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Trying to Get Inside the Head of Vladimir Putin

By David Marples

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On Sunday, Russian troops invaded Crimea, an autonomous republic of Ukraine in which 15,000 sailors of the Russian Black Sea Fleet are stationed. What was the Russian president's thinking in escalating a world crisis over the past week? Why has a politician, whom many considered to be a rational actor, chosen to intervene in Ukraine?

Analyzing Putin's mind is not a simple task. His statements are often contradictory. He maintains, for example, that Ukraine's new leaders should have adhered to the deal brokered by European foreign ministers on Feb. 21 that would have allowed Viktor Yanukovych to remain in office as president until an early election that was scheduled for December, according to the agreement. Yet Russia took no part in that discussion and refused to sign that agreement. Perhaps even more significant, it has not advocated the return of Yanukovych, despite the fact that he has fled to Russian territory.

Putin also maintains that because of the collapse of the European Union-brokered deal,

Russia is no longer bound by the terms of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, according to which Russia, the U.S. and Britain committed themselves to guaranteeing the security of Ukraine. Many were left scratching their heads, asking what the link was between the two events.

In essence, according to this line of reasoning, the protest leaders carried out an illegal coup. Yet it was precisely as this deal was being debated that the former president ordered his troops to use live ammunition on the protesters, carrying out a massacre on the square. Consequently, Yanukovych lost his majority support in the parliament as many Party of Regions deputies deserted to the opposition. Sensing that he had lost all support and legitimacy, he fled to Russia.

What else do we know about Putin's thinking on Ukraine? What could have prompted him to flout the Budapest Memorandum and perpetuate and give new credibility to the old canard of Russian aggression against Ukraine? If we assume for the moment that we are inside Putin's head, then it might run something like the following:

• Western powers refused to accept Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in November in Vilnius. That decision came after my meeting with Yanukovych in Moscow on Nov. 9. Thus they financed and openly supported a mass protest in the streets of Kiev during which violent protesters, organized by Ukrainian nationalist extremists, set afire their own police with Molotov cocktails.

• As evidence of U.S. involvement, look at how Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland was overhead in a phone conversation effectively choosing the next government of Ukraine. Or look at Senator John McCain who encouraged protesters during his speech on the Maidan. What's more, McCain stood on the same stage alongside the Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok, a man whom even former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko had thrown out of his party a decade ago for his racist views toward Russians and Jews.

• Once the "mobocracy" had ousted Yanukovych, it elected its own government composed mainly of supporters of the Euromaidan protests and one devoid of any members of the Party of Regions or Communist Party, both of which have been traditionally supported by Russian-speaking citizens in eastern and southern Ukraine. Moreover, the interim Cabinet promptly banned the controversial language law that had permitted Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine to conduct business in their own language. The fascist leaders in Kiev had declared war on ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine.

But to understand fully Putin's perspective, you have to delve deeper. Here is a politician who would fit neatly into what Lenin perceived as the Russian chauvinist of 1922 when the Soviet Union was formed. Putin adheres to the view that Kiev is the ancestral and founding city of Rus, the East Slavic nation that accepted Christianity in 988 and eventually divided into three component parts of the same family: Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians.

Putin has suggested on several occasions that Ukraine is not a foreign country, but an anomaly that derived from what the Russian leader perceives as the greatest tragedy in history: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

During one visit to Kiev, he made reference to the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, when Russia

and the Ukrainian Cossacks under Bohdan Khmelnytsky signed a treaty. Some interpret the treaty as a union between Russia and Ukraine; others see it as the codification of Ukraine's vassalage to Moscow. In any event, it was on the 300th anniversary of that treaty that former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine as a "gift" from Russia.

It is quite reasonable to give a prized possession to one's brother. But if that brother subsequently leaves home and then renounces all family ties — Ukraine in 1991 — then the gift becomes a theft, according to Putin's logic.

For Putin, Crimea — and especially its port of Sevastopol — is sacred Russian soil. The port survived two great sieges after its conquest in 1783: one in the Crimean War from 1854 to 1856; and another during the "Great Patriotic War" of 1941 to 1945 against Hitler. Sevastopol is one of the original Hero Cities designated by Stalin in May 1945, alongside Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Odessa. Equally important, Crimea is the one place in Ukraine that Putin can recognize as ethnically Russian, although that implies a striking lack of recognition for the rights of the Crimean Tatars, who were deported by Stalin at the end of the war and are still struggling for their rights today.

It is still unclear, though, what Putin really hopes to gain from intervention. His statements do little to clarify the issue. Having secured all the main Crimean military bases, he said Tuesday that there had been no invasion at all. Yet the actions of the mysterious forces who seized the parliament in Simferopol, the airport and military bases followed his own request to the State Duma to deploy troops across the Ukrainian border.

What is clear is that nothing in Putin's world will ever be the same. Already former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a presidential candidate, has declared that she would remove the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol at the earliest opportunity. The U.S. is talking of asset freezes and trade embargoes. The EU will discuss the crisis on March 6, and even the Germans, who are most reluctant to sever ties with an important trading partner, may be wavering. The man who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering peace in Syria will surely never been seen in the same light again by his Group or Eight or EU partners.

Moreover, he has managed to convince skeptics that Russia has retained its imperialist outlook and is a predatory state that seeks to swallow its neighbors. Until recently, this would be dismissed as exaggerated, Cold War rhetoric, but he has single-handedly succeeded in giving new credence to this claim.

Whatever the outcome of the Crimean crisis, it is difficult to see where the lengthy political career of Putin, one of the most self-obsessed and egotistical leaders of the contemporary world, will now go from here.

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