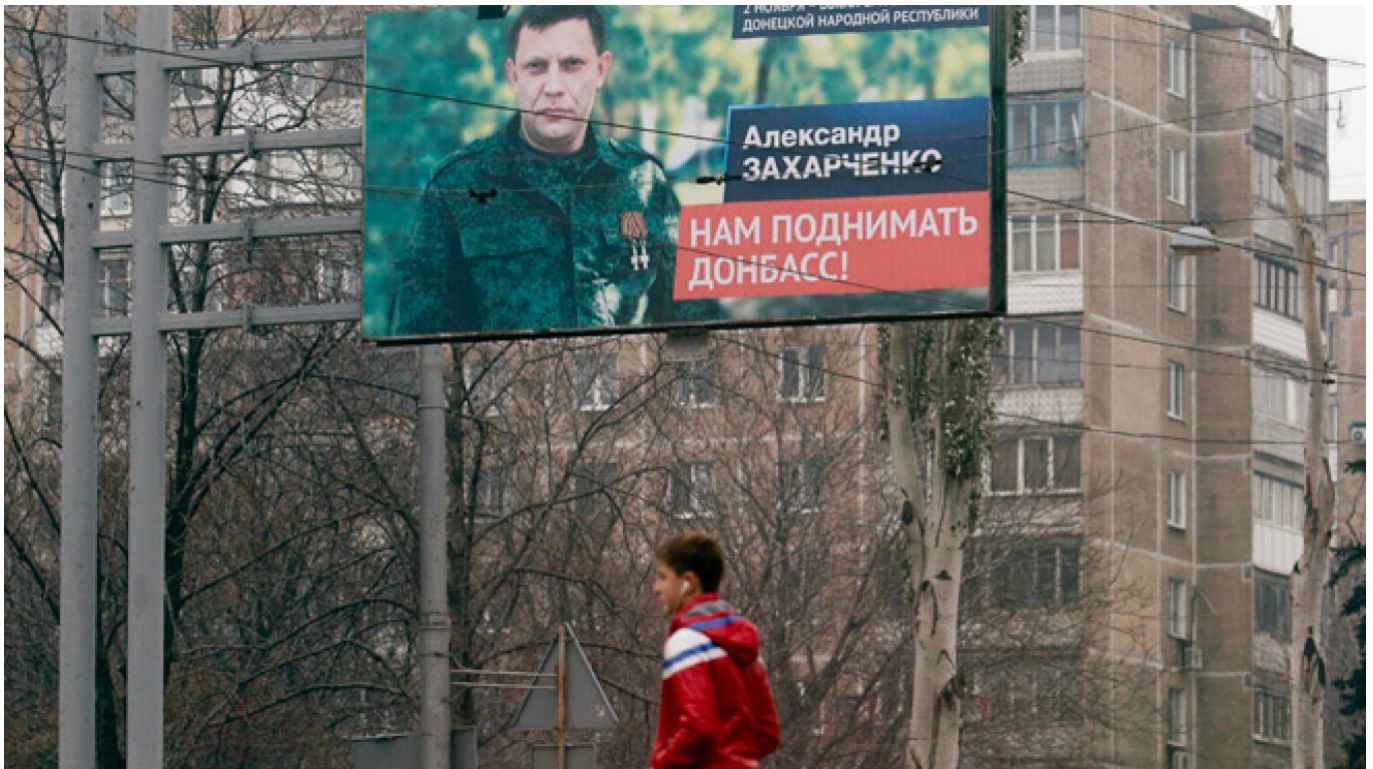


# Putin Will Regret Interfering in the Donbass

By [Stephen Holmes](#)

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Global temperatures are rising, but the former Soviet Union's frozen conflicts show no sign of a thaw. On the contrary, the ice is expanding.

Russia's support for the election held by separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk — key cities in Ukraine's Donbass region — indicates that the Kremlin has decided to create another semi-permanent "mini-Cold War," this time in rebel-controlled areas of Russia's most important neighboring country.

But freezing Ukraine's legitimate government out of the region is potentially far more destabilizing than the Kremlin's support for the other ex-Soviet breakaway territories: Moldova's self-proclaimed republic of Transdneestr and the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By blurring its border with Ukraine, Russia is creating a new relationship with an anomalous, internationally unrecognizable entity that belongs, culturally and historically, not to the

imaginary Novorossia proclaimed by the separatists, but to the "undead" Soviet Union. The question is why Russian President Vladimir Putin and his entourage view a frozen conflict in the Donbass, created to preclude a political settlement or lasting peace, as a positive outcome for their country.

Within their current borders, Donetsk and Luhansk are of negligible geo-strategic importance to Russia. Moreover, an independent Donbass would impose substantial costs on Russia, which would presumably be forced to rebuild and sustain an economy deprived of all other foreign investment.

Unlike Transdnestr or Abkhazia, the Donbass is heavily industrialized and dependent on subsidies; its infrastructure is devastated; and its businesses are largely owned by oligarchs who have fled to Kiev, London or Paris, rather than Moscow, to escape the conflict. Add to that the irregular legal status of these self-proclaimed "people's republics," which makes it impossible for the Donbass' industrial producers to trade with the world, and the region's economic — and social — prospects seem bleak.

Citizens of the other Russia-backed breakaway regions have long been subjugated by their squalid "feudal democratic" systems in which local leaders routinely stage sham elections and base their power on mafia-style corruption and patronage. After months of empty promises by separatist leaders, the citizens of Donetsk and Luhansk are unlikely to acquiesce quietly to the region's transformation into another internationally isolated pariah entity that benefits Russia-based criminal networks.

By establishing a frozen conflict in the Donbass, Russia has jammed a thorn into Ukraine's side and, in the short run, complicated relations between Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko and the country's prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk. But it has also guaranteed that, in the longer run, the Ukrainian state will be reconsolidated around anti-Russian sentiment and policies — meaning that Russia will be unable to normalize its relations with Ukraine for decades.

Furthermore, Putin's support for the Donbass separatists is the final nail in the coffin of his regional integration project, a Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Ironically, Russia's EEU ambitions are what fueled its forceful response to Ukraine's westward drift, with Putin recognizing that, without Ukraine, the bloc could not fulfill his vision as a viable rival to the European Union.

Yet Russia's flagrant and unapologetic violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity has not only poisoned relations with Kiev; it also implicitly threatens prospective EEU members, especially Kazakhstan, whose independent statehood Putin has openly questioned.

What is the geopolitical payoff for Russia in turning an unstable Donbass into an enduring fixture of its southwestern hinterland? Why would the Kremlin show "respect" for elections that virtually no other country will recognize?

The answer could be simply that the Kremlin has backed itself into a corner. Russia's state-owned media, together with domestic nationalists, have fomented a frenzied public atmosphere that deprives Russia's policy toward Ukraine of tactical flexibility. In lieu of a comprehensive strategy, the Kremlin is relying on ad hoc gestures to ensure that the Russian

public, on whose support it depends, does not view it as betraying the rebels in Ukraine.

For their part, Ukrainian rebel leaders, loath to lose their newly acquired fiefdoms, are lobbying fervently against any rapprochement between the Russian and Ukrainian governments.

At the same time, Putin presumably wants to show the West that its policies toward Russia, including tough economic sanctions, will not work. Creating more frozen conflicts, which the West abhors but is powerless to resolve, may seem like a useful way to achieve this.

In short, Russia's actions in the Donbass may be more symbolic and opportunistic than strategic. But that does not make them any less dangerous. Putin has now lost the initiative that he seized in Crimea by turning the bloody battle over Donbass into an unresolvable stalemate.

With oil prices tumbling, Putin may now feel compelled to make another desperate and destructive move, in the hope of convincing the world that he is still in control of the situation. Efforts to identify some grand strategic vision behind such spoiler tactics, however, will continue to prove futile.

Facing pressure from all sides, Putin is losing his geo-strategic footing. His foreign policy accomplishments over the last year should not be overestimated. By annexing Crimea, he lost Ukraine. And by "freezing" the Donbass, he has buried his quasi-imperial EEU dream once and for all.

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