

Russian policy towards Ukraine: Local actions, global goals

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Over the last week, the Western world's attention has been drawn to the Russian humanitarian convoy sent to Ukraine. The real motives for its sending aroused controversy. This once again raised fears that the months-long conflict would turn into an open, massive military intervention by Russia in Ukraine. Once again, a specific initiative launched by the Kremlin dominated the international narrative of the Ukrainian conflict, distracting attention away from Moscow's wider objectives which determine its policy towards the armed conflict around Donetsk and Lugansk. Russia's strategic goal regarding Ukraine remains unchanged – the permanent subordination of that country by gaining influence over the direction of its foreign, domestic and security policies and its economic life. Maintaining the instability in the Donbas therefore merely serves as an instrument intended to help Moscow gain influence over the whole of Ukraine.

The Kremlin's policy towards Kyiv also has wider implications for international politics and Russian domestic affairs. Russia seeks to obtain international acceptance for a Russian sphere of influence in the CIS, and to change the geopolitical balance throughout the Euro-Atlantic area by limiting the influence of Washington. Domestically, Russian policy towards Ukraine currently constitutes an important source of the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's power, and a means of keeping in check the great-power aspirations which have been awakened in nationalist circles. At the same time, it is crucial for the Kremlin to prevent the transformation of Ukraine, a country which is mentally, culturally, linguistically close to Russia. The successful democratisation of Ukraine would pose a threat to Putin's regime, undermining the basic ideological premise of the political system built up by his team, namely the claim about the specific nature of Russian civilisation, which precludes the use on its territory of Western political models, especially that of liberal democracy. At the same time, it would undermine the whole philosophy of the Kremlin's Eurasian integration project.

Russia's objectives towards Ukraine

Russia's constant goal is to have a permanent influence on the most important political and economic processes in Ukraine. One tool of that influence was to have been Eurasian integration; it seems that Russia still assumes that in the future, after a change of power in Kyiv, this could be possible. At this stage, however, Moscow is primarily seeking to hamper Ukraine's pro-Western course and the economic and political transformation which would result. Besides considerations of prestige, this is intended to counteract the further reduction of Russian influence in the country, and ensure its systemic compatibility with the Russian political and economic model. Moscow also argues that one consequence of

moving closer to the European Union may be strengthened cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, something which Moscow sees as a threat to its essential security interests.

As long as it remains impossible for Russia to achieve its long-term goals towards Kyiv, it will pursue a policy of destabilising the Ukrainian state, by consistently fuelling the conflict in the Donbas, attempts to extend the zone of instability, and perhaps even resorting to acts of terror outside the current conflict zone. By keeping Ukraine in a state of permanent, deep crisis, Moscow intends to turn it into a 'failing state' and to prevent the authorities in Kyiv from undertaking effective democratisation and market reforms, and thus from integrating the country with the West. Moscow wants Ukraine to remain in a state of permanent crisis until the costs become so high that Kyiv will be forced to agree to Russia's adverse conditions for ending the conflict.

Russia wants to ensure a degree of autonomy for the Donbas, or even to create a dependent entity along the lines of Moldova's Transnistria region by formalising its status as 'Novorossiia' – a project being implemented in the Donbas to create a pro-Russian para-state which draws on the ideological assumptions of Russian 'great-power' rhetoric. The political reform which Russia calls 'federalisation', and constantly demands from Ukraine, is intended to ensure that this political entity can be used by Moscow as a tool of influence over Kyiv. There have also been plans on the Russian side to integrate an autonomous Donbas with Eurasian structures if the attempt to integrate the whole of Ukraine fails, and a need then arises to balance Kyiv's ongoing moves towards the West.

In view of the above objectives, an open, massive Russian military intervention in Ukraine, especially coupled with the necessity to occupy the territory, would be counterproductive. It would deepen the gap between Ukraine and Russia, and push any possibility of eventual integration even further into the realms of unlikelihood. It would also strengthen Kyiv's determination to exercise the pro-Western option, and would increase the risk of Western involvement in support of Ukraine. It would also lead to further sanctions and international ostracism for Russia. Moreover, such an intervention would be incomparably more expensive than simply supporting the separatists and maintaining the unofficial Russian military presence in Ukraine. Therefore, Russia prefers merely to threaten large-scale military intervention rather than actually carry it out. Yet open Russian military intervention in Ukraine cannot be ruled out, if Kyiv strengthens its position against the separatists, and also if pressure grows inside Russia, where a prolongation of the conflict will be perceived as a sign of Kremlin's weakness.

The international dimension of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine

From the Kremlin's point of view, what is at stake in the conflict in eastern Ukraine is a shift in geopolitical balance – and not only in Central and Eastern Europe, but also throughout the entire Euro-Atlantic area. Moscow is in fact seeking to gain acceptance from the main Western powers – Germany and France – of its interests in Ukraine. In the Kremlin's opinion, the main reason why it has not yet been able to achieve this is pressure from Washington and the influence of the pro-Atlantic part of the Western European establishment. Russia has been using a combination of threats and tempting offers in order to influence the Western European elites: on the one hand, an escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the loss of the benefits of economic cooperation with Russia; and on the other a vision of a

sustainable and stable European order jointly guaranteed by Russia plus lucrative contracts. This strategy is aimed at convincing European leaders that it is in their interests to weaken the Euro-Atlantic ties, work for the strategic emancipation of Western Europe from Washington, and participate in Putin's 'Greater Europe' project. From Moscow's point of view, this would mean surrendering any prospects for the future enlargement of the EU to the countries of Eastern Europe; the effective end of the North Atlantic Alliance; and Russia's unquestioned dominance of the post-Soviet area. It would be of symbolic importance for the Kremlin to demonstrate Washington's helplessness in combatting Russian ambitions in Eastern Europe. The Kremlin also believes that a realisation of the weaknesses of Washington and Western multilateral institutions (NATO, the EU) would also influence the policies of the Central European countries, causing them to pay more heed to Moscow's interests.

The situation in Ukraine is also important for Russia's position in the post-Soviet area. A successful transformation for Ukraine, or its entering onto the path of integration with Western structures, would mean the 'loss' of a key state for Moscow, which would significantly weaken its role as a regional power. The example of Ukraine could spread to other post-Soviet countries, and encourage their ruling elites to try and free themselves from the Kremlin. So for Moscow, its stake in the conflict in eastern Ukraine is the halting and reversal of the unfavourable geopolitical trends which began in 1990-1991 with the loss of Moscow's control over first the Central European countries, and then the Soviet Union republics as a result of the USSR's dissolution.

The importance of the conflict with Ukraine in the domestic Russian dimension

The events in Ukraine are also relevant for the internal political situation in Russia; for the Kremlin, they are a tool to strengthen the legitimacy of the current leadership team and consolidate the elites and the general public.

The annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine (which is being portrayed as a fraternal nation's defence against Kyiv's inhumane policy) have secured President Putin a record increase in public support; according to a poll from the Levada Centre on 6 August, it currently stands at 87%. This is a reversal of the downward trend which had been observed for several years (the previous high for Putin of 88% came during the war with Georgia; since then his support has gradually decreased, levelling off at the beginning of 2014 at between 60 and 65%). In the short term, this has strengthened the president's position within the system of power, and weakened the influence of his opponents: both the opposition who have criticised the annexation of Crimea, the broader liberal-democratic circles, and those sections of the Russian elite who do not support the policy of confrontation with the West because it has brought them measurable losses. Maintaining high public support is now more important for Putin as he is aware of the concealed discontent among some sections of the elite caused by the economic sanctions and a deteriorating investment climate. In subsequent years, the negative consequences of the sanctions will accumulate, and this may exacerbate the discontent among the elite and big business, and to a degree among the general public as well. In this situation, a 'great-power' foreign policy, which is consonant with the expectations of the majority of Russian society, will be an important (and perhaps the primary) source of legitimacy for Putin throughout the

rest of his rule. This in turn will require the Kremlin to find further 'successes' (at least for propaganda purposes) in connection with the operation in Ukraine.

Another domestic political motivation for continuing the 'Novorossiia' project is Putin's attempt to maintain the support of nationalist circles, within which we can observe the awakening of more 'great-power' aspirations. Although the separatists in eastern Ukraine are being commanded by direct envoys from the Kremlin – 'volunteers', guns and money all backed by Russia – some Russian nationalist circles consider Moscow's involvement to still be insufficient, and have been glorifying the Russian warlords who are fighting there, such as Igor Girkin (a.k.a. Strelkov). This raises the risk in the future of nationalist groups – who are usually well-organised, and often armed – becoming an active opposition to the regime, which would pose a major challenge for the authorities. Nationalist circles have already manifested their criticisms of the Kremlin; in 2010-2011 groups formed which accused the Kremlin of conducting an 'anti-Russian' migration policy, and of rampant corruption. The annexation of Crimea radically changed the mood in these circles; they witnessed an outpouring of euphoria, which translated into support for Putin's policies. At the same time, the annexation fuelled expectations among those groups of continued, aggressive Russian expansion into Ukraine, including the formal transformation of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions into Russian-controlled provinces.

Finally, an at least partially successful transformation of Ukraine – a country mentally, culturally and linguistically close to Russia – would pose a major challenge to Putin's regime. It would undermine the entire philosophy of the Kremlin's Eurasian integration project, which is based on the assumption that the post-Soviet area – conventionally called *Russkiy Mir* (the 'Russian World') – is a distinct civilisation, with values different from the West. Russia treats the 'dragging' of the region's countries into the orbit of Western influence as a violation of the natural order which had formed in the area; and it sees its own actions as a defence of this order. Ukraine's possible entry onto the path of European integration and its successful transformation would mean the symbolic collapse of Russia's geopolitical project. Thanks to the closeness between both societies, the example of Ukraine could influence the consciousness of the Russian people and revolutionise their expectations regarding models of leadership and paths of economic development. Thus, blocking the transformation of Ukraine by all means possible, including military measures, is the Kremlin's attempt to defend its own model of the state – authoritarian, centralised, with society as a passive subject.