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Vladimir Putin: Geopolitical wrecking ball¹

With his crude but effective intrusion into Kyiv's strategic decision-making, Russia's President has comprehensively destabilised Ukraine with unpredictable consequences and triggered a reprise of the 'Orange' events of 2004–05.

As a candidate in the 2004 presidential elections and with Putin's overt support, Viktor Yanukovich had deployed 'administrative resources' to rig the ballot. Mass street protests, with some brokering from Western emissaries, forced a re-run, which Yanukovich lost decisively to the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko, a humiliating reversal that has haunted both Yanukovich and Putin since.

While Moscow has always strongly resented the idea that Ukraine should join NATO, it has seemed more relaxed about former Soviet republics having closer economic ties with Europe. But, in 2013, when a number of them seemed likely to conclude Association Agreements (AA) with the European Union, Moscow's reaction became more emphatic.

Punitive trade boycotts were unleashed against Ukraine and Moldova, and Armenia was threatened with a withdrawal of Moscow's security guarantee against Erevan's archenemy Azerbaijan. After a sudden trip

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to Moscow to see Putin, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan abruptly announced his country was trashing years of negotiations toward an AA and had decided instead to join Putin's Eurasian Customs Union, a kind of ersatz USSR.

Then, after two secretive meetings with Putin, Yanukovych announced Ukraine too was 'suspending' its long-running negotiations, only a week before it was to sign an AA at the Vilnius EU Summit of 28–29 November 2013.

On 17 December, after another Putin–Yanukovych meeting, it was announced that Russia would purchase US\$15 billion worth of Ukraine's wilting Eurobonds (to stave off any possible default), and reduce the price Gazprom charges Kyiv for its gas imports by a third. To keep Yanukovych honest, the US\$15 billion would be dispensed in tranches, and the gas deal would run for 18 months, reviewed quarterly.

Before his sudden about-face, Yanukovych had shown every sign of firming up on an AA in response to Moscow's economic coercion (gas price hikes, trade boycotts and the construction of gas pipelines bypassing Ukraine). Kyiv's abrupt and totally opaque 180-degree turn shocked Ukraine's citizens even more than it shocked Brussels. For months, polling had shown solid, even decisive majority support for the AA. Ordinary Ukrainians, not just in the centre and west, saw the AA as the key to their becoming citizens of a 'normal' country, like the EU countries that they had visited or seen on their screens, free of the rampant corruption, cronyism and sustained economic stagnation of their homeland. Hence the large crowds on Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) that have persevered through three months of winter.

Yanukovych's instinct was seemingly to make few concessions and wait for winter to do its work. But, several times, he has attempted violent dispersal of the protesters. He was probably being pushed in that direction in part by Kremlin economic blackmail. After the first US\$3 billion tranche had been disbursed, Russia suspended the program because of the resignation, in response to Maidan pressure, of Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov (a Russian immigrant to Ukraine), a decision of which Moscow clearly disapproved. The latest crackdown earlier this week was launched immediately after a second

tranche of bond purchases worth US\$2 billion was announced. Yanukovych had had a discreet meeting with Putin in Sochi a few days earlier, where quid pro quos for a second tranche may well have been discussed.

Until recently, the Maidan protesters maintained remarkable levels of discipline and organisation, despite growing regime violence, casualties and disappearances, some of which were carried out by hired thugs (*titushki*), not regular police or security units. Opposition leaders like Vitali Klitschko and Arseny Yatseniuk have consistently called for calm but, unsurprisingly, militant groups have lately grown more prominent, and some of them have managed to acquire weapons.

The Kremlin's line, since the days of Stalin, has been that western Ukrainians are all 'fascists', and this hyperbole has been given undue prominence by poorly informed Western commentators. If anti-Russian Ukrainians, many of whom would have lost relatives to the *holodomor* (Stalin's enforced mass starvation policy in Ukraine in the 1930s), are 'extremists', what is one to say of the unreconstructed Ukrainian communists and Yanukovychites in the east demanding the protests simply be crushed?

In a conversation with the uncensored Maidan TV station Hromadske (Community), the eminent US historian of the region, Timothy Snyder, aptly referred to this attempt to disqualify the protest movement as 'abuse of history'. Now Yanukovych, Putin and the European Union have an entrenched polarisation and potential civil war on their hands, all essentially flowing from Putin's attempt to foist his geopolitical dreams on the Ukrainian public, most of whom do not want his Customs Union.

Recently, Moscow voices have begun talking of 'federalisation' projects, a theme that has also been taken up by pro-Moscow groups in, for example, Crimea and Kharkiv. As it has done elsewhere, the Kremlin may support breakaway pro-Russian enclaves and proclaim an obligation to protect 'fellow countrymen' it has liberally issued with Russian passports. Any such manoeuvres with a large country like Ukraine would be far more destabilising than similar tactics in Georgia.

What's needed, ideally, are fresh elections, hopefully yielding a new, competent and legitimate leadership with the wisdom to rule for both ends of the country. An EU–US economic package with enough noughts to compete with Putin's offer and a renewed International Monetary Foundation support deal would also be highly desirable, if not essential.

It's hard to be optimistic about any of this. Until recently the US leadership has been focused elsewhere, and many influential EU leaders believe Russia is best not provoked, and that Ukraine is a basket case they should shrewdly avoid taking on. They seem to view the emergence of a Putinist anti-Western empire flush on their borders with remarkable equanimity.

The EU's responses so far have tended to be too little, too late. With the Sochi Winter Olympics out of the way, and given his conviction that the West is in terminal decline, President Putin may be prepared to throw some more weight around to win the battle for Kyiv.

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