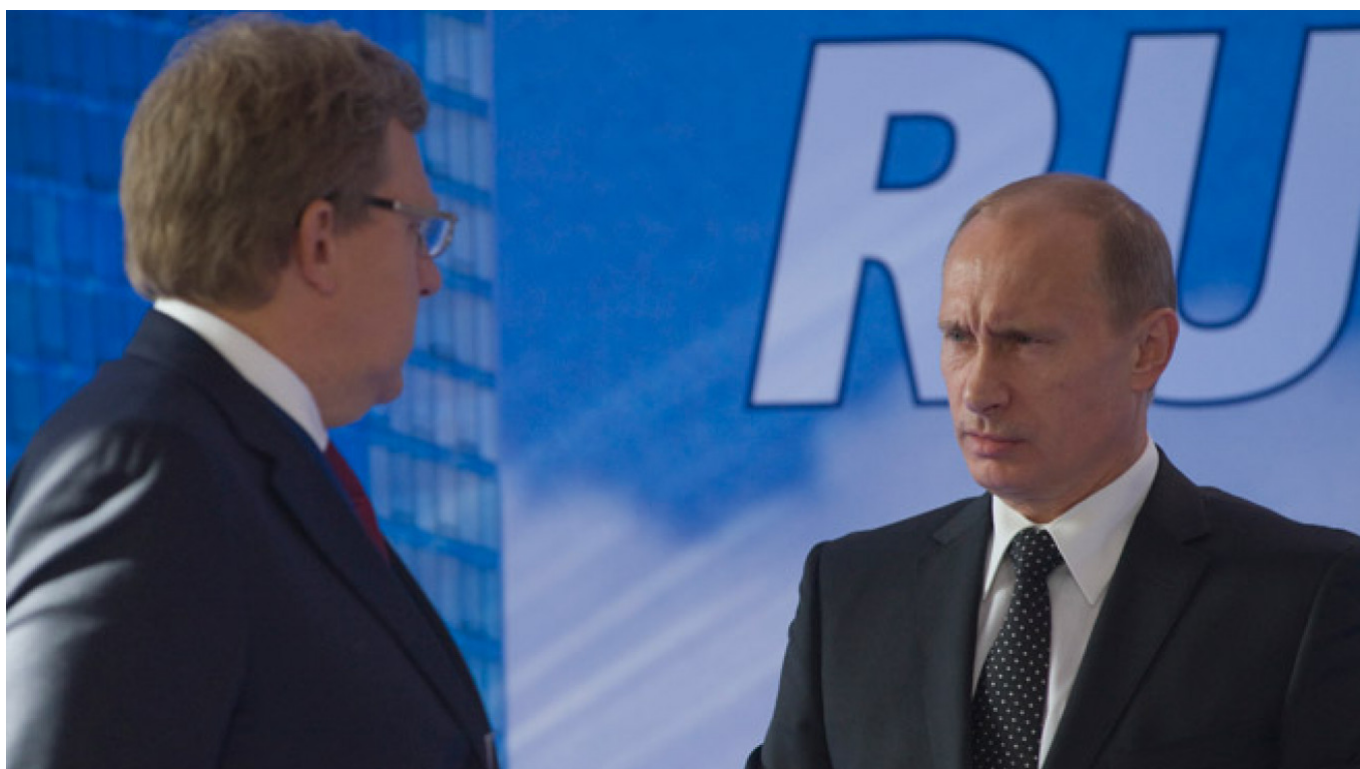


Putin Needs Kudrin's Help in Ukraine Crisis

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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As President Vladimir Putin contemplates the unraveling of his international stature over the Ukraine debacle and gropes around for a "no retreat, no surrender" exit, he may find his menu of choices reduced to two options: the disastrous and the cynical.

The disastrous would be to go "Andropov," purposefully escalating confrontation with the West all the way to nuclear brinkmanship. Standing strong against the West would cement his domestic support.

This would entail a doubling-down on Russia's aid to separatists in eastern Ukraine to prevent their military defeat. Given the successful Ukrainian offensive, Putin has days to decide whether to simply send in more combat gear or launch a full-scale "humanitarian intervention" to freeze the conflict.

Were the U.S. and NATO to provide military aid to Ukraine to stop the Russian advance, Moscow might abrogate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and forward-deploy

nuclear missiles. Western sanctions would then go full-throttle and essentially cut off Russia from Western markets. Defense spending would be ramped up to keep Russia's economy afloat until the country is unable to pay for even basic goods. To learn more about how this ends, call up Mikhail Gorbachev.

The cynical would be to go "Yeltsin," launching a complete government reshuffle and throwing under the bus the rightwing loonies who got him into this mess. Putin needs to avoid looking weak, while shifting the blame for a humiliating defeat onto his minions who misled him on political realities in Ukraine. He needs to partner with an authority figure untainted by the Ukraine imbroglio, someone who is able to credibly negotiate peace with Kiev and sanction relief from the West.

This sounds like former Finance Ministry Alexei Kudrin's moment to lead Russia's government. For Putin, this could be a political trifecta. He gets rid of the nuisance called Dmitry Medvedev and a bunch of other unpopular ministers. He rebuilds bridges with liberals and the business elite. He crushes the rightwing loonies who have become a drag on his rule. And he returns to business as usual with Western leaders, provided his new prime minister negotiates a final accommodation with Ukraine, including some form of strategic purchase of Crimea.

Putin's choice will ultimately determine his legacy and fate. Left to his own devices, he is prone to go "Andropov." Going "Yeltsin" is a safer bet.

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