

Putin Stays on Offense in Ukraine

July 27, 2014

The  **Moscow Times**

Russian President Vladimir Putin might be expected to hunker down into defense mode as he is besieged by accusations of Russian involvement in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. Instead he has stayed on offense and appears to be positioning for the long game.

In his televised appearances since last Thursday's crash, Putin's demeanor hasn't wavered from his usual steely determination. He has allowed Russian media to propound theories blaming Ukrainian forces or suggesting a U.S. hand in the crash, while refusing to deny such theories and indirectly placing responsibility on the Ukrainians.

Just hours after the crash, Putin laid the groundwork for this approach, saying at a meeting of economic officials that "the tragedy would not have happened" if Ukraine had not resumed its military actions against rebels in late June. "The state over whose territory this occurred bears responsibility for this awful tragedy," he said.

That argument neatly eludes a key issue: that the offensive was renewed after a 10-day unilateral ceasefire that the pro-Russia rebels ignored. Throughout the eastern Ukraine crisis, now in its fourth month, Putin and his officials have consistently portrayed the conflict as Ukraine's unprincipled assault on its own citizens, rather than as a move to take back

a sizeable part of the country seized by heavily armed separatists.

The aim is to discredit the Kiev authorities without openly opposing them. Putin even spoke face-to-face in June with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who had just been elected following the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich in the wake of months of mass protests. But on Tuesday, he stepped up the aspersions in a meeting with his security council.

"True, they held elections after the takeover," Putin said. "However, for some strange reason, power ended up again in the hands of those who either funded or carried out this takeover."

This is where the long game appears to take shape.

By aggressively suggesting that Ukraine's instability is a prelude to Western designs on Russia, Putin not only deflects attention away from the plane crash, but strikes a chord in the Russian psyche. Russia characteristically sees itself as both a vast and mighty world power and as forever beleaguered by devious and violent forces dating back to the Mongol hordes and later including Napoleonic France, Poland, Sweden and, finally, Nazi Germany.

Even as he expresses concern about Russia's vulnerability, Putin also declares that "the recipes used regarding weaker states fraught with internal conflict will not work with us."

Resorting to the contradictory — yet popular — message may indicate the tight spot Putin finds himself in as he faces not only international opprobrium but the prospect of even more economic sanctions.

"He appears caught, first, by the possibility of very serious limitations from the West," analyst Fyodor Lukyanov was quoted as saying by the news website Ekspert. "Secondly, the psychological pressure is very serious. And for Putin, I think, it's hard just on a human basis."

But Putin is the ultimate survivor. And barring evidence that irrefutably connects Russia with the plane's crash Putin likely has the stamina and determination for a long haul.

Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow think-tank, said that while many may hope that sanctions and the pressure on Putin will cause him to pull back, "those banking on this scenario will probably be disappointed."

"Putin is unlikely to stand down, or back off," he wrote in a commentary.

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