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Russia Must Regain Crimea's Lost Momentum

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The Ukrainian crisis has been raging for four months. What has Russia gained and lost in that time?

The acquisition of Crimea gave the Kremlin a large popularity boost: it was seen as the first truly bold step Moscow has taken after nearly 25 years of constant retreat, and a symbol of Russia's return to an independent policy line.

That said, it has split society asymmetrically into a supportive majority, and a small but intensely disapproving minority. The latter is made up of representatives of Russia's creative intelligentsia, the educated and "progressive" part of society.

Losing the support of the creative class would certainly be a blow to Russia. The Kremlin could balance this out, though, if its foreign policy retains the momentum gained in Crimea.

However, it appears that there is no follow-up plan in the offing. In the face of its

intellectuals' disillusionment, as well as Western hostility and a worsening economy, Moscow must quickly work out a long-term foreign policy if it wants to keep its newly regained position as a global power.

Traditionally, Russia's creative class has been the conduit for ideas of modern development and an agent for change: technological, social and cultural.

These people are usually oriented toward the West and are international in lifestyle and profession. They serve as a link between Russian society and the world. It would be dangerous to totally alienate them from the authorities.

For the greater part of Vladimir Putin's rule, this progressive class has cohabited successfully with the government. But relations began to erode before Crimea, between 2011 and 2012, when the supporters of change, galvanized by the promises of modernization under Dmitry Medvedev, felt deceived by his departure from the presidency and the abrupt change in national discourse.

Crimea and Ukraine made the atmosphere even more fraught due to an upsurge in patriotism, a militarization of the narrative, and Russia's ideological contraposition to the West. The elite class has not split, as intended by those who crafted the sanctions in the U.S. and Europe, but the number of people who are deeply concerned about the consequences for Russia's economy and way of life is growing.

Against the background of a powerful wave of Western rhetorical and financial attacks on Russia, the active minority has felt isolated both at home and abroad.

This is the source of the intelligentsia's radicalization, their rejection of everything emanating from the Kremlin, and their cynicism about the future. The authorities' attempts at pressuring them has only strengthened these feelings and mobilized them to find an exit strategy.

After the initial euphoria induced by the Crimean move, there was confusion about what came next.

A revival of the empire? And if so, within what borders? The establishment of a nation-state based on ethnic Russians within the country and abroad? The appearance of a kind of major international mission to stand up against the present world leadership? A turn to another civilization, or to the East? Each of these policies has supporters and opponents, but the absence of a clear line has raised many doubts.

The Kremlin's hesitation to support the "people's republics" in eastern Ukraine, areas that now risk defeat by Ukrainian government forces, has also generated disappointment among even the loyal pro-Putin majority.

In the current volatile international environment, Russia needs to make dramatic economic and political steps forward. The enthusiasm brought about by events in Crimea must be converted into economic development and the realization of Russia's domestic potential.

Currently, the only reaction seems to be inertia, as if it were possible to go back to pre-Crimean policies and relations with foreign partners. If this continues, Russia will soon feel

the consequences of altered relations, including containment by the West, but won't have any way to oppose them.

Ukraine will remain a chronic problem for Russia. However, one positive result of the takeover of Crimea is that the future of the Black Sea Fleet, considered a crucial element in Moscow's strategic development, has been resolved. Kiev would certainly have canceled the lease for the fleet's base if Ukraine was successful in its pro-Western transformation.

But the success of such a drastic and risky step as taking Crimea does not mean that Russia's foreign policy is successful. Regardless of whether one considers the Ukrainian crisis to be an internal affair or provoked from abroad, the result is the same. Russian influence in the post-Soviet space has taken a hit and been challenged, but still remains a top priority for Moscow, as it has always been.

And despite the Kremlin's best efforts, it is still likely that Ukraine will turn into a state that is extremely hostile to Russia.

Russia's relations with the West are undergoing a crisis as well. Moscow can limit the negative consequences by tactical means, but, in general, relations with Europe and America are most likely to become weaker.

That does not strengthen Russia's position with regard to Asia, where Russia's turn to the East is regarded as a necessity rather than a choice.

The crisis has also highlighted the limitations that globalization places on confrontations between great powers. Russia's vulnerability to sanctions emphasized that it simply cannot be as focused on the West as it was in the previous century.

Some steps are already being taken to establish greater economic sovereignty. Replacements for imported goods, the creation of a national payment system and more active attempts to diversify foreign trade are already being discussed.

In the long term, Russia can support more measures to decentralize the world leadership system and lessen U.S.- and Western-centrism. As the world grows increasingly weary of American domination, the country promoting a "more just" world will find an audience. But right now there isn't the sense that Russia is ready to do that.

By going on the attack in late February and early March, Russia made a major statement and upped the ante. But if it turns out that the only long-term gain is a relatively small peninsula, people will start to ask if it was worth the trouble.

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