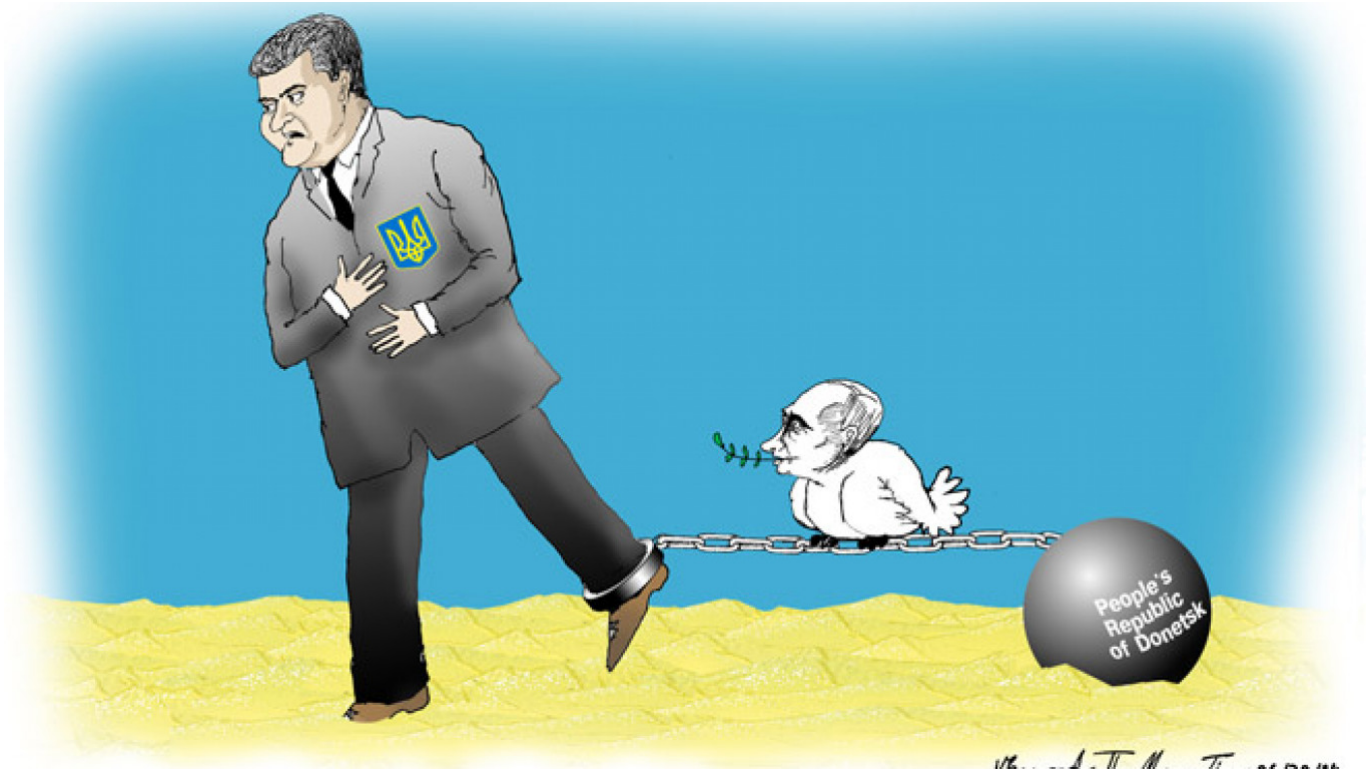
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Ukraine Gambit Paying Off

By Fyodor Lukyanov

June 29, 2014



President Vladimir Putin's request last week that the Federation Council revoke his right to use military force in Ukraine marks the end of the first phase of that county's international crisis.

Russia has played a key role in those events, and so it makes sense to sum up the interim results: what was gained, what was lost and whether it was worth the effort.

The collapse of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's regime caught Moscow by surprise, although the steadily rising tensions in Kiev since the beginning of the year clearly pointed to such a possibility. All of the Kremlin's subsequent actions were motivated by its deep-set fear that Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" fever might infect Russia.

The atmosphere reigning in post-Maidan Kiev and the initial decisions taken by the interim authorities confirmed fears that Ukraine was not only shifting its orientation toward a close partnership with the West, but that it was also willing to join Euro-Atlantic organizations, that Russia would lose Sevastopol as a place to base it Black Sea Fleet, that Ukraine would restructure the state along hard-line nationalist and anti-Russian principles and that

a system of "soft" apartheid was forming that infringed on the rights of the Russian-speaking population.

According to realpolitik, the fact that Yanukovych was ousted despite Moscow's strong support meant a painful defeat for Putin. What's more, the Moscow leadership interpreted events in Ukraine as a battle for Russia's place in the global hierarchy — the toughest and most important such struggle since the end of the Cold War.

Russia's lightning-fast seizure of Crimea — first physically, then legally — served as partial compensation for its failure in Kiev. But more importantly, it secured the future of the Black Sea Fleet. The uncharacteristic professionalism shown by the Russian troops indicated to some observers that the whole operation had been planned in advance.

However, that is unlikely, considering that as recently as mid-February, nobody had even imagined that events in Kiev would turn so dramatically against Yanukovych. But once it unexpectedly happened, the Russian state displayed a higher than expected ability to rapidly mobilize its troops in response to the emergency.

After the annexation of Crimea and the resulting political uncertainty, Putin conducted a calculated game designed to keep a number of options open at once. Interestingly, while various Russian officials made hard-hitting and belligerent public statements, the president himself maintained a decidedly reserved tone.

Moscow's adamant refusal to recognize the new Ukrainian leadership's legitimacy then began shifting toward a possible recognition of the results of upcoming elections. It seems that during this period the Kremlin also formulated its policy toward the self-proclaimed "people's republics" — that is, to provide them with support to prevent their military defeat, but to steer towards keeping them part of the Ukrainian state on terms essentially dictated by Moscow.

The Kremlin most likely came to this approach after running a costs-benefits analysis of further territorial expansion, considerations that included the effect of sanctions the West would likely impose; the direct expense of integrating Ukraine's eastern regions or supporting their autonomy; the probability of the appearance of a far more homogenous and openly anti-Russian government in Kiev that could turn into a military and strategic springboard against Moscow; the formation of a single Western front consolidated by the "Russian threat" and the subsequent collapse of pro-Russian forces in Europe.

The negotiations in Donetsk on June 23 were the result of an intensive, mostly behind-the-scenes process that began with a brief conversation between Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Putin in Normandy.

The starting conditions are acceptable to Moscow. Kiev has stopped referring to the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic as terrorists, de facto recognizing them as participants in the negotiations — including, and more importantly, its Prime Minister Alexander Borodai, a Russian citizen.

This has legitimized the real players in Ukraine's eastern region, including its Russian members. Poroshenko has indicated that he is serious about the talks by enlisting the political

heavyweight and former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma to negotiate on his behalf, along with Kuchma's former chief-of-staff Viktor Medvedchuk, a close friend of Putin and the most pro-Russian figure in the Ukrainian political field — and himself well-integrated into that milieu.

What is Russia's goal? It is exactly what senior Russian officials have repeatedly stated — namely, the decentralization of Ukraine with rights guarantees for different population groups and the formal declaration of Ukraine as a neutral state.

Russia is no longer willing to rely on outside guarantees and prefers creating a sort of built-in "disabling device", perhaps a political party, that would prevent Ukraine from moving in a direction undesirable to the Kremlin. This hypothetical party has almost no chance of ever coming to power in Ukraine, but it would carry enough influence to exercise veto power over Kiev's strategic decisions.

The Kremlin sees Ukraine's development as a neutral state as a real possibility, and therefore used the revocation of the president's right to use military force in Ukraine as a gracious gesture toward Poroshenko and the West.

What happens next? There is some chance that a political resolution of the crisis will succeed, although the experience of similar conflicts, such as that in Bosnia, indicates that a lasting truce will only come after several failed attempts.

Considering the scale of the problems Kiev faces and its past experience, the Kremlin has little faith in the sustainability of the Ukrainian state, even if a path to peace is found now. As a result, there is a widespread belief that any settlement will be only temporary at best, and that new crises are inevitable. And in the absence of an overall strategy, the Kremlin will continue to pursue a purely reactive policy toward Ukraine.

Fyodor Lukyanov is editor of Russia in Global Affairs.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/06/29/putins-ukraine-gambit-paying-off-a36844