



# Ukraine's impact on Russia

by Nicu Popescu

Domestically at least, Putin has profited handsomely from the recent turmoil in Ukraine. According to the Levada-Centre, a polling organisation, just before major protests erupted against former President Yanukovich in Ukraine, Putin's approval ratings were at their lowest since he came to power 15 years ago. By May 2014, however, they had shot up to 83% – among the highest levels he has ever enjoyed.

There are several reasons for this development. One is the simple fact that Crimea's 'return' to Russia is popular in its own right. But there has also been a sea change in public opinion since the 2011 anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow. Although many Russian citizens remain frustrated by government incompetence and corruption, the prevailing mood in the country is that bad government is better than no government at all. With post-revolutionary Ukraine seemingly descending into civil war next door, more and more Russians appear content with the fatalist and minimalist slogan from a 1960s Soviet movie "*lish by ne bylo voiny*" (anything but war).

The quick and efficient manner in which the annexation of Crimea was carried out proved that Putin is ready to take risks and capable of delivering results. The successful hosting of the Olympics in Sochi also sought to reinforce the official narrative of a 'functional Russia' (as opposed to a dysfunctional Ukraine). And although Moscow fears that a third wave of Western sanctions could be damaging, current measures do not seem to have made much of an impact. Russian markets are recovering, as is the

rouble, and expectations of economic growth have been revised upwards.

Russia's political opposition also finds itself in total disarray, and the once-united anti-Putin alliance of liberals, nationalists and leftists has long since evaporated. For politicians, not vocally supporting, let alone questioning, the annexation of Crimea is practically akin to political suicide – even for liberals. Anti-Putin nationalists (and those nostalgic about the USSR) are enthusiastic backers of Putin's territorial grab, and the figurehead of the 2011 protests, Alexei Navalny, has been almost forgotten – and remains under house arrest.

However, the fate of Ukraine raises some serious questions concerning Russia's own ability to pass on power in an orderly fashion. Ukraine, for all its faults, has a much better record when it comes to changing leaders, and the troubles now faced by Kiev might one day affect a post-Putin Russia. Neighbouring Kazakhstan faces a similar dilemma: the president remains without a named successor and the country lacks the political institutions to elect a new head of state. In this regard, Kazakhstan stands as a worrying reminder to Russia that what matters for super-centralised political systems is 'not just how they fly, but how they land'.

## Russia's goals in Ukraine

While there has clearly been a softening of Russian rhetoric with regard to Ukraine, it is not clear,



however, whether Russia's actions on the ground have followed suit. As most of Russia's objectives can be achieved without a major invasion, the emergence of a situation where 'neither war nor peace' prevails is a satisfactory outcome for Moscow.

The Russian leadership's goal is *not* to annex (small) parts of Ukraine, but to destabilise the entire country. From a Russian perspective, two possible, and almost complementary, routes could be taken.

In a similar manner to what Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US did in Afghanistan in the 1980s, one option is to continue covertly destabilising Ukraine by channelling, arming and assisting irregular volunteers (rather than getting bogged down in an open conflict using conventional troops). This would damage the chances of successful reforms being introduced in Ukraine, keep the government in Kiev preoccupied in the east, and drain the country of political and financial resources.

The aim is to turn Ukraine from a weak and fragile state into a failing state. The emergence of such a Ukraine would then act as a constant reminder to the Russian people that Putin is a better alternative to the chaos of civil strife. Internationally, the hope is that this would soon lead to 'Ukraine fatigue' in the West, thereby killing off even purely theoretical chances of the country eventually joining NATO and/or the EU.

As Putin seems to believe that the Association Agreement with the EU is a step on the road to NATO accession, no assurances by Kiev to the contrary are likely to hold much weight. With NATO reluctant to extend security guarantees to states suffering from chronic instability, many in Moscow believe the best insurance policy against further NATO enlargement on their doorstep is to encourage the emergence of unresolved conflicts.

The same calculation applies, to a lesser extent, to Georgia and Moldova. There is now an increased risk that in addition to existing conflict zones (Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia), others may emerge – such as the Moldovan region of Gagauzia or the Armenian-inhabited parts of Georgia.

A second way for Russia to approach the crisis in Ukraine is to push for a (con)federalised state system from a position of strength, i.e. after Kiev fails to defeat the insurgents. Moscow would then seek to maintain a minority stake in the Ukrainian state by influencing regional elites economically linked to (and dependent on) Russia. This would replicate a similar system that existed in the USSR, where

some major industrial enterprises – especially in the military-industrial complex – in the soviet republics were subordinated directly to Moscow as 'enterprises of Union-level importance'.

## Russia: stronger or weaker?

Many in Moscow believe that the recent demonstration of the readiness to use force makes Russia more influential: feared on the international stage, the country is better placed to achieve its goals in the post-Soviet space – and beyond.

Nevertheless, for all its ability to handle crises, Russia's broader strategy is in tatters. In the rush to position itself as a global pole of influence in a multipolar world, Moscow's overarching goal was always to establish a Eurasian Union – with Ukraine on board.

In fact, Russian objectives *vis-a-vis* Ukraine have been dramatically scaled down over the past six months. In November 2013, the plan had been to acquire and maintain a high degree of influence over the *entire* country, not least by integrating it into the Eurasian Union. Last February, after Yanukovich's departure, the hope was that most of the Ukrainian south east from Kharkiv to Odessa – or the area which Putin referred to using the 18th century Russian imperial term '*Novorossia*' – would rise up against Kiev. By June, only parts of two out of eight regions in eastern Ukraine were in turmoil.

To a large extent, Russia's actions in Ukraine have been self-defeating. Now, certain trends that Russia sought to prevent are accelerating: there is a stronger US and NATO commitment to central Europe, greater investment in energy security by the EU, an anti-Russian mood across Ukraine, and a decline in foreign direct investment in the Russian economy. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have now all signed Association Agreements with the EU, and once these agreements are ratified, Russia's hopes to include these countries in the Eurasian Union will be all but dashed.

Virtually everyone may end up worse off because of the crisis in Ukraine. Russia might now be territorially bigger, but it is no stronger.

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