
Moving Beyond "Zero Sum" Logic

Jeffrey Mankoff, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2014

| EU | PUTIN | SANCTIONS | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |

The dominant U.S. narrative about Putin—to the extent we have one—tends to depict him as a calculating automaton, ruthlessly pursuing his aim of reestablishing Russian greatness and weakening the West. I would say that narrative overestimates Putin's control of the situation, both within Russia and, increasingly, in the context of Russian foreign policy.

Domestically, the Kremlin (which is larger than Putin) still seems genuinely concerned about maintaining legitimacy, especially in the face of a weakening economy and the emergence in late 2011 of a significant protest movement. The tool the Kremlin has chosen to bolster its legitimacy is nationalism in various guises, which also spills over into foreign policy. Indeed, domestic legitimation seems to be an important factor driving Russia's intervention in Ukraine and the broader effort to demonize the United States. Having unleashed these nationalist forces, Putin cannot simply re-cage them.

Putin the individual is one contributing factor, but focusing on him alone obscures the role of grassroots nationalism, post-imperial

nostalgia, the institutional interests of the security services and military, as well as other forces that could well push Russia in an illiberal, confrontational direction even if Putin were to disappear tomorrow.

Our narrative about a seemingly all-powerful Putin misses the domestic constraints he faces (partially self-created), and ends up personalizing the standoff between Russia and the United States. Putin the individual is one contributing factor, but focusing on him alone obscures the role of grassroots nationalism, post-imperial nostalgia, the institutional interests of the security services and military, as well as other forces that could well push Russia in an illiberal, confrontational direction even if Putin were to disappear tomorrow. Personalizing U.S.-Russia disputes also makes it more difficult for Putin to compromise, and, ironically, reinforces the identification that Russian state media are trying to present of Putin with the Russian state.

Putin's general objectives seem to be the same ones that have driven Russian policy toward the other post-Soviet states for almost two decades: that these states should continue to act as a buffer between Russia and the outside world while remaining subject to Russian influence. That is, the post-Soviet states should remain defined by their post-Sovietness. Underlying that objective is an assumption that the outside world (the West in particular) is hostile to Russia, and that the expansion of Western influence into the post-Soviet region would be damaging to Russian interests.

In the last few years, Russian policy in this region has moved from being largely defensive to largely offensive.

In the last few years, Russian policy in this region has moved from being largely defensive to largely offensive. While the Georgia war was about preserving

what Russia already had, the announcement of the Eurasian Economic Union and the annexation of Crimea are more about changing the status quo in Russia's favor. That shift seems to reflect a greater sense of self-confidence within Russia, the product of Russia's own growth and stabilization, as well as the perceived decline of the West since the 2008 economic crisis.

Before the crisis in Ukraine started, a more concerted effort to show that European integration did not have to be mutually exclusive of a close economic and political relationship with Moscow might have headed off this confrontation. Unfortunately, the EU depicted association with Brussels and membership in Russia's customs union as incompatible—and then did nothing to address Russian concerns before the crisis began. Today, that zero-sum logic seems pretty well entrenched, and I am not sure there is a clear-cut way out, at least in the short term.

Printable PDF



Add a comment...

Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Credits](#)

| [Photo Credits](#)

© Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2014



The views expressed on this site are the sole opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.