

Inside the Confused Mind of Vladimir Putin

By [Mark N. Katz](#)

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It is not at all clear what President Vladimir Putin's ultimate goals are in the current crisis over Ukraine. His ambitions might be limited to securing Crimea and the Donbass for Russia and getting the West to accept this state of affairs. Or he might want to gain control over more of Ukraine, if not all of it. Or he might aim at nothing less than undermining NATO and the European Union through further aggressive moves in the Baltic states and elsewhere that Western governments will not be able to agree on how to respond to. Or perhaps he himself is not sure.

But whatever his actual foreign policy goals may be, two seemingly contradictory propositions appear to underpin Putin's policies toward Ukraine and toward the West as a whole.

The first is that the United States and at least some European governments are determined not just to weaken Russia through the expansion of NATO and the EU and the promotion of "color revolutions" in former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, but also to impose crippling

sanctions on and even promote a "color revolution" inside Russia itself in order to topple the Putin regime and install a "democratic" government subservient to the West.

The second is that NATO and the EU are both weak and divided. Many Western countries are dependent on Russia for energy supplies and there are economic problems in Western states, particularly in Europe, which Moscow can exploit in order to strengthen Russia.

Logically, of course, both of these propositions cannot be true simultaneously. If the West really is in a position to weaken Russia or topple the Putin regime, then the West must not be weak. And if the West is weak, then it cannot be in a position to weaken Russia, much less topple Putin. It does not appear, however, that Putin sees the contradiction in these two propositions.

Some might ask how Putin can possibly think that the West seeks to weaken Russia, much less overthrow him. U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, after all, tried soon after coming into office to "reset" U.S. relations with Russia. And many EU governments have welcomed cooperation with Russia in recent years, over natural gas in particular.

Putin, though, has on numerous occasions described the United States in particular as the author of the "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), as well as the popular demonstrations against Putin inside Russia (2011-12), the Euromaidan demonstrations, and the downfall of Moscow's ally, former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, in Ukraine (2014).

Putin apparently does not even acknowledge the possibility that these popular uprisings may actually have been popular; his statements indicate utter certainty that they were orchestrated by the West.

While many Europeans might see the expansion of the EU as surely less threatening to Russia than the expansion of NATO, Putin may not agree.

Accession to the EU, after all, requires the adoption of EU standards regarding democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and both economic competition and transparency — everything, in short, that the Putin regime does not want to see in Russia or former Soviet states it regards as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence.

For the EU to have negotiated even an association agreement with Yanukovich, then, was seen by Moscow as threatening to inexorably draw Ukraine out of the Russian orbit and into the Western one.

Putin lobbied hard to persuade Yanukovich not to sign it in 2013, and to join Putin's Eurasian Union scheme instead.

When Yanukovich complied, Putin may have believed that he had won the contest for influence in Ukraine. But after pro-EU demonstrations arose in Ukraine, Yanukovich fled from Kiev in early 2014 and pro-Western forces came to power there, Putin saw all this as the result of a Western-backed plot.

Similarly, Obama's early attempts to improve U.S.-Russian relations were seen by Moscow as a ploy to better position Washington to back Putin's domestic opponents. Given these views, it

is understandable why Putin may prefer to have openly confrontational relations with the West in order to whip up Russian nationalist support for him and to discredit anyone in Russia calling for democracy and better ties to the West.

Russia allowing relations with the West to improve, by contrast, could serve to support democratic forces in Russia.

It may be, then, that Putin does not want to resolve this crisis over Ukraine with the West, but to keep it boiling, though not boiling over.

And so we are now in a position with the West attempting to forestall further Russian advances in Ukraine and elsewhere mainly through imposing economic sanctions while negotiating cease-fires.

All the while, Putin is branding his domestic opponents as Western agents, continuing to push forward in Ukraine, exploiting differences within the West and threatening worse to come if the West does not stop opposing Moscow.

At this point, all that is clear is that this crisis between the West and Russia over Ukraine and beyond will not end until there is a realization in Moscow that the West is not trying to overthrow Putin, and that Russian expansion into Ukraine (and perhaps elsewhere) does not serve to strengthen Moscow.

But since Putin is not likely to experience any such epiphany, any such realization may not occur until after his long reign finally comes to an end.

Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.

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