

Putin's Imperial Pursuit Of a Subordinate Ukraine

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President Vladimir Putin's Crimean gambit has multiple political objectives, and annexing the region may not be the most important of them.

Russia already controls Crimea with the insertion of a relatively small commando force. This falls short of a full-scale invasion and provides Moscow with plausible deniability and a quick exit if the going gets tough. Ukraine has no military options in Crimea other than supporting an armed insurgency among Crimean Tartars and ethnic Ukrainians.

But Putin's goal is far more overarching. He wants to reverse the gains of the Ukrainian revolution that ousted President Viktor Yanukovich. He also wants to keep at least the industrial heartland in eastern and southern Ukraine within Russia's zone of "privileged interests" — and perhaps also in a future Eurasian Union.

By declining to recognize the legitimacy of the new authorities in Kiev and fostering

instability in Ukraine's Russian-speaking regions, Russia wants to make a clear point that elected governments should not be brought down by street protests. Moscow's narrative is that revolutions bring nothing but chaos, ethnic strife, a complete collapse of a functioning state and social dislocation. Street power and democratic choice are bad for your health.

Moscow will deny economic assistance to the new government in Kiev and revoke the reductions in gas prices to force Ukraine's economic collapse. Branding the events in Kiev as "a fascist coup," Moscow has already called the May 25 presidential election illegitimate.

Recognizing the disgraced Yanukovich as the legitimate president of Ukraine, Moscow now has a political vehicle to engineer regional coups in the southern and eastern regions and install administrations that would recognize Yanukovich's authority.

By insisting on full implementation of the Feb. 21 European Union-mediated agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition, Moscow seeks to impose a new negotiated settlement on power-sharing in Ukraine that would dramatically expand the autonomy of the Russian-speaking regions and keep the Russian naval base in Sevastopol. The ultimate goal is a new government in Kiev that agrees to join the Eurasian Union. Western Ukraine, which would never agree to this, will be denounced as separatist and will likely be let go to join Europe.

Much like his imperial and Soviet predecessors, Putin is fighting against a popular, grassroots revolution on Russia's borders. Unfortunately for him, history is not on his side.

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