

Russia's strategy in the Ukrainian crisis

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The toppling of the Yanukovych regime and the taking over of power in Ukraine by the opposition were a strategic defeat for Russia, whose aim had been to permanently block the process of Ukraine's European integration and make the country part of Russia's own integration project, the Eurasian Union. It also delivered a blow to the image of president Putin as an effective leader. After the failed attempt at creating, with Russian political support, an alternative centre of power in Kharkiv that would represent the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, Russia decided to activate the separatist movement in the autonomous Crimea. Moscow actively backed it through military intervention and *de facto* occupation of the peninsula. It also undertook subversive activities in eastern and southern Ukraine, and enmassed troops along the Ukrainian border.

Russia's maximum plan is apparently to bring about a reconstruction of the Ukrainian government that would involve including pro-Russian politicians, and a change of the country's system of government, with the eastern and southern regions gaining broad political and economic autonomy. Such an outcome would give Russia a powerful lever to influence Ukraine and its policies. The alternative would be to have the eastern and southern regions proclaim broad autonomy without Kyiv's approval. If those plans fail, Russia will probably seek to partially neutralise its defeat by backing the independence of Crimea or even its incorporation into the Russian Federation in the longer term, without giving up further attempts at destabilising Ukraine.

The background behind Russia's stance on Ukraine

For large sections of the Russian elite, Ukraine is not 'abroad' in the strict sense of the word, but rather part of the homogenous Russian political and cultural space. It is the most important country of the post-Soviet area after Russia, and Moscow considers it to naturally belong in the Russian sphere of influence - this being a hallmark and a basis of Russia's status as a world power. Keeping Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence has been and remains a priority strategic objective of Russia's foreign policy. So far, Russia has been pursuing this objective through successive projects of economic and political re-integration of parts of the post-Soviet area - the Customs Union, set to formally transform into the Eurasian Union in 2015, is the newest project in this series. The Union is a priority project for president Vladimir Putin personally, and Ukraine's participation - a necessary prerequisite of the project's success. From this point of view, Ukraine's plans to sign an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union have been and are still a challenge to Russia's strategic interests, because once Ukraine

becomes part of an area governed by EU legislation and standards, it will no longer be able to join the Eurasian Union.

Russia's actions so far

In order to prevent that from happening, in the summer of 2013 Russia started exerting very strong political and economic pressure on the government of Ukraine, which contributed to president Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign the accords with the EU at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013. That decision, in turn, triggered the political crisis in Ukraine, unleashing a wave of protests that morphed into a revolution. During that phase, the Kremlin was pressing Yanukovych to forcibly quash the protests, expecting that this would cut Ukraine's political ties with the West, undo its chances for European integration and leave Kyiv with no choice but to integrate with the Eurasian Union. When those calculations failed to materialise, Moscow threw its weight behind the Kharkiv congress of pro-Russian forces from eastern and southern Ukraine held on 22 February in a hope to create a centre of power that could be an alternative to the rebellious Kyiv.

The flight of Yanukovych and his principal aides, and the taking over of power by the opposition were a strategic defeat for Russia and a blow to the image of president Putin as a strong and effective leader. From the Kremlin's perspective, it also posed a potential threat to the internal political stability of Russia by providing a model of how to oust a regime through revolution, coming from a culturally very close country.

This prompted the Kremlin to take more radical action, i.e. to activate and back the separatist movement (dormant since the mid-1990s) in Crimea where Russia held the largest sway and had the best instruments at its disposal thanks to the presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the peninsula. However, the local Russian groups could not take over control in Crimea on their own and Moscow had to become directly militarily involved, using both the Fleet units, and additional troops sent in from Russia. In this way, under the circumstances of *de facto* occupation of Crimea, people closely co-operating with Moscow took over power in the autonomy and launched the process of unilaterally expanding the Autonomous Republic's prerogatives, or actually building *de facto* independence from Ukraine.

Russia's actions in Crimea sent a signal to members of the pro-Russian groups in eastern and southern Ukraine, who launched a campaign for the autonomy of their respective regions, with Moscow's informal support. Activists sent in from Russia took part in demonstrations and were at the core of the groups which stormed the oblast administration buildings and tried to establish new "governors" there. In order to provide cover for those actions and at the same time intimidate the government in Kyiv, Russia enmassed large numbers of troops along the Ukrainian border and president Putin obtained, on 1 March, a formal endorsement from the Federation Council to use those forces in the territory of Ukraine (which foreboded a potential full-scale invasion). The problems Russia faced with obtaining political backing from the elites of eastern and southern Ukraine were probably decisive in the Kremlin's decision to de-escalate (i.e. declare that Russia would not invade Ukraine beyond the Crimea for now) signalled during president Putin's press conference on 4 March.

Russia's objectives in Ukraine

Russia has demonstrated its determination to defend its interests in Ukraine, hoping to take advantage of the perceived weakness of the new government in Kyiv and the limited involvement of the West. Its aim is still to pursue Russia's strategic interests in relation to Ukraine.

Russia's maximum plan is probably to broker, through rather informal negotiations, a political agreement on a reconstruction of the Ukrainian government to include pro-Russian politicians, and bring about a reform of Ukraine's system of government towards so-called federalisation, i.e. division of the country into regions enjoying broad political and economic autonomy. All that would in effect give Russia a powerful lever to influence Ukraine and the policies of its government, and would enable it to obstruct Ukraine's integration with European structures. At the same time Moscow's expectation is that this would open the possibility of integrating eastern and southern Ukraine (with Crimea as *de facto* a territory confederated with Ukraine) with the Eurasian Union created by Russia.

In order to implement this scenario, Moscow will blackmail the current government in Kyiv by threatening to: refuse to recognise the results of Ukraine's presidential election on 25 May; back *de facto* or formal independence of Crimea (after the referendum which is to take place in the Autonomous Republic on or before 30 March) or even incorporate Crimea into Russia; continue destabilising eastern and southern Ukraine; or send Russian troops to Ukrainian territory beyond Crimea (under the document allegedly expressing "president" Yanukovych's request for such a move). Moscow also has at its disposal instruments to pressure Ukraine economically, which, however, it is reluctant to use to a full extent because it is concerned about alienating the populace in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

At the same time Moscow hopes that the West (in practice, Germany in particular), worried about the possibility of further uncontrolled escalation of the crisis, will pressure the government in Kyiv over negotiations with Moscow and become itself involved in such talks, and *de facto* accept Russia's main demands. To make its case, Russia has been invoking the deal signed on 21 February by the then president Yanukovych, the opposition and Western observers (ministers of foreign affairs of Germany, France and Poland), calling for its full implementation, and formally recognising Viktor Yanukovych as the legitimate president of Ukraine while refusing to recognise the legality of Ukraine's new, transitory government.

If Russia stumbles on difficulties in implementing this maximum scenario, it may step up efforts to destabilise eastern and southern Ukraine by trying to bring about a unilateral proclamation of broad autonomy by those regions (which may partly replicate the decisions taken by the Crimean autonomy). The success of those efforts, however, depends on whether Moscow manages to find local politicians capable of effectively taking over power (with the support of the pro-Russian forces) and control the situation, and who would be willing to closely co-operate with Moscow while at the same time enjoying some authority among the local people, and being capable of enforcing their decisions through the local administration and security structures.

It seems that the Kremlin could opt for partly neutralising the negative PR impact of its political defeat by recognising the independence of Crimea, or even incorporating the peninsula into the Russian Federation, only as a last resort, if none of the previously discussed scenarios could be successfully implemented.

Russia's other objectives in the crisis

Russia does not fear a political confrontation with the Western states because it believes the West to be too divided and have too little interest in Ukraine. For this reason, Moscow expects some limited political sanctions from the West, but firmly believes that in not-too-distant future the West will pragmatically resume co-operation with Russia, especially economic co-operation. The weaker the Western response to the Ukrainian crisis, the more Moscow will be inclined to test the West by pursuing increasingly aggressive policies. In this context, Moldova will be the next target of Russia's massive pressure, as the country is planning to sign an association agreement with the EU this August. Russia will also presumably step up pressure on Georgia (which also plans to sign an association agreement with the EU) and Azerbaijan.

Moreover, Russia also hopes that the reluctance of some key Western states to respond firmly to Moscow's policies will frustrate some other EU and NATO members, thus eroding confidence and seriously denting the cohesion of those organisations and the United States' position in Europe.

Russia also hopes that its "demonstration of power" vis-à-vis Ukraine (which reveals the level of Russia's determination in pursuing its interests) will intimidate the other CIS countries and make them more susceptible to Russian pressure and more willing to revise their policies in line with Moscow's interests.

Finally, with regard to internal politics, the Kremlin is very much interested in neutralising the damage to president Putin's image inflicted by the ouster of Yanukovych in Ukraine. Putin's harsh stance vis-à-vis Kyiv, his defence of "compatriots" in Crimea and his political challenge to the West will strengthen the president's popularity among the conservative sections of the elite and the Russian public. The situation in which Ukraine is afraid and the West worried in anticipation of Putin's difficult-to-predict further moves, is, in the intention of the Kremlin propagandists, designed to build a desirable psychological advantage, bolstering the image of Putin as a strong and competent leader.

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