

Putin Will Continue to Fight Dirty in Ukraine

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is not looking for an easy exit from the Ukraine conflict. He is digging in for the long haul to secure his end goal: a "structural lock" over Kiev's security and foreign policy in a re-engineered Ukrainian state.

Moscow is not interested in a frozen conflict in the Donbass. This would defeat its strategic objective of maintaining decisive political influence in Kiev and would saddle Russia with an exorbitant price tag. It would also allow Ukraine to proceed with reform, integration with Europe and building security relationships with NATO and the United States, a strategic loss for the Kremlin.

Moscow's interest is in forcing Kiev to integrate the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk republics as "special status regions" in a "federalized" Ukraine under a new constitution. The objective is to "re-establish" the Ukrainian state as a Bosnia-style confederation of the eastern (Russia-dominated) regions and the western regions, each with the option to choose their international security and trade arrangements — a form of Russian veto over NATO and EU

membership.

Moscow keeps insisting that Kiev hold an "inclusive national dialogue" with all regions and develop a new federal constitution. This underscores the scale of Russia's ambition and chutzpah. While ignoring the political realities in Ukraine — there is no clamor for such a "national dialogue" and very little support for federalization — it allows Moscow to impose its own agenda to advance its interests.

Putin may have decided that full implementation of September's Minsk agreements, leading to a stable cease-fire and a gradual restoration of full Ukrainian sovereignty, would ultimately diminish Russia's leverage over Kiev's foreign and security policies. This explains the latest military surge and sham elections in the Donbass. Now the task is to force Kiev to negotiate a new framework for the Ukrainian state directly with Russian proxies.

To get there, Putin will ramp up economic and military pressure to force Kiev and the West to accept his terms. Moscow will encourage the separatists to press along the line of control, expanding their territory, driving Ukrainian forces backward and grinding Ukraine down until it capitulates to Moscow's demands. A parallel effort would be made to expedite Ukraine's financial meltdown while stimulating anti-government protests in the east.

Putin looks bent on winning ugly in Ukraine, regardless of the cost, but he is about to lose the plot.

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