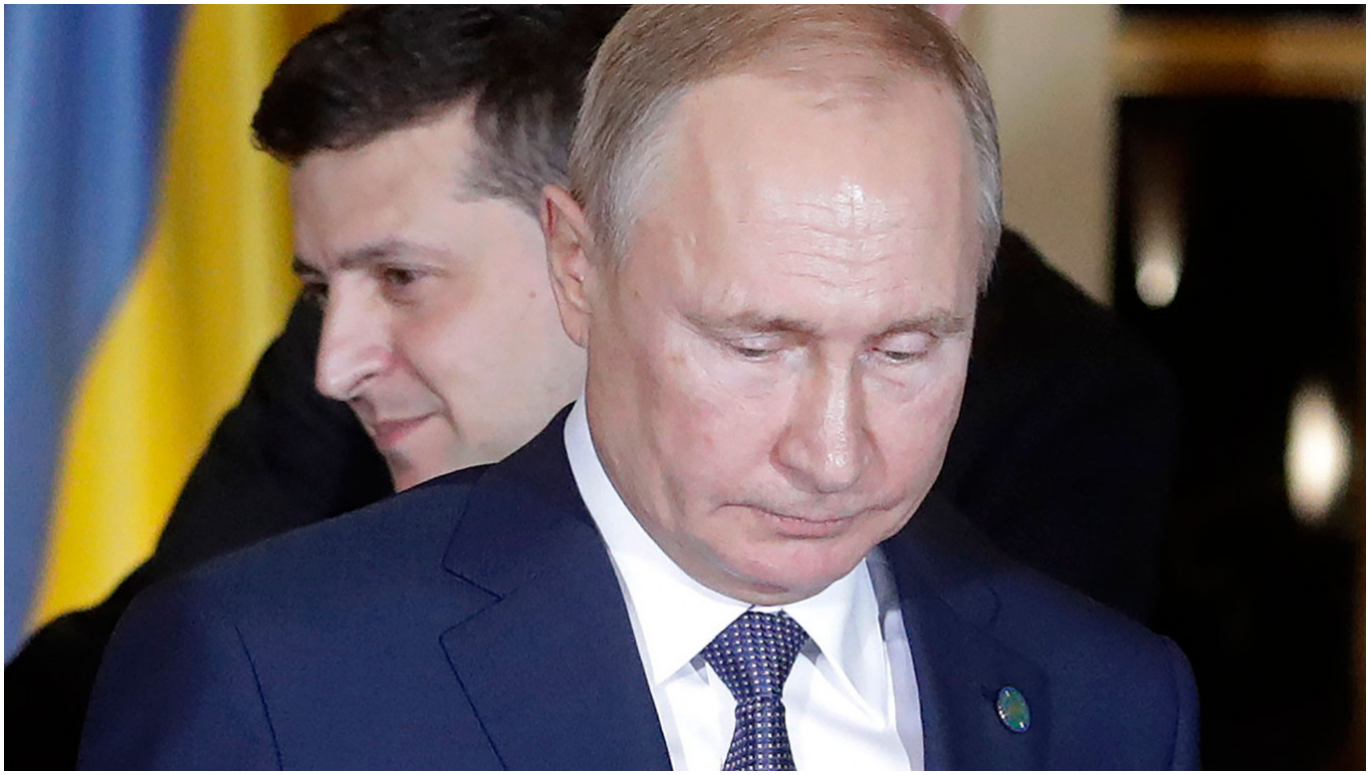
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Does the Kremlin Understand Ukraine? Apparently Not

The abject failure of Russian policy toward Ukraine over the past seven years suggests Vladimir Putin has a flawed understanding of the country.

By Steven Pifer

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

At dinner at the American ambassador's residence in Moscow some years ago, I asked a former senior foreign policy official if anyone in the Kremlin understood Ukraine. He replied that someone there understood Ukraine very well. He then added "but nobody listens to him."

The abject failure of Russian policy toward Ukraine over the past seven years suggests the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin have a flawed understanding of the country.

On Dec. 17, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "Have we [Russia] lost Ukraine as a partner, ally and so on? At this point, yes, completely."

The Russian leadership presumably did not intend this. Thus, the question of whether the Kremlin and Putin understand Ukraine. Many signs suggest that they do not.

Putin's last visit to Kiev occurred in 2013, when he traveled to mark the 1025th anniversary of Kievan Rus's acceptance of Christianity. In a speech Putin said, "We are all spiritual heirs of what happened here 1025 years ago. And in this sense we [Ukrainians and Russians] are, without a doubt, one people."

What an utterly tone-deaf statement to make in Ukraine. Millions of ethnic Ukrainians heard it as a denial of their culture, history and language. Putin has since often repeated that point.

Russia's use of military force to seize Crimea following the Maidan Revolution could hardly be expected to win over Ukrainian sympathies. Nor would sparking and sustaining a conflict in Donbas that has now claimed more than 13,000 lives.

Shortly after the Russia-Ukraine conflict began in 2014, Putin and other Russians started speaking of "Novorossiya" — the idea that much of eastern and southern Ukraine would rise in revolt against Kiev. The allure of Novorossiya held sway in Moscow long after it became clear that there was little enthusiasm among Ukrainians for breaking away.

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Volodymyr Zelenskiy won the Ukrainian presidency in 2019. He came to office a political novice who comfortably spoke Russian and promised a different approach from that of his predecessor, whom Moscow despised. Zelensky endorsed the Minsk agreements as the basis for resolving the Donbas conflict and spoke approvingly of the "Steinmeier formula" for moving forward—politically risky steps for the new president given growing frustration and anger in Ukraine about the failure of the Minsk agreements to deliver peace in Donbas.

What did that get Zelensky? Putin agreed to a meeting in December 2019 with the Ukrainian leader, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. The meeting produced agreement on a prisoner exchange, a full ceasefire in Donbass and a follow-up meeting in spring 2020. Only the prisoner exchange occurred.

Rather than seek compromise, the Kremlin leaders seemed to calculate that they could force the newcomer to make humiliating concessions.

Moscow increasingly took the position that it was not a party to the conflict — despite a Russian signature to the Minsk II agreement — and sought to force Kiev to deal directly with the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics." The Kremlin now swats away any request by Zelensky to meet Putin.

The unsurprising result: Zelenskiy's attitude toward Moscow has hardened. While he brought to office an ambivalent view of the Ukraine-NATO relationship, he now publicly calls for an early membership path for Ukraine.

Kremlin policy has driven Ukraine away. More than anything else, it has persuaded the Ukrainian government and an increasingly large segment of the Ukrainian population that they can find security and stability only if their country is anchored in institutions such as the European Union and NATO.

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The Kremlin appears intent on continuing this course. Putin released an essay in July in which he all but denied Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign nation. In October, former President Dmitry Medvedev termed talking to Kiev "pointless."

The Russian military has massed tens of thousands of troops and tanks, artillery and other combat vehicles in staging areas near Ukraine, suggesting that Russia is preparing a major military assault.

That would not bring Ukraine back to Russia. It would instead generate more sanctions on Russia, an increased flow of Western arms to Ukraine, a bolstering of NATO military presence near Russia's borders — and dead Russian soldiers.

The Russian military is undoubtedly stronger, but the Ukrainian military would exact a price. Moreover, Kiev is preparing for partisan warfare, and an early December poll showed that one-third of those asked, including one-fourth in the country's east, would take up arms if the Russians invade.

It is time for the Russian leadership to reexamine the premises on which it has based its approach. Bad understanding leads to bad policy, and the Kremlin appears poised to make another in a line of mistakes in its approach toward Ukraine. This one would prove a tragedy for Ukraine ... but also for Russia.

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