



Russian foreign policy: domestic constraints

by Cameron Johnston

President Putin is often presented by Western media as an autocratic leader free of checks and balances who imposes his will in foreign policy. If we could only climb ‘inside the head of Vladimir Putin’, to paraphrase the title of a recent book by French philosopher Michel Eltchaninoff, we could divine his intentions and predict his next moves. But though Putin does indeed enjoy a remarkably free hand abroad, he still has to take public opinion into account in weighing up his options.

After a year spent fixating on Ukraine and entertaining great power ambitions, the Russian people are turning their attention back to the bread-and-butter issues that affect their daily lives. Jobs, wages and food prices are once again the order of the day. What effect, if any, this will have on foreign policy is as yet uncertain. The recent build-up of soldiers and materiel along the Ukrainian border might seem to disprove the thesis that Putin will shrink from decisive action in the interest of domestic stability. Nevertheless, the strategy he adopts at the front will likely be informed by the prevailing atmosphere back home.

Neither hawks nor doves

Thus far, the Kremlin has secured the Russian people’s overwhelming support in conducting its foreign policy. Putin has enjoyed approval ratings of around 85% ever since annexing Crimea last March. What is more, the percentage of people willing to shoulder the economic costs associated with the

annexation, in the form of ‘limited growth to wages and pensions, cuts to social programmes and a rise in prices’, has remained roughly constant between April 2014 (46%) and March this year (50%).

Beneath the surface, however, important changes are afoot. Surveys conducted by the Levada-Centre, an independent polling organisation, show that Russians are increasingly hostile to ‘foreign adventures’. Those who declare themselves willing to support the Russian leadership in the event of an all-out war with Ukraine are much fewer now (44% in February 2015) than they were a year ago (74% in March 2014), while advocates of the annexation of Donetsk and Lugansk are now in a small minority, 15% compared to 48% previously. The proportion of Russians who believe that Russia has the right to annex a territory in which the rights of ethnic Russians are being violated has likewise dropped from 58% in March 2014 to 34% in March 2015.

Separate polls taken by the Russia Public Opinion Research Centre and the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences bear out these findings. The latter reported in April 2015 that one in every two respondents feared an escalation of the Ukraine crisis and the prospect that Russia might be ‘fully drawn in’.

The turning of the tide

Growing caution on the part of the Russian people is partly due, no doubt, to changes in official

discourse. The word ‘*Novorossiya*’ – an 18th century Russian imperial term for parts of southern and eastern Ukraine – has fallen out of Putin’s vocabulary, just as it has disappeared from news bulletins, and the president is now careful to underline the fact that Donetsk and Lugansk are part of Ukraine. But it has also coincided with mounting concerns about rising food prices and falling real wages. In other words, political support for a hawkish foreign policy began to decline as its economic cost increased.

The first quarter of 2015 saw the Russian economy contract by nearly 2% and real wages fall by over 8% compared to the previous year, with the devaluation of the rouble and Russian counter-sanctions on EU foodstuffs taking large bites out of pay packets. These trends are not catastrophic but they are significant: it is the first time that real wages have fallen for a sustained period under Putin’s presidency.

Rising food prices first began to register with the public last autumn. Levada polls show that the proportion of people who had noted a rise in food prices almost doubled between August and October, before rising further to 80% in November. These price hikes were not a matter of small change. In January 2015, a majority of respondents said that the price their families paid for goods and services had increased by between 15% and 50% over the past year, while close to a quarter claimed they had risen by 50%-100%.

Russians are cutting out non-essential purchases and a large number of people are struggling to make ends meet. The Russian government’s own Financial University estimates that as many as one in five residents of Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) barely earn enough to feed themselves.

Many indicators show long-term trends are going into reverse. For over a decade, strong economic growth lifted millions of people out of poverty (defined by the World Bank as living on less than \$5 a day). Over the past year, however, over half a million Russians have fallen below the poverty line and the World Bank expects a further 4-5 million to suffer the same fate in 2015.

Their suffering will be compounded by cuts to public services, such as schools and hospitals, on the part of regional governments scrambling to stave off bankruptcy. Over the last two years, Russia’s regions contracted around \$40 billion in debt at high rates of interest in an effort to fulfil Putin’s May Pledges, the spending commitments he made on returning to the presidency in 2012.

Since public spending on healthcare is already exceptionally low in Russia – 3.5% of GDP in 2014 – the regional authorities cannot slice off much fat before hitting bone. Cuts will therefore compromise the standard of healthcare and exacerbate public frustration.

Putin’s options

Will public scepticism towards foreign adventures persuade Putin to roll back his ambition in eastern Ukraine? Recent events suggest not. With tanks, rocket launchers and artillery pieces arriving daily in Matveev Kurgan, a town 25km from the border with Ukraine, Russia could still launch a large-scale assault with the aim of pushing its neighbour closer towards economic collapse. The EU would almost certainly respond with yet tougher sanctions, deepening Russia’s recession and driving down living standards. But given the fact that the Russian population is quiescent like never before – only 6% would even consider protesting – he might be prepared to take that risk.

On the other hand, Putin may calculate that he can achieve his ultimate goal at a lower cost, avoiding further sanctions and thereby insulating the average Russian from further economic shocks. If Russia were to inject men and materiel into the Donbas in fits and starts, slowly, unobtrusively raising the tempo of the conflict, it might be able to drain Ukraine’s coffers without drawing fire from the West. Putin could thereby kill two birds with one stone, increasing his leverage over Ukraine while simultaneously maintaining his grip at home.

Putin the tactician

It is impossible to say for sure what Russia will do next, although Putin will probably err on the side of caution. Lacking the ideological fervour of his Soviet forebears that would allow him to take reckless leaps into the unknown, he carefully calibrates the effects of his actions before taking any decisive step.

With the Russian people already smarting from the threefold blow of Western sanctions, falling oil prices and structural economic problems, he will hesitate before adding to their woes by launching a full-scale attack on parts of Ukraine like Mariupol. Whatever path he does take, though, he is sure to keep one eye on public opinion.

Cameron Johnston is a Junior Analyst at the EUISS.

