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Putin's last territorial demand¹

In just over three weeks, the Kremlin has invaded and seized control of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, installed a local government headed by a pro-Russian politician with a criminal past, enacted legislation through its well-trained Russian parliament facilitating annexations of other people's territories, supported the conduct of a hasty plebiscite at the point of a gun that achieved truly Soviet results (allegedly 97 per cent in favour), and commenced the accelerated approval of an appeal from Crimea to be annexed.

The procedure was crassly illegal from start to finish, secured virtually no support from the international community and effectively disenfranchised the Crimean Tatar community, whose grandfathers' generation had been brutally deported by Stalin towards the end of World War II with a fatality rate of up to 50 per cent. The survivors and their families were allowed to filter back to the peninsula only 45 years later. Not surprisingly, they decided to boycott the shotgun poll.

The model thus demonstrated has proved so attractive that Transnistria, a Russian-supported and largely Russophone enclave in mainly Romanian-speaking Moldova, which shares no common border with Russia, has also indicated its wish to be annexed.

¹ First published as 'Say nyet now – or watch Putin's appetite expand', in *The Australian*, 22 Mar. 2014.

The West has so far responded to this machine-gun fire of facts on the ground with shock, disapproval and non-specific warnings of 'costs' and 'consequences'. But, when the United States and European Union presented parallel programs of targeted sanctions on 18 March, these scarcely made a dent in the triumphalist mood of Vladimir Putin's celebratory annexation speech in the Grand Kremlin Palace the next day.

Further US sanctions announced on 20 March do, however, land some telling blows against some of Putin's KGB and judo billionaire cronies. One in particular, Gennady Timchenko, is widely believed to be Putin's personal bagman. But sanctions, to be truly effective, must emanate from the European Union, the source of most of Russia's fading prosperity.

Further steps are under discussion, and some European leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, seem at last to be seized of the matter. But the pain for both sides of serious trade sanctions, and the continuing divisions in EU circles, suggest nothing too dismaying for Moscow is likely to emerge.

In 1904, Russian Interior Minister Vyacheslav Plehve justified his support for the Russo-Japanese war by arguing that, to avert a revolution, Russia urgently needed a 'short, victorious war'. Since launching his Crimean triumph, Putin's ratings have gone up 10 per cent.

The Russian President has an obsessive fear of popular revolts that can take over the streets and topple autocrats. Twice he has seen it happen in Ukraine, in 2004–05 and again in 2013–14. And, just ahead of 'the greatest political catastrophe in the twentieth century' (the fall of the Soviet Union), he saw it, unnervingly, at first hand in the streets of Dresden in East Germany, where he was posted as a middle-ranking KGB officer.

Lately, the Russian economy has been in increasing trouble, with growth down to 1 per cent and further decline likely, particularly given Putin's extravagant US\$700 billion rearmament program for the current decade superimposed on the defence budget.

Unproductive expenditure on his vast and ever expanding security forces and corrupt civil bureaucracy has led to cuts in health, education and infrastructure, all of which urgently require greater investment.

But Crimea is an alluring symbol for the 80 per cent of voters who depend on Russia's increasingly mendacious and xenophobic state television programs for their news and views. Thanks to the blanket propaganda from official media, the proportion of opinion-poll respondents who favour Russian interference in Ukraine has increased from a minority to an overwhelming majority within a month.

While Putin is simultaneously cracking down further on his domestic opponents, right-wing super-patriotic extremists are increasingly setting the tone for Russia's public life,² and the surviving moderates in the President's entourage are marginalised. In seeking rational explanations, even justifications, for Putin's behaviour, commentators sometimes forget the basic principle that an autocracy's foreign policy will depend in large measure on the head noises of the autocrat and his current circle of favourites.

Crimea has been a splendid achievement for Putin, but he will not now want to stop there, unless he is very energetically resisted. He has invested a great deal in destabilising the eastern provinces of Ukraine, sending in volunteers and probably also, as in Crimea, *spetsnaz* (special forces) in mufti. Together with local Russian patriots, the newcomers have provoked repeated clashes with supporters of the government in Kyiv, seizing public buildings and trying to install 'popular governors'. These struggles are probably meant to create a fresh *casus belli* for Russian military intervention.

Such clashes are not typical of Ukraine, where, despite their differences, eastern and western Ukrainians have got along pretty well. But Moscow has run the narrative that its 'fellow countrymen' in Ukraine generally, as in Crimea, are at risk of terrible and violent persecution, which supposedly imposes on Russia an R2P (responsibility to protect) obligation. This is largely rubbish, as the Russians have not

2 See Robert Horvath, 'Putin's fiasco', *Inside Story*, 11 Dec. 2014, insidestory.org.au/putins-fiasco.

been in danger and are, in fact, close to a majority in the cities of the south-east. But under the radicalising stress of invasion and further threatened incursions, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Putin will not withdraw those irregular forces until he has gained a good return on his investment. He will have had time to assess the Western response. Putin is known to hold Western leaders in contempt, viewing their cumbersome decision-making processes as dysfunctional. He will have been observing the internal disputes about sanctions and policy towards Russia in the European Union, and the frequent transatlantic disputes triggered by the dripfeed of Kremlin-friendly leaks from the idealistic Edward Snowden – safely ensconced in that mecca for human rights, Moscow. Unless Western leaders can suddenly reverse the momentum of recent months and set him back on his heels with some resolute decision, he will feel a strong impulse to move on to more venturesome scenarios.

If Moscow can maintain a state of disorder in south-eastern Ukraine, it may try to settle for a federalisation scenario. In a curious echo of NKVD secret police strategies in Eastern Europe in 1944–48, Russia has this week proposed that a ‘support group’ be created to oversee a rewriting of Ukraine’s constitution to overcome the ‘crisis’ in the country and replace the ‘illegitimate’ government. The new constitution should, among other things, provide for a federative structure, with extensive autonomy for the provinces where Russians are allegedly under threat; ensure the country be permanently neutral and precluded from joining NATO or the European Union; prevent Ukraine from again adopting a ‘neo-Nazi’ ideology; and require it to accept Russian as a second state language. Not surprisingly, the Kyiv Government has dismissed this modest proposal, describing it as an ‘ultimatum’.

For Putin, Ukraine is at once the jewel in the crown and, as he said to George W. Bush, not a real country. Its Ukrainian inhabitants are little brothers when they behave nicely and, particularly, when they speak Russian or identify as ethnic Russians (as some 17 per cent do), or fascists and Banderists when they look westwards. He covets Ukraine’s extensive Soviet-legacy defence industries, which could be vital to his huge military buildup. A recent article in a Russian specialist publication, *Sovershenno Sekretno* magazine, went so far as to suggest Ukraine’s defence industries were vital to the Russian

defence complex's functioning. Putin would also be glad of the infusion of 46 million Slavs with a relatively small Muslim community. In Russia, at least 15 per cent of the population is made up of Muslims, many of whom are increasingly alienated by government crackdowns on Muslim migrants in Russia's big cities and harsh counterinsurgency operations in the North Caucasus.

Russia is going through a demographic trough where the cohorts of young people in the right age group for employment and military recruitment are very low. The establishment of a compliant, pro-Moscow government in Kyiv, happy to join the Moscow-led Eurasian Customs Union and post-Soviet security structures, and with guaranteed autonomy for the Russophone regions of eastern Ukraine, would be a big step forward from Moscow's point of view. And it is possible that possession of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine will not exhaust Putin's territorial demands. Clearly, plans are afoot for Moldova. And he may not yet have given up on Georgia, where Russia already de facto occupies some 17 per cent of the country and half its Black Sea coastline.

Moldova and Georgia are keen to conclude Association Agreements (AAs) with the European Union this year in a search for security. Moscow will want to torpedo any such development one way or another. Even the Baltic states, despite their NATO and EU membership, may not yet be safe. Estonia and Latvia each have large populations of supposedly suffering Russians who – strangely – do not want to leave. In 2007, Russia conducted an aggressive campaign against Estonia over the removal of a Soviet statue from central Tallinn to the suburbs, with extensive cyberattacks on government institutions and a sudden outburst of angry demonstrations by aggrieved Russians in Estonia.

This week a Russian diplomat in Geneva drew an ominous parallel between discrimination against Russians in eastern Ukraine and Estonia. Aggressive and extensive Russian–Belarusian military exercises and aerial patrols in the Baltic-Nordic area have become regular events in recent years.

For too long the Western responses to these provocations have been tepid and tactful. It is high time they became more emphatic.

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