Ukraine crisis, has suffered sustained harassment, and the editor of popular news site Lenta.ru was sacked for her reporting on Ukraine. Several opposition politicians’ websites, including those of Navalny and chess champion Garry Kasparov, have been blocked. The founder of VK, a popular social network, fled Russia saying that security services had demanded information about a pro-Maidan internet group. And Navalny himself was placed under house arrest on the same day that Russian forces began seizing Crimea.

The crackdown shows how deeply Putin fears political spillover from Ukraine. This ‘defensive’ strategy has succeeded in marginalizing political opposition. But Putin is playing offense, too. The annexation of Crimea created a surge of patriotism, heavily underwritten by state-run media, which let the Kremlin drive a wedge between liberal critics of the Crimea invasion and the majority of Russians, who supported annexation. Putin condemned “national traitors” and “fifth columnists” in a prominent speech. Lest anyone miss his point, several days later a massive banner was hung outside a central Moscow bookstore with a picture of Navalny and other Putin critics and the words “The Fifth Column.”

Yet the most important strategy for staving off a Maidan in Moscow is to prove that political opposition in general—and ‘Western-style’ democracy in particular—leads to chaos. The Kremlin has used Ukraine to prove this point. Russian state-run TV portrays the Maidan protests as a Nazi takeover, and continues to claim that Ukraine is being overrun by fascists. When far-right presidential candidate Dmytro Yarosh won 1% of the vote in recent presidential elections, Russian TV reported polls suggesting he won 37%, underscoring the argument that protests feed radicalism.

But it is important to separate cause from effect. Putin's media machine repeatedly argues that political opposition causes chaos, yet it is Russia that most aggressively stoked chaos in Ukraine -- from the annexation of Crimea, to the arrival of Chechen fighters in Donetsk, to Russians who have repeatedly destabilized Ukraine. Some see this as evidence that Moscow is willing to risk chaos in order to defend its core interests. The reality is that controlled chaos—which discredits Kyiv's new government—suits the Kremlin perfectly. Without regular video footage of militants and explosions on the nightly news, it would be far harder for state TV to explain why the Maidan was so dangerous in the first place.

While Westerners have sought to understand Moscow's enduring interests in Ukraine, Russian analysts—including those in both pro-government and opposition circles—have drawn straight lines between Ukraine and Russia's domestic politics. For example, Fyodor Lukyanov, a leading Russian foreign policy thinker, has written that Putin's Ukraine policy is driven by a “deep-set fear that Ukraine's ‘Orange Revolution’ fever might infect Russia.”

Those who defend Moscow's conduct in Ukraine note that the two countries have a shared history and culture. Putin himself has argued that “you have to understand that Ukraine is not even a country.” The two countries' politics are indeed intertwined, as Putin knows well: one of his main goals in Ukraine has been to stave off another Maidan—not in Kyiv, but in Moscow.

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