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Why Putin Can't Afford to Dump the Ukrainian Separatists

By Alexey Eremenko

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An armed pro-Russian separatist gestures to reporters at the crash site of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, near the village of Grabovo, Donetsk region.

While Russia's support of Ukrainian separatists has led to its worst standoff with the West in post-Soviet history, the Kremlin cannot afford to disown them because that would spell a major geopolitical defeat and alienate the jingoistic masses at home, Russian pundits said.

The rebels are Moscow's last remaining leverage in the otherwise vehemently pro-Western Ukraine, Maria Lipman of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank said Monday.

And domestically, the Russian public has been persuaded to see the insurgents as the good guys resisting "forces of evil" — which means disowning them would destroy Putin's popularity, Lipman said.

This leaves Putin without any appealing options, though he may yet whip out a surprise

and come out on top, as he has been known to do, experts said.

"The Kremlin has been reduced to choosing between bad and worse," said independent analyst Sergey Shelin.

"But it only has itself to blame," he said.

'The Boeing Crisis'

The months-long conflict over Ukraine intensified last week when a Malaysian passenger jet was shot down over a separatist-controlled area, leaving 298 dead, most of them European citizens.

U.S. officials have accused the allegedly Moscow-backed secessionists, who are campaigning to join Russia, of being behind the incident.

Those accusations have been echoed and amplified by Western media and the government in Kiev, who have dismissed attempts by the rebels and official Moscow to blame the incident on the Ukrainian anti-insurgency forces.

In an apparent effort to defuse the "Boeing Crisis," Putin aired a live public appeal on the issue — timed, unprecedentedly, for Sunday evening primetime in the U.S.

But he refused to side with the West and blame the rebels, limiting his speech to well-meaning generalities and vague accusations against Kiev.

Keeping NATO Out

Putin's strategic goal is to keep Ukraine from affiliating with the EU and, even more importantly, NATO, said Alexei Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies, a for-profit think tank in Moscow.

The "Great Game" for Ukraine between Russia and the West has lasted for at least a decade, kicking off with the Orange Revolution of 2004, which prevented a pro-Russian presidential nominee from coming to power in Kiev.

Russia lost most of its political influence in Ukraine with the second revolution, which ousted the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in February, said Makarkin.

Now the only option Moscow has left is rendering Ukraine too unstable for NATO to align with, and a simmering insurgency is just the thing to do the trick, the analyst said.

However, the plan to maintain a festering low-profile conflict in eastern Ukraine became unfeasible with the Malaysian jet's downing, which requires the Kremlin to act, said Shelin.

Fighting the 'Forces of Evil'

So far, the Ukrainian crisis has been a major ratings booster for Putin, whose public approval soared to 86 percent last month following Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's pro-Russian province of Crimea in March.

The only time Russians loved Putin more was in 2008, when his approval rating hit an all-time record of 88 percent following a brief successful war against Georgia, another pro-Western former Soviet neighbor.

Most Russians see Ukrainian separatists as heroes resisting the quasi-fascist "junta" in Kiev, a view hammered home by relentless propaganda on Russian state television, said Lipman of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

The anti-Ukrainian sentiment is also apparently shared by part of the Russian ruling establishment, especially in the army and security forces, though they do not voice it publicly, all experts polled for this story agreed.

Putin has reaped the benefits of the ongoing jingoistic, anti-Ukrainian frenzy at home, Lipman said.

But this also means the Kremlin would negate all popularity gains if it pulls off an ideological U-turn and denounces the rebels, pundits said in unison.

"Given the current economic trouble, if the Russian public thinks we were defeated in Ukraine, the approval ratings are likely to plummet," Makarkin said.

Russia is undergoing an economic slowdown in recent years that even Putin has attributed to state mismanagement. The country has been teetering on the brink of recession for months.

Emboldening the Opposition

Giving up on the insurgency could also energize domestic political opposition in Russia, experts said.

Russia saw sweeping anti-Putin protests from 2011 to 2013, largely liberal and pro-Western in sentiment and therefore not dissimilar to Ukraine's two recent revolutions.

The annexation of Crimea was, among other things, a message to liberal protesters that such revolutions do not end well, said Lipman.

Both she and Shelin, the independent analyst, admitted that the liberal wing of the Russian opposition has been largely crippled by a government crackdown.

But another danger are the nationalists, especially the radical volunteers who are infiltrating Ukraine in droves to fight for the separatists, and who will be outraged if Putin explicitly denies them support, experts said.

"If they go in one direction, they can go in another," Lipman said. "And these people are ready to shoot."

No Good Solution

The problem for the Kremlin is that acting on domestic public expectations is likely to bring about a severe international backlash, said Shelin.

Though direct Russian involvement in the downing of the Malaysia Airlines plane has not been proven, the incident has already been compared to the 1988 bombing of a U.S. passenger jet over Lockerbie in Scotland staged by the Libyan government. The incident ruined the global image of Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi and triggered economic sanctions that trimmed Libya's GDP by a quarter over a decade.

Western countries have already imposed sanctions against selected Russian companies and officials, and are considering expanding them to entire sectors of the economy. Public humiliation is also possible — U.S. and Ukrainian media are already calling for Russia to be stripped of the 2018 World Cup — and the bruises to Russia's global image could take years to fade.

There appears to be no solution that would simultaneously end the hostilities in Ukraine, appease the Russian public and allow Putin to save face, Makarkin said.

The two current options — giving up on the rebels or antagonizing the West — are both "catastrophic" for the Kremlin, Lipman said.

"Putin needs a totally unexpected maneuver to get out of this one," she said. "He has pulled it off before, but the situation has never been as tight as now."

See also:

Western Leaders Give Putin 'Last Chance' to Control Ukraine Separatists

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