

How Russia Took Over Crimea, and Crimea Took Over Putin

For Russia, the main consequence of annexing Crimea has been the gradual decline of Putin as the country's domestic leader.

By [Tatiana Stanovaya](#)

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Five years after Russia's annexation of Crimea, experts are producing detailed analyses of how the annexation changed Russia and its society.

The country has undoubtedly changed — but no less important is the change Vladimir Putin himself has undergone.

He experienced two crucial jolts to his psyche — the first when he grabbed back power from Medvedev, who was dreaming of a second term as president, and the second when he decided — somewhat unexpectedly, even to himself — to annex Crimea.

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Over the past five years, a new political leader has emerged — one who has little in common with the Putin the country had known and loved. Russia may have taken over Crimea, but Crimea, in turn, appears to have swallowed up Putin.

The fact that Vladimir Putin's regime was based on his own high ratings was no secret: This was a key element of the entire political system.

Putin was essentially able to construct his power vertical on the basis of a direct contract between authority and society, emasculating the Russian elite and prioritizing the state control and repression apparatus above all other political actors, oligarchs, regional elites and political parties.

If by 2008, this construction had reached its peak, it was severely tested during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. The worst came in 2013, when Putin's ratings plummeted to their lowest yet, the economy stuttered and positive trends were noticeably absent.

That year saw the first signs of the regime's erosion and political depression. The Crimean annexation turned this around, appearing to bring precisely the things that significant swathes of the population expected from their leader: determination, historical justice and national pride. The country had, once again, found its hero.

Soaring post-Crimea approval ratings and the paralysis and eventual collapse of the liberal opposition, however, brought with them their own political dangers.

Putin began to lose touch with the mood in society. The "return" of Crimea created the illusion of indulgence, a carte blanche for the most ambitious geopolitical projects. With time, however, it became apparent that the president represents not his electorate, but a state of his own imagination. After 2014, Putin's regime began to evolve into something entirely different.

The annexation of Crimea was the first significant foreign policy initiative undertaken without regard for Western reaction. This new approach soon manifested in the Donbass and Syria conflicts, as well as in Russia's information and cyber policy toward Western countries.

If during his first two terms Putin was motivated primarily with reviving the country by domestic development, after Crimea, he adopted an entirely new mission in no way linked with his country's social and economic needs. Putin's course and focus as president subsequently took on a life of its own, at direct odds with the wants of the people.

Related article: [Crimea 5 Years Later. And How Russia's Wealthy Are Taking Advantage of the Country's Legal System.](#)

Crimea rallied Russians behind Putin — but Putin no longer listened to them.

With his continuing focus on foreign policy, the president moved away from his own political elite, resulting not just in an increasingly detached president, but also a power vacuum within the vertical.

This has resulted in fierce [infighting](#) among the elite, as the high-profile [arrests](#) of former Economic Development Minister Alexei Ulyukayev and senator Rauf Arashukov demonstrated. Here too, we see signs of Putin's weakness as a political leader.

For Russia, the main consequence of annexing Crimea has been the gradual shriveling of Putin as the country's domestic leader.

A tightly coiled political vacuum has formed, and it is closely guarded against alternative elements. Vladislav Surkov's notorious [open letter](#) sums it up well: never before has anyone described the lack of ideas and cynicism of Putin's new Russia with such candor.

The annexation of Crimea allowed the president to cast Russian society as a silent, helpless, impotent mass, forever in debt to the president for bringing the peninsula "home." Russian society, however, is starting to show that it never signed up for these terms.

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