

Personalization and Patriotism

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| NATO | PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |



American media narratives generally tend to excessively personalize politics and international affairs, and recent coverage of Russia is no exception to this overall trend. During the entire Ukraine crisis, and especially in the aftermath of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, Vladimir Putin has been portrayed as an evil leader bent on some combination of restoring the Soviet empire and destroying the international order. His motivation has frequently been framed as a sense of pique for the exclusion of Russian leaders from key decisions, such as on the Iraq war, on NATO's intervention in Kosovo, and on NATO

enlargement.

While Russian leaders certainly do have a sense of grievance over perceived slights by the West, and particularly by the United States, against Russia that have accumulated over the 20-plus years since the breakup of the Soviet Union, these grievances are not sufficient to explain Russian foreign policy. Instead, Russian foreign policy is driven by a combination of a desire to restore Russia's great power status, the perception that Russian security can only be guaranteed if Russia is surrounded by friendly states, and the fear that the United States is taking active measures to overthrow the current Russian government.

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Furthermore, the personalization of Russian foreign policy hurts U.S. policymaking toward Russia by creating a perception that Russian actions, as guided by Putin, are irrational and therefore cannot be dealt with through strategies other than containment. There is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) undercurrent that the crisis in U.S.-Russia relations will inevitably continue unless and until Putin is removed from his position as Russia's leader.

While Putin has unquestionably installed a repressive domestic regime in Russia and pursued an aggressive foreign policy that seeks to establish a set of dependent buffer states on the territory of the former Soviet Union, Russian foreign policy does derive from a rational set of beliefs, goals, and interests. The inability of many Western commentators and some policymakers to see the world from the Russian point of view damages the ability of the U.S. government to adopt a Russia policy that allows for a reasonable response to

Russian actions without defaulting to the outdated image of Russia as a direct descendant of the Soviet “evil empire.” In addition, Western analysts neglect the likelihood that if Putin is forced out of office, his replacement is unlikely to be a pro-Western politician. Instead, any successor is likely to be at least as anti-Western as Putin is perceived to be. Given the strength of nationalist sentiment among the Russian population, any new leader is in fact likely to be more nationalistic and aggressive than the current incumbent.

Throughout the current crisis, Russia has been acting from weakness, rather than from strength. While various commentators have described Putin as playing a chess game against the West, I would argue that he has actually been primarily reacting tactically to what he saw as a major defeat. After all, in late February, in just a few days Ukraine went from having chosen alliance with Russia over Europe to a victory by anti-Russian forces and the prospect of a close alliance with the West, and the potential loss of Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol.

Russian leaders see the protests in Ukraine as part of a Western plot. For them, colored revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently-minded national governments in favor of ones that are controlled by the West. They have argued that this is part of a global strategy to force foreign values on a range of nations around the world that refuse to accept American hegemony, and that Russia was a particular target of this strategy.

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This perspective appears to be at the core of a new national security strategy

that Russia is developing. Although Western readers may find the lumping together of uprisings as disparate as those in Serbia in 2000, Syria in 2011, and Venezuela in 2014 hard to swallow, from the Russian point of view they all share the common thread of occurring in countries that had governments that were opposed to the United States. Although uprisings in countries whose governments were tied more closely to the United States, such as Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Egypt and Bahrain in 2011, are harder to explain, such inconsistencies appear to not trouble the Russian government. If this is the dominant perspective, then Russia's opposition to the United States and the West is about mindset and has nothing to do with interests. In that case, it is not worth spending time to try to convince the current Russian leadership to pursue more cooperative policies. If they truly believe that the United States is seeking to force them out of power and is simply waiting for an opportune moment to strike, then Russian policies will remain committed to ensuring that the United States does not get such an opportunity.

In that environment, Russia's current policies in Ukraine have little to do with geopolitical calculations about Ukrainian economic ties with the EU versus the Eurasian Union or even with potential Ukrainian NATO membership. And the annexation of Crimea was not about ensuring the security of the Black Sea Fleet. Instead, the main goal is to strengthen the Putin regime domestically by increasing patriotic attitudes among the Russian population. Patriotism would thus be the means by which the Russian government inoculates the Russian population against anti-regime and/or pro-Western attitudes. This goal would explain the obsessive focus on building an anti-Ukrainian and anti-American domestic media narrative from an early stage in the Ukraine conflict.

The U.S. response to such a position would have to focus on a combination of reassuring steps to show that the United States is not planning to overthrow the Putin regime with the restatement of the core U.S. position that the citizens of each country deserve the right to determine their own government without external interference (from either Russia or the United States).

In practical terms, the U.S. government should encourage the Ukrainian government to pursue policies of reconciliation in the Donbas. While the conflict has been greatly exacerbated by Russian actions, it has an internal component that cannot be solved by military action alone. In an ideal world, Russia and the United States would work together to encourage this reconciliation, though I doubt that the current Russian government is genuinely interested in peace in eastern Ukraine. Instead, it would prefer to keep eastern Ukraine unstable as an object lesson to its own population of the dangers of popular protest leading to the overthrow of even a relatively unpopular government.

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Mr. Gorenburg is absolutely correct in advising not to over personalize our understanding of Russia's policy and actions. They are not simply the result of paranoiac whims of Russia's president but of widely held views in Russia. Any strategy to maintain peace and stability in Europe requires an understanding of these views and what "Western" actions or inactions have stimulated them. They have been amplified and exacerbated by skillful propoganda, but it was not propoganda that gave rise to them in the first place. Of course, understanding the views of others does not require approving them or even accepting them as accurately based. Empathy is not the same thing as sympathy.

There are no valid objective reasons to conduct our relations with Russia as if we were in or entering a new Cold War. None of the ideological elements that predominated Cold War thinking are present in the situation today. But we and many of our European allies seem to ignore the original causes of the Russian feeling of estrangement and in fact continue policies and actions that feed the Russian narrative of victimization by a scheming U.S. and its NATO allies. So we need not only a better understanding of how Russians see the world, but also why they see it that way, entirely apart from the exaggerations and fabrications of their propoganda.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 4 · August 23 at 11:32am**Pavel Palazhchenko** · Moscow State Linguistic University · 1,464 followers

Unfortunately, if 'Russia's opposition to the United States and the West is about mindset and has nothing to do with interests' (which in my view is correct) then it's very difficult if not impossible to devise a policy that would prevent further worsening of relations. The author's recommendations are well intentioned but he himself seems to doubt that they will work. Sad indeed.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 24 at 3:01am**Jack Matlock** · Duke University

Can nothing be done to affect the mindset? Maybe not, and if not, we are in for a rough and dangerous time that damages everybody's true interests.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 24 at 12:59pm**Pavel Palazhchenko** · Moscow State Linguistic University · 1,464 followers[Jack Matlock](#) It's worth trying, of course.[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 24 at 1:13pm

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