

Putin Is Not Afraid of Becoming a Global Pariah

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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President Vladimir Putin needed only two hours to get the approval from the Federation Council for the use of Russian troops in Ukraine. It gave Putin the green light without a single question or comment. In fact, Putin's plans for military intervention began long before March 1 — probably during the Olympic Games. Last Thursday, he ordered military exercises near the Ukrainian border that included airborne troops, military transport and long-range aviation formations. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the maneuvers involved 150,000 troops, or about one-fifth of all active soldiers. He added that the exercises had no connection whatsoever to events in Ukraine, saying, "These exercises will be held along Russia's borders with a number of different countries, possibly including Ukraine."

Shoigu thereby deliberately misinformed NATO countries. The military exercises turned out to be preparations for an invasion of Ukraine. They provided Russia's generals with the cover they needed to mobilize units for the intervention, bring them into the region of troop concentration and to test the men and equipment for battle readiness. In such a situation,

the international community could cite the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures, which was signed in 2011 by Russia and the other members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

With the Cold War a thing of the past, few ever believed that the European continent would need this document, ensuring that no country would be able to concentrate enough forces to launch an unexpected act of aggression against another member country. And now it turns out that such an agreement was the only thing that could have protected Ukraine — that is, if Russia had upheld it. Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov found himself in the hot seat, struggling to explain how the forthcoming "maneuvers" would fall within the framework of the Vienna Document. "No more than 38,000 troops are involved," he said. "They will be deployed for no more than 72 hours. ... Do not confuse the figure of 150,000 I mentioned earlier with 38,000. I am speaking of 38,000, a number that falls within the limits of the Vienna Document. This includes ground forces, airborne troops and marines."

On Thursday, while the Russian military exercises were in full swing, armed men in unmarked military uniforms seized the Crimean parliament building and the airport in Simferopol. The soldiers had no trouble taking control of all the most important locations in Crimea, especially because the peaceful local population made no attempt to resist. In fact, no widespread disorder or rioting resulted from the capture of the peninsula. And because there were no observable threats to the civilian or military personnel serving Russia's Black Sea Fleet, Foreign Ministry officials in Moscow had to invent a story to justify the invasion. The only thing they came up with was that an unidentified group of people from Kiev attempted to seize the Interior Ministry building in Simferopol, resulting in an indefinite number of unnamed "victims." It is telling that not only did the officials offer no explanation for how these mysterious infiltrators managed to cross through the lines of special forces ringing the peninsula, but that the first mention of the incident came from the new, pro-Russian, self-proclaimed head of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov.

For several days, analysts suggested that Russia might repeat the "Georgian scenario" in Crimea. In that conflict, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 because that country's troops attacked Russian servicemen, providing the perfect *casus belli*. But no such attacks took place in Crimea, inducing Moscow to opt for the 1968 Czechoslovakian scenario instead.

Annexing Crimea was a relatively simple military objective because there are only a few roads that link the peninsula to the rest of Ukraine, and it was easy to cordon them off. In addition, the few thousand Ukrainian soldiers who were stationed in Crimea were deeply demoralized and preferred to remain neutral or simply surrender their weapons. And even if the new post-Yanukovich Ukrainian leadership in Kiev has combat-ready units at their disposal, they would not want to send them to Crimea to enter an open military conflict against a much stronger Russian army.

Many analysts, myself included, had completely dismissed the possibility of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine. After all, we thought, Putin would never jeopardize the opportunity to hobnob with the world's top leaders as host of the Group of Eight summit in Sochi, Putin's Olympic pride and joy, in June.

But, as it turned out, this was not the case. Putin was deeply stung by the fact that Washington

had outmaneuvered him during the Ukrainian crisis, when his protege, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, was forced to flee the country. What's more, Putin was concerned that the political turmoil in Kiev would seriously undermine his authority in Russia — or perhaps re-spark protests at home against his rule. These concerns trumped everything else, including preserving working relations with practically all of his foreign partners — with the possible exception of China, which welcomes any rupture between Moscow and Washington.

Now, Russia is likely to face severe isolation from the international community and sanctions. Russia might find itself evicted not only from the G8 but perhaps also from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The European Union and the U.S. might soon publish new "Magnitsky lists" that are updated to include the names of the Russian officials who voted to deploy troops.

I am afraid that when we wake up tomorrow, we will find ourselves in different country. I even know the name of that country: the Soviet Union.

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