

Putin and the West Don't Play by the Same Rules

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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I think analysts have misjudged President Vladimir Putin's recent speech to Russian ambassadors. Some considered it a traditional and very clumsy attempt to justify the annexation of Crimea, while others pointed to apparently conciliatory remarks toward the West, such as his mention of the need for cooperation with the United States.

At the same time, everyone was intent on finding double and even triple meanings in his words without considering the possibility that Putin was speaking in all sincerity. In fact, his comments fit perfectly with his foreign policy doctrine, a doctrine that makes former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of limited sovereignty for Eastern European states look tame by comparison.

Besides the imperative to protect Russian speakers from Ukrainian nationalists, Putin explained Crimea's annexation by saying: "We could not allow NATO forces to eventually come to the land of Crimea and Sevastopol, the land of Russian military glory, and cardinally change the balance of forces in the Black Sea area."

"This would mean giving up practically everything that Russia had fought for since the times of Peter the Great, or maybe even earlier," Putin added.

The prime minister of Greece might similarly have claimed that his country had the right to annex Crimea because the peninsula was a remote province of Athens for many centuries. "Dozens of generations of Greeks have sacrificed their blood and sweat," he might have argued, "in order to safeguard our vital ancestral interests in the Black Sea region."

But for Putin, the mere suspicion that someone might infringe on Russia's geopolitical interests provides compelling justification for the annexation of a large part of a neighboring state. What's more, Putin uses the "Russian character" of the residents of that neighboring state as an argument for intervention.

"Our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means, from political and economic [measures] to operations under international humanitarian law and the right of self-defense," he said.

Need I remind readers which European leader spoke of "protecting compatriots abroad" 70 years ago? Putin's regime apparently considers all citizens of the former Soviet republics as "Russians," meaning that his right of intervention extends at the very least to the entire territory of the former Soviet Union.

Some observers correctly pointed out that Putin was wrong to suggest that NATO had plans to deploy its military forces in Crimea and that the residents of the peninsula were never in any danger from Ukrainian nationalists.

But for the sake of argument, let's suppose that Ukrainian politicians really had intended to join NATO and offer Sevastopol to the alliance. Would that have provided justifiable grounds for annexing part of another state?

If we lived in the 19th century, perhaps it would. The idea that a state's power, wealth and security were determined by its size and access to the sea dominated in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. This implies a world in which "the strong" have certain special rights that are denied to weaker countries. Such an understanding of geopolitics explains why Russian leaders from Catherine the Great to Josef Stalin seized whatever they could, divvying up Poland in the 18th century and the Baltic regions in the 20th.

Of course, they inevitably encountered other predatory states in the process, sometimes reaching agreement with them, but most often going to war against them. The problem is that such an approach has no place whatsoever in the modern world.

Today, a state's security depends not on its territorial size but on its economic situation, the presence or absence of allies and, finally, the combat capability of its armed forces. Significantly, Russia's annexation of Crimea was the first such event in Europe after the implementation of the Yalta agreements at the end of World War II. Even when Turkey seized northern Cyprus, Ankara preferred casting it as the emergence of an "independent state."

According to Putin's doctrine, though, a single suspected infringement of Russia's

geopolitical interests is enough to justify redrawing European borders. What counts as an infringement, though, is something the Kremlin itself determines,

Putin's understanding of the world order obviously lags behind the prevailing conception by 60 or 70 years. Of course, there are leaders in the world with even more eccentric views, but the main concern here is that Putin heads a major nuclear state. That makes it impossible to simply ignore the Putin doctrine.

For months, Western officials have been repeating a mantra that a new Cold War will not break out because there is no ideological basis for such a confrontation. But is it not a form of ideology when Putin states: "It is time we admit one another's right to be different, the right of every country to live its own life rather than to be told what to do by someone else"? Today's world exists in part because leading nations respect certain conventions, and turning the clock back to 1815 threatens that order.

Essentially, Putin is demanding the right to live in a fictional world and to structure not only Russia's life, but the entire world order, according to long-obsolete rules. The worst thing world leaders can do is to continue to pointlessly explain to Putin that they are not a threat, when he fixedly believes that they absolutely are.

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