The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Does Putin Really Want in Ukraine?

By Nina Khrushcheva

February 04, 2015

Ukraine's former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov walks past a portrait of Russia's President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Confusion, confusion, confusion! This is how Russian President Vladimir Putin, increasingly isolated from Western conversations, keeps the world on its toes. Because only he has any answers.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine is ever more fierce. Russian-supported rebels in the occupied cities of Donetsk and Luhansk now use sophisticated weapons to capture more land and ports. Yet Putin continues to insist that Moscow has nothing to do with it, despite abundant proof from intelligence reports and satellite imagery. He has no influence, Putin declares, over the rebel bands battling for independence from a Kiev government that the CIA installed.

Putin needs the bombastic oratory of war. With economic disaster looming in Russia, because of the West's sanctions and plunging oil prices, his thinking may be that a threat of war can help justify his autocratic regime. The growing recession is forcing the Russian public to pay a high price for the annexation of Crimea.

Putin seems to be counting on the sanctions to make it the patriotic duty of all Russians to stand by him. As they are doing now — his approval rating is more than 80 percent.

Though some of his aides might occasionally slip up and suggest the rebel troops in eastern Ukraine are Russian surrogates, Putin always stays on point. It looks as if he always will.

He has built his image on strength, resolve and total control over his country's actions. Putin's militancy might subside, but only if the West accepts Russia's March annexation of Crimea.

Western approval is highly unlikely, however. Moscow's seizure of Crimea betrayed all international norms. But being the victim of the West serves Putin's interests just as well.

Last week, he was conspicuously absent from the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp, one of the Red Army's triumphs in 1945. Snubbed by world leaders, Putin held his own celebration in Moscow, to the loud cheering of the public — united in denunciation of the European lack of gratitude for Russia's sacrifices.

Putin also skipped last month's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He sent his cabinet officials instead, whose job seemed to have been to stir up yet more confusion. One appeared to be granting concessions, while others defended the mighty Russian president.

Arkady Dvorkovich, a deputy prime minister, talked about a positive "turning point" in West-Russia relations because of Moscow's interest "in stabilizing the situation globally and in Ukraine in particular."

At the same meeting, however, another deputy prime minister, Igor Shuvalov, accused the West of imposing sanctions on Russia to topple Putin. Shuvalov insisted Russians are ready for sacrifices — economic and military — to support their president.

There is yet more confusion. The Kremlin is talking about international negotiations to de-escalate the conflict and make both Ukrainians and the rebel separatists pull back up to 9,000 troops and 500 tanks. But the round of talks that began last week in Minsk was quickly derailed by the rebels. Their leaders have withdrawn from any peace negotiations and have begun a massive offensive in Debaltseve, an important railroad hub, and in and around Mariupol, a strategic port city whose capture could give Moscow overland access to the Crimea.

Despite Putin's denials, it is highly unlikely that the rebels would have initiated this major geopolitical reshuffling on their own.

Some political analysts assert that Putin is all about asymmetrical retaliation: Every time he feels his power is disrespected, he lashes out. Troop deployment, hyped-up anti-Western rhetoric and attacks on Mariupol were Putin's response to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's accusation that Russia has undermined Ukraine's sovereignty.

According to this theory, Putin wants Europe and the United States to feel threatened by a possibility of a larger war with Russia — in order to push them into continuing talks with him. If the talks fail, Putin might want the West to believe, Russia will have no choice but to expand militarily.

Other analysts suggest that what Putin really cares about is the negotiations, not the war. By pushing the rebels to take more territory in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin is trying to create new facts on the ground that Putin can use as leverage in the impending talks.

In this case, both the Kremlin's denial and the rebels' offensive serve to strengthen Russia's diplomatic hand. To avoid further rebel expansion, Kiev might also have to agree to federalization of the nation. It has already called for a ceasefire with the rebels. It may have to ultimately cease its efforts to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Short of accepting Crimea's annexation, the West, regardless of what it thinks about Putin, must continue to meet him at the negotiating table. It is possible that he could follow through on his decision to play a positive role in global affairs, as Dvorkovich, the deputy prime minister who is talking peace, suggested.

Not only because it will help Putin avoid additional sanctions, but also because the Russian economy might not survive additional shocks. There have already been mass layoffs, and the public's growing unhappiness could threaten the existence of Putin's rule.

The so-called Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine may have served the Kremlin's purpose of destabilizing that country. But the level of dismay these insurgents have brought with their actions — from the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 that killed 298 people in July, to the dozens of civilians killed around Mariupol in recent weeks — is creating unease across Russia.

So having Russian officials speaking from the different sides of their leader's mouth is a tactic to keep everyone confused. It only further enhances Putin's image as a leader who holds all the answers.

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