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Will Putin Seize Crimea?

By Josh Cohen

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As the battle on Maidan ends with the defeat and humiliation of President Viktor Yanukovych, some observers have turned their attention to Ukraine's Crimea region with the following question: If Ukraine turns toward the European Union and the West, will President Vladimir Putin move to seize Crimea?

While Crimea is situated far from the drama of Kiev, it stands out as the only region in Ukraine where Russians are in the majority, constituting about 60 percent of Crimea's population. There is also a critical naval base at Sevastopol that the Russians lease from Ukraine. Sevastopol serves as the home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and it gives the Russian Navy direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. Russia has signed a lease agreement with Ukraine that allows its fleet to remain at Sevastopol until 2042.

For two centuries, Crimea was part of Russia, and to many Russians it is only through a strange quirk of Soviet history that Crimea is not part of Russia today. On Feb. 19, 1954, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, gifted Crimea to Ukraine as a gesture of goodwill to mark the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's merger

with tsarist Russia. Not surprisingly, at the time, it did not occur to anyone that one day the Soviet Union might collapse and that Ukraine would again be an independent country.

Last week, one of Putin's leading advisers, Vladislav Surkov, visited Crimea and met Crimean leader Anatoly Mogilev, Crimean legislative Speaker Vladimir Konstantinov, and Sevastopol Governor Vladimir Yatsuboi. The talks were followed up by a meeting in Moscow on Feb. 20 between Konstantinov and Sergei Naryshkin, the speaker of the State Duma.

Underscoring Russia's interest in Crimea, an unidentified Russian government official told the Financial Times on Feb. 20 that Russia was willing to fight a war over Crimea if Ukraine started to disintegrate. "If Ukraine breaks apart, it will trigger a war," the official said. "They will lose Crimea first [because] we will go in and protect [it], just as we did in Georgia."

This viewpoint seems to reflect Kremlin thinking. At a 2008 meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush, Putin reportedly told Bush that Ukraine was an accident of history.

There is ample precedent, furthermore, to believe that if Putin and the Russian establishment believed that Ukraine was slipping permanently out of their grasp, then Russia would find a pretext to seize Crimea. Russia has made it amply clear that it considers the former Soviet Union to be a space where it sees itself having wide latitude for maneuver.

Russia has not hesitated to act militarily within the former Soviet Union, first in the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic in 1992 and then in South Ossetia in 2008 during its brief war with Georgia. After the end of the war in Georgia, Russia became the only country in the world to officially recognize the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While Russia does not officially recognize Transdnestr, it has a consulate there, many of Transdnestr's citizens have Russian passports and the Russians provide a de-facto guarantee of Transdnestr remaining separate from Moldova.

If Ukraine turns decisively West, it may well find that it is forced to leave Crimea behind.

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