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Crimea Is Turning Russia Into a Rogue State

By Georgy Bovt

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The situation in Ukraine, and particularly in Crimea, calls to mind a steamroller going downhill: It is impossible to stop, and nobody knows exactly how much damage it will cause in the end.

If anybody still believes that President Vladimir Putin is only bluffing about his intention to annex Crimea, they are sadly mistaken. There would be no way for Russia to walk out of such a bluff without disastrous losses. Now the U.S. and the European Union want to stop Putin with the help of sanctions in the apparent belief that he can be swayed by pragmatic considerations.

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past decade - particularly concerning the West's double standards.

I think it is an error to use purely rational arguments to understand the current standoff between Putin's Russia and the West. Many contend that because Russia's top corrupt officials have placed many of their children and financial assets in the EU and U.S., it would not be in their interests to engage in a direct conflict with the West. That is perfectly true, but there have been times in history when leaders simply cast aside all rational and economic considerations. As a result, the conflicts escalate in a chaotic fashion, sometimes culminating in war.

The instability of the crisis in Crimea is exacerbated by the fact that Putin probably feels he has little to lose in the big geopolitical game. If this is the case, Putin, instead of making shrewdly calculated chess moves against his opponent sitting opposite him, is just as likely to sweep all the pieces off the board in a fit of frustration, anger and despair.

I think Putin will not halt his move on Crimea, if only to avoid losing face. It is not his habit to backtrack once he has publicly stated a position. What's more, he feels he is justified in intervening in Ukraine and Crimea.

Although the international community has made serious charges that Russia is guilty of aggression against an independent state and of violating its territorial integrity, many in the Kremlin are citing the precedent of Kosovo. Serbian law and the laws of the former Yugoslavia in no way justified Kosova's declaration of independence, but the International Court of Justice in The Hague approved it.

In addition, the Kremlin views any backtracking on Ukraine not only as a defeat for Russia. The Kremlin is concerned that NATO will fill the vacuum, sending its tanks, F-16s and missile defense batteries to deploy in Kharkiv or even closer. Some might consider that sheer paranoia, but it is the Kremlin's firmly entrenched worldview. Putin's worldview was shaped by his Soviet education, KGB training and numerous conflicts with the West over the past decade — particularly concerning the West's double standards. For example, the West considered Kosovo's secession and declaration of independence legitimate but views an attempt to separate Crimea from Ukraine as a flagrant violation of international law. What's more, Putin feels he was deliberately deceived over Ukraine, that the West orchestrated the coup in Kiev in late February at the very moment his Olympic Games in Sochi were achieving such spectacular success. Putin believes it was an organized, subversive campaign to discredit and isolate Putin and his protege, Yanukovych.

According to Putin's thinking, the seizure of Crimea is only one part of the moral compensation that Russia rightfully deserves. In the large-scale confrontation with the West. Putin has no pragmatic concerns. Let them impose sanctions if they want, he says. If necessary, Moscow will not hesitate to extend its zone of control beyond Crimea, however much the West might choose to isolate Russia politically.

Of course, such a confrontation would isolate Russia further. It would put Russia in the role of a belligerent state in the eyes of the world, if not a rogue state. It would also turn Russia

into a besieged fortress in the eyes of Russians, giving Putin the pretext he would need to not just "tighten the screws" internally, but also to create a full-fledged totalitarian government. I shudder to even imagine how bad it might get. It could be similar to the transformation that turned Iran into an Islamic republic in 1979.

The Kremlin will not exit from the world stage quietly and close the door gently on its way. If fate has determined that it must exit, it will slam the door with a mighty bang on its way out. And if anyone is wondering whether Russia may at some point push the button — and I do not mean the "reset" button — if the confrontation goes far enough, the answer is yes.

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