

Ukraine Is Putin's Favorite Vassal

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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President Vladimir Putin has never concealed his colonial attitude toward Ukraine.

"Ukraine is not even a state!" Putin reportedly told U.S. President George W. Bush during the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

The following year, Putin referred to Ukraine as "Little Russia" when quoting the diary of Anton Denikin, a commander in the White Army.

Then, in July 2012, an unapologetic Putin kept Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich waiting for four hours when Putin, en route to talks in Yalta, made an unscheduled stop to meet with the Night Wolves bikers club. It was almost as if Putin wanted to drive home the point that in Moscow's view, Yanukovich is little more than a provincial governor.

Soviet leaders
used brute force
to keep Ukraine

as a subservient
vassal state. But
Putin must use
a more subtle
method of carrots
and sticks
to achieve
the same thing.

For his part, Yanukovych, whose popularity rating is below 20 percent, has become a modern-day Bohdan Khmelnytsky by cutting an unpopular inside deal with Putin and reinforcing Ukraine's position as a provincial vassal for Moscow. Khmelnytsky, too, received a generous package of payoffs in the mid-17th century from his feudal lord, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, in exchange for his fealty to Moscow.

As such, the anti-government protests that have lasted nearly a month in Kiev are the latest chapter in a centuries-long battle by Ukrainians to gain independence from Moscow's dominance.

There were three major historical dates that sealed Ukraine's fate as a vassalage to Moscow:

* 1654. Ukrainian leader Khmelnytsky signed the Treaty of Pereyaslav with Moscow, which legitimized the subsequent incorporation of the territory of Kievan Rus into the Russian Empire. To this day, Ukrainian nationalists decry the treaty as a betrayal of Ukrainian independence — one that turned Ukraine into a de facto vassal state within the Russian Empire for the next 270 years, and then within the Soviet Union for another 70 years.

* 1709. During the Battle of Poltava between Russia and Sweden, Ukrainian leader Ivan Mazepa allied himself with Sweden, which promised independence for Ukraine. But Russia under Peter the Great defeated the Swedes and kept Ukraine within the Russian Empire, during which Ukraine was commonly referred to as "Little Russia."

* 1922. After the Bolsheviks defeated forces belonging to the Ukrainian People's Republic, which had set up an independent state in 1918, a pro-Bolshevik puppet government in Ukraine signed the Treaty on the Creation of the Soviet Union on Dec. 30, 1922, once again signing away the country's independence to Moscow.

Under the treaty, Ukrainians "voluntarily" joined the Soviet Union based on principles of "mutual trust, peace and solidarity." But it did not take long for Ukrainians to experience Moscow's "mutual trust, peace and solidarity." Six years later, in 1928, Josef Stalin started implementing his forced collectivization program of individual farms in Ukraine. This caused massive food shortages, destruction of crops and livestock and famine. Peasant revolts were brutally suppressed.

Stalin's collectivization program led directly to Ukraine's Holodomor of 1932-33 in which 2.4 million to 7 million Ukrainians died from starvation. Holodomor was followed by a period of severe political oppression from 1934-39, which included purges, the gulag and repression of peasants.

It was no surprise, then, that many Ukrainians collaborated with the Nazis two years later during the German occupation of Ukraine, serving in the German police, army and the SS Galizien division. They initially viewed the Nazis as liberators of Soviet oppression and hoped that the Nazis would help them gain independence.

It is also so surprise that after 45 years of post-war Soviet repression and low standards of living, Ukraine became the first republic after the failed August 1991 putsch to declare independence from the Soviet Union. After more than three centuries of being a de facto vassal of Russia, Ukraine finally became a full-fledged independent country in 1991.

The country's second president, Leonid Kuchma, maintained good ties with Moscow, but he also tried to put the country on a European path. Kuchma, author of the 2003 book "Ukraine Is Not Russia," was the first Ukrainian president to approach the European Union with the idea of signing an association agreement — the same agreement that became the casus belli of the current Maidan protests after Yanukovych unexpectedly refused to sign the pact on Nov. 21.

Kuchma's successor, President Viktor Yushchenko, leader of the Orange Revolution, ratcheted up Ukraine's shift toward Europe.

Yet when Yanukovych became president in 2010, Ukraine shifted back toward Russia's orbit. Most important, Yanukovych adopted Putin's model for autocratic rule. He even copied one of Putin's methods of sidelining a chief political opponent by jailing former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on politically tinged charges of abuse of office.

After three years of experiencing Yanukovych's Putin-style vertical power structure, Ukrainians are fed up with the rampant corruption, lawlessness, economic stagnation, poor social services and infrastructure and general malaise — all of which protesters associate to one degree or another with being dominated politically and economically by Moscow.

This is precisely why the protesters have so strongly embraced the European model, with its democratic values and rules-based institutions, as an alternative to Moscow's autocratic, colonial model.

In this way, Ukrainian protesters are fighting their centuries-old battle of independence from Moscow all over again. Protesters agree with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that Moscow's tactic of bullying and bribing Kiev into its orbit is an attempt to "re-Sovietize" the country. It was precisely these factors that drove the protesters to tear down a Lenin statue in Kiev, a highly symbolic and vivid demonstration of their strong anti-Moscow sentiments.

In a broader sense, the protests are reminiscent of those in Moscow in August 1991. Ukrainians, too, are rising up against the *sovok*, a pejorative term to describe the decrepit and inept Soviet-style authoritarianism and its low standards of living.

In the days of Peter the Great, Lenin and Stalin, Ukraine was kept in the Russian empire by brute force. Today, of course, Putin cannot get away with sending troops into Ukraine. So to keep Ukraine under Moscow's hegemony, Putin had to devise a more subtle strategy of sticks — painful trade sanctions against Ukrainian goods — and carrots — the \$15 billion loan package, most of which will likely be written off later, and heavy gas discounts

announced last week. Putin, who dipped into the National Welfare Fund to get the \$15 billion and once famously said the Soviet collapse was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, appears to believe that the high price is justified to maintain control over his "Little Russia."

But in the end, the \$15 billion loan will not appease the protesters, particularly because it is seen as an underhanded ploy to buy fealty and to keep the comatose Ukrainian economy afloat ahead of the country's 2015 presidential election.

If Ukrainian protesters understand one thing, it is this: Beware of feudal lords bearing \$15 billion gifts.

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