
A Tale of Two Russian Narratives

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Two broad narratives have come to dominate debates about the sources of Russian foreign policy toward Ukraine. The “domestic politics” view argues that concerns internal to Russia have driven President Putin’s policy choices in Ukraine. Faced with a very sluggish economy and declining public approval ratings, President Putin decided to use an assertive policy in Ukraine to win back support from elites and mass public within the state who had begun to question his authority. This view fits well with a broader trend over the last few years of heightened nationalism in Russian politics in response to supposed domestic and foreign foes. It also fits well with reports of President Putin’s growing interest in Russia’s (and his own) historic role in world affairs.

Proponents of this view have predicted that setbacks in Ukraine threaten the very foundation of the Putin regime. Therefore President Putin will use all resources at his disposal to prevent defeat in the short-run, and over time will use hostile relations with the West to underpin his rule. Faced with a nationalist threat on the right, the Kremlin will continue to use poor relations with the West to support its rule. This view suggests that Western actions will have little impact on Russian foreign policy behavior until the domestic politics change in

Russia.

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This view is plausible, but not without flaws. It suggests that Russia's actions in Ukraine were driven by President Putin's domestic weakness at home—but signs of that weakness are easy to overstate. Yes, President Putin's approval ratings were at historic lows for him, but still 65 percent of Russians approved of his rule even at the low point of November 2013. His approval ratings were trending up in November and January even before the collapse of the Yanukovich government in Kiev. Increases in approval ratings in February were likely driven as much by the successful Sochi Olympics as by Russian policy in Ukraine.

Yes, the economy was (and continues to be) in the tank. Economic growth rates have declined almost every quarter since President Putin returned to office in May 2012, even as oil prices have remained high, other BRIC countries have returned to growth, and major economies have begun to emerge from recession. But past political protests in Russia were not driven by worries about the economy, and political opposition from groups currently harmed by the economic slowdown is hard to find. Finally, the poor economic performance was far from a collapse.

This approach also risks conflating causation with correlation. The annexation of Crimea led to a surge in President Putin's approval ratings from 70 to 80 percent, but this does not mean that it motivated President Putin's behavior. If the primary goal was to bolster President's Putin's domestic position, one would have thought that President Putin would have taken the popular and low-cost step of annexing Crimea and then declared victory in Ukraine. Why take the far

more risky step of backing poorly trained and ill-disciplined rebels in eastern Ukraine where Moscow's tactical advantages on the ground were far fewer? Even with an over the top media campaign against the so-called "Nazi junta" in Kiev, a majority of Russians still oppose introducing troops in Ukraine. Indeed, the number of Russians opposed to the use of direct military force in Ukraine increased from 45 percent in June to 61 percent in July.

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A second view suggests that foreign policy concerns, especially worries about Ukraine building closer ties with Europe in general and NATO in particular, are behind Kremlin policy toward Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea and the continued backing of the pro-Russian separatists are designed to keep Ukraine weak and divided, while minimizing the direct exposure of the Russian military. There is little doubt that keeping Ukraine from joining NATO is of utmost priority in Moscow, and that Western assurances that closer ties with the EU need not imply closer ties with NATO are unpersuasive to the Kremlin. This view suggests that it is Russia's strategic weakness—especially the Kremlin's mistake in backing the ill-fated Yanukovich government and subsequent loss of influence in Kiev—that drives foreign policy.

This view seems closer to the mark, but is also not without problems. If the goal was to keep Ukraine weak and divided, and thereby ineligible for closer relations with EU and NATO, other tools might have achieved this goal without invoking the wrath of many Ukrainians and international sanctions. Over the last 20 years, Russia's covert operations have deeply penetrated the Ukrainian political system and national security apparatus. Ukrainian dependence on Russia for gas gives the Kremlin a heavy stick with which to keep Ukraine in line. And remember, a year ago most Ukrainians had either a neutral or positive

image of Russia. For years majorities in Ukraine have opposed joining NATO.

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Moreover, if the goal was to keep Ukraine out of the “new look” NATO, it has certainly succeeded in bringing back elements of the “old look” NATO with calls to increase the NATO presence in member countries near Russia. These easily predictable responses suggest that Russian foreign policy has not quite had the desired effect of making Russia more secure.

This “foreign policy” view suggests that the facts on the ground in Ukraine are especially important in shaping Russian policy. With pro-Russian separatists holding their own against Ukrainian government forces, regular Russian military forces could stay in the wings. With Ukrainian government forces putting pro-Russian separatists on the run, however, the calculation surely changes and the risk of military intervention under the guise of peacekeeping or protecting Russian speakers increases dramatically.

Indeed, unexpected events on the ground have played an outsize role in the crisis. In January, Russia thought it had “won” the war over the future direction of Ukraine when President Yanukovich put off signing an agreement with the EU. However, President Yanukovich’s surprising decision to flee the country then turned victory into defeat. Faced with a serious strategic loss, the Kremlin recouped some of its position by annexing Crimea. The shocking and tragic missile attack on flight MH17 turned the course of the conflict again by galvanizing Europe into levying stiffer sanctions. Finally, it was the surprisingly rapid advance of the Ukrainian army that has pushed the pro-Russian separatists and their supporters in Moscow into a corner. This suggests that all

parties are reacting to events at least as much as they are in putting in place well thought out strategies.

Of course, there are elements of truth to both the “domestic politics” and “foreign policy” narratives, but the latter seems a better guide to understanding Russia’s approach toward Ukraine in this crisis. Oh, and be ready for more surprises.

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An insightful analysis which leads me to several general conclusions: (1) Speculation about the intent of another person, particularly of a political leader, is not very helpful when it is posed in either/or terms. As Professor Frye notes, most motivations are mixed. And even if one gets the motivation right, capability is a relevant factor, often ignored. (2) Resort to violence, whether internally in a country, as happened in February on Kyiv's Maidan, or on the basis of foreign inspiration and support, as happened in Ukraine's eastern provinces, unleashes unpredictable forces which can bring about a result the opposite of that intended. The infamous August putsch against Gorbachev in 1991 was intended to stem the centrifugal forces pulling the Soviet Union apart. Its result was precisely the opposite of that intended.

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