

Russia Isn't Chasing After Empire in Ukraine

By [Dmitry Gorenburg](#)

September 23, 2014



While various commentators have described President Vladimir Putin as playing a chess game against the West, I would argue that he has actually been primarily reacting tactically to what he saw as a major defeat.

After all, in late February, in just a few days Ukraine went from having chosen alliance with Russia to a victory by anti-Russian forces and the prospect of a close alliance with the West, and the potential loss of Russia's naval base in Sevastopol.

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But throughout the Ukraine crisis, and especially in the aftermath of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, Putin has been portrayed as an evil leader bent on restoring the Soviet

empire. His motivation has frequently been framed as a sense of pique for the exclusion of Russian leaders from key decisions, such as on the Iraq War, on NATO's intervention in Kosovo, and on NATO enlargement.

And while Russian leaders certainly do have a sense of grievance over perceived slights by the West, these grievances are not sufficient to explain Russian foreign policy. Instead, Russian foreign policy is driven by the perception that Russian security can only be guaranteed if Russia is surrounded by friendly states and the fear that the United States is taking active measures to overthrow the current Russian government.

Russian leaders see the protests in Ukraine as part of a Western plot. For them, color revolutions are not manifestations of popular will but a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently minded national governments. They have argued that this is part of a global strategy to force foreign values on a range of nations around the world that refuse to accept U.S. hegemony, and that Russia was a particular target of this strategy.

This perspective, discussed extensively by top Russian officials at the Moscow Conference on International Security in May, appears to be at the core of Russia's new national security strategy. Although Western readers may find the lumping together of uprisings as disparate as those in Serbia in 2000, Syria in 2011 and Venezuela in 2014 hard to swallow, from the Russian point of view they all share the common thread of occurring in countries that had governments that were opposed to the United States.

Although uprisings in countries whose governments were tied more closely to the United States — such as Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Egypt and Bahrain in 2011 — are harder to explain, such inconsistencies appear to not trouble the Russian government.

In this environment, Russia's current policies in Ukraine have little to do with geopolitical calculations about Ukrainian economic ties with the EU versus the Eurasian Union or even with potential Ukrainian NATO membership. Instead, the main goal is to strengthen the Putin regime domestically by delegitimizing Ukraine's popular revolution, thus inoculating the Russian population against anti-regime attitudes.

This goal would explain the focus on building an anti-Ukrainian and anti-American domestic media narrative from an early stage in the Ukraine conflict. U.S. policymaking toward Russia, however, has been driven by a perception that Russian actions, as guided by Putin, are empire-focused and therefore cannot be dealt with through strategies other than containment. There is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) undercurrent that the crisis in U.S.-Russia relations will inevitably continue unless and until Putin is removed from his position as Russia's leader.

This inability of many Western commentators and some policymakers to see the world from the Russian point of view damages the ability of the U.S. government to adopt a Russia policy that allows for a reasonable response to Russian actions without defaulting to the outdated image of Russia as a direct descendant of the Soviet "evil empire."

In addition, Western analysts neglect the likelihood that if Putin is forced out of office, his replacement is unlikely to be a pro-Western politician. Instead, any successor is likely to be

at least as anti-Western as Putin is perceived to be. Given the strength of nationalist sentiment among the Russian population, any new leader is in fact likely to be more nationalistic and aggressive than the current incumbent.

The U.S. response instead should be to focus on a combination of reassuring steps to show that the United States is not planning to overthrow the Putin regime with the restatement of the core U.S. position that the citizens of each country deserve the right to determine their own government without external interference (from either Russia or the United States).

In practical terms, the U.S. government should encourage the Ukrainian government to pursue policies of reconciliation in the Donbass. While the conflict has been greatly exacerbated by Russian actions, it has an internal component that cannot be solved by military action alone.

In an ideal world, Russia and the United States would work together to encourage this reconciliation, though I doubt that peace in eastern Ukraine is a primary goal for Russia. Instead, it would prefer to keep eastern Ukraine unstable as an object lesson to its own population of the dangers of popular protest leading to the overthrow of even a relatively unpopular government.

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