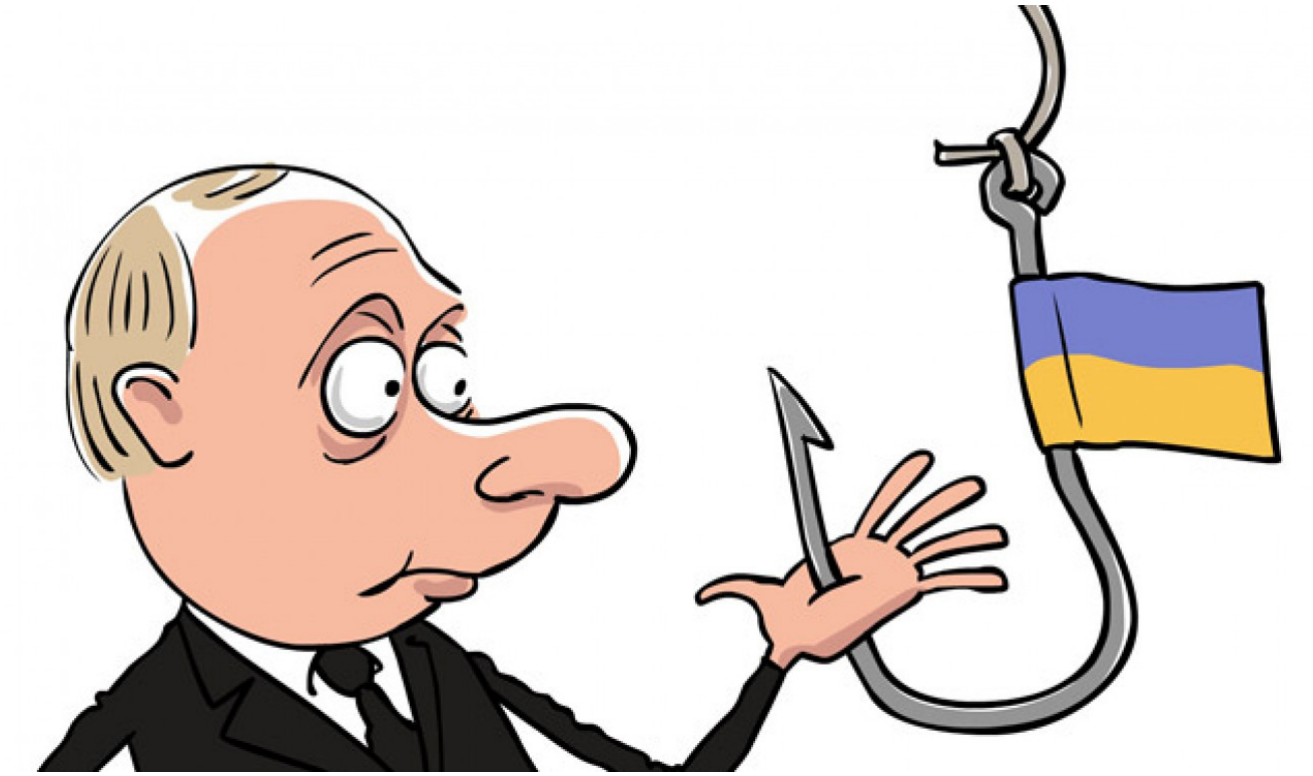
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Moscow Needs a Plan B in Ukraine

By Georgy Bovt

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"It would be good if we could learn to see at least one step ahead," President Vladimir Putin said recently in a speech on the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. He could have said much the same thing about the current crisis in Ukraine.

It would, in fact, be interesting to know how many steps ahead both of the sides involved in this conflict have planned. Recklessly posturing, both parties in this game of brinksmanship seem to have lost control and are headed for the edge of the cliff. Do the two major players even have a Plan B, a backup option, if their initial plans fail or if their goal turns out to have been misguided?

For now, the West's main leverage against Moscow is tighter sanctions. Their goal? "The cessation of Russia's efforts to destabilize Ukraine." It is probable that a complete halt to any aid for separatists in the southeast would be considered a sufficient concession to prevent new sanctions.

But what would be the next step? If these demands are met, will the current sanctions be lifted? Most likely not, and then Crimea will be the next issue up for discussion. How does

the West plan to carry out the return of the peninsula to Ukraine, on a purely practical level?

Should Moscow receive any security guarantees in return for handing back Crimea, or will its experience mirror that of Saddam Hussein in his exit from Kuwait? Where should Russia's Black Sea Fleet go? What should be done about the referendum that has already taken place in Crimea?

And of course the March referendum was just the latest: A vote in the early '90s produced very similar, pro-Russian results. Should both referendums be simply annulled as "illegitimate" and inconsistent with the Ukrainian constitution? Or should a new referendum be held in five years to test the validity of the previous one? Or 10 years? Or even right now, under the control of numerous international observers, as was done in Kosovo?

Of course such questions seem absurd today, but this is what a "situational analysis" is, when the consideration of even the most unlikely scenarios reveals both sides' potential, their resources, and their strengths and vulnerabilities. The ideal result is an appropriate evaluation of the current situation.

But in any case, vague calls to "stop the bloodshed" and "punish Putin" are no longer sufficient. Neither of those can be an end goal. Both sides must decide whether they should continue on a path of escalation or look for creative measures that will, at least, stop the slide toward total catastrophe. At the moment, though, its seems both are playing a game of blitz chess, with no time to think.

For the West, it seems likely that the end goal of "pressuring" Putin with sanctions, beyond the short-term and likely unachievable aim of ending Russian influence in Ukraine, is for him to resign as president. This is the West's Plan A.

This won't happen immediately, which begs the question: How far will this pressure go?

Preliminary calculations on the cost of sanctions for Russia and the European Union are already starting to appear, and they amount to tens of billions of dollars. The United States will fare better, at least in the short term. But what will be the cumulative effect on the entire global economy, including its financial sphere, if Russia is pushed into default?

Turning again to historical parallels, the Great Depression started when the stock-market bubble burst in the U.S., but the second, more powerful blow to the U.S. economy came from Europe, when Germany defaulted on its debts to French and British banks. The domino effect from this caused widespread economic harm and led to the rise of the Nazis.

And, even if the West throws all its economic might at Putin, what if he manages to maintain his position as president? Is direct military conflict between Russia and NATO being considered? On what scale and in what manner will the use of nuclear weapons be prevented? Or will it be?

Of course, much depends on what the Kremlin's goals and plans are. Putin is said to be surrounded by a variety of viewpoints on how Ukraine's crisis developed and in which direction to steer it. This may be true, and if so, it would explain why the Kremlin has not yet outlined a clear policy on its hopes for Ukraine's future or its relationship with Russia, NATO

or the EU.

Moscow's most likely Plan A, so far, appears to be to destabilize Kiev, thereby pushing Ukraine to keep its nonaligned status and for its eastern regions to have enough autonomy to retain close economic ties with Russia.

But here, too, we see very shortsighted thinking when considering the means and methods used to achieve the desired result. If any type of military alliance between Ukraine and NATO is seen as an existential threat to Russia itself (and I believe there is no alternate point of view on this in the Kremlin), does it follow that absolutely any means of preventing it are permissible?

This would be an extremely dangerous policy choice, though. If the separatists are proven to be the ones responsible for shooting down the Malaysia Airlines passenger plane, then, in my opinion, Russia must definitively distance itself from those people, condemn their actions and help punish those guilty for this tragedy. No one attacking a passenger plane can possibly be an ally or even an agent in the most cynical of political undertakings.

However, if an alliance is viewed as an outcome that can be lived with, as with the NATO status of Poland and the Baltics, then the appropriateness of the methods currently being used, and the cost Moscow is prepared to pay, become questions of primary importance. In this case, there should be a Plan B, an exit strategy from the crisis.

A separate set of questions arise in connection with the Russian economy. It's already clear that the response to the external challenge will not be new incentives and freedom from administrative and tax restraints for any business. There will be further nationalization and centralization. But how deeply has this scenario been analyzed, or has it been analyzed at all?

Will it go straight to the issuance of ration cards, confiscation of bank accounts (starting with foreign currency accounts and ending with all the rest), cuts in wages or social benefits, or will the state only cut individual projects one at a time without any larger plan and raise taxes across the board? The second option seems more likely. But this is a shortsighted plan.

The West and Moscow are currently basing their actions not on a game plan worked out in advance, but are only reacting to a situation that is deteriorating and becoming more and more unpredictable. They are turning into hostages of this situation and their emotions.

The Plan A's of both sides are clearly not mapped out several steps ahead, and an analysis of the losses associated with those plans is done only after measures are taken. It appears that no one has a Plan B. This means that the situation will continue to move along the least predictable, and therefore most dangerous, path.

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