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# Behind Russia's "Propaganda Bullhorn"

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| PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |

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There's an inevitable tendency in disputes between the West and Russia to portray these controversies in personal terms. Attentive publics in the United States and elsewhere in the West are savvy enough to regard our leadership in complicated terms. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that in an authoritarian regime, Vladimir Putin is nevertheless but one among many contemporary Russians (but not all; consider Aleksei Kudrin's recent remarks) for whom stability, the maintenance of the status quo, a return to Russian greatness, and a sense that much of what many Russians associate with the West these days is bizarre, motivated by bad intentions, and needs to be defended against, not just in Russia per se but in the former Soviet Union as well.

These views sometimes result in statements by Putin and others such as the foreign minister who speak officially for the Kremlin that, for good reason, are mystifying to the outsider. It is easy to interpret many such statements as cynically inspired, manipulative, and something no serious person, East or West, would entertain. For instance, roughly a month before the March 2012 Presidential election, Putin said that the opposition was "looking among well-known people for a sacrificial victim" and asserted that "they could, I'm sorry,

knock someone off and then blame the authorities.” The absurdity of these kinds of remarks has been multiplied several times over in reference to the ongoing crisis within Ukraine, especially since many of them have been parroted not just by the foreign minister but by a sizable portion of the Russian press. Under such circumstances the temptation is to dismiss everything emanating from the Kremlin and in the Russian press as, as Secretary of State John Kerry has put it, stemming from “a propaganda bullhorn” reflecting “a fantasy.” This would be a mistake.

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While the utterances coming out of Moscow ring hollow to Western ears, they play well, as my Russian colleague Eduard Ponarin of the Russian Higher School of Economics has emphasized, with those among Russian elites for whom resentment of Russia’s loss of world power status is central to their thinking. President Obama was exactly right analytically to dismiss Russia recently as a regional power but distinctly insensitive politically. It is far better to pay attention selectively to the substance of what emanates from Moscow than to dismiss these utterances out of hand.

Two examples suffice. One was the widespread Western skepticism regarding Putin’s announcement that the army was going to back away from its border positioning, which may have been a lost opportunity for a negotiated settlement. The other has been the emphasis in the last couple of months by Moscow on the desirability of an outcome in Ukraine characterized by regional autonomy and federation.

It’s fair game to score points by noting that federalism as an outcome for

Ukraine is more appealing for Moscow than it is with regard to Siberia. Nevertheless, as shaky as a Ukrainian federation involving two or more subunits will be, it is the only alternative for Ukraine that might subsume several component regions with a single capital, a single currency, and some semblance of an army, almost certainly composed of something like national guards (analogous to U.S. national guards) ultimately responsible to both a central government in Kiev and the governor of the region. When it comes to political posturing, time flies rapidly. Only six months ago in February, federation was an unacceptable option for western Ukrainian cities such as Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk where what the *Guardian* then termed “parallel governments and security forces” were flourishing, where the police were siding with the citizenry, where weaponry was being obtained from governmental sources, and where calls for autonomy were pervasive.

In August, even if it is endorsed by the Russian officialdom or press, symmetrical autonomy remains the only alternative that does not involve a bloodbath and long-term adverse effects on relations between Kiev and southeast Ukraine. Such a confederation would be tenuous at best but it might stop the killing and keep the country together. As minimal as that would be, it is a sine qua non for anything else, including over time raising the Ukrainian GNP to levels comparable to that of democratic Poland or authoritarian Russia.

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