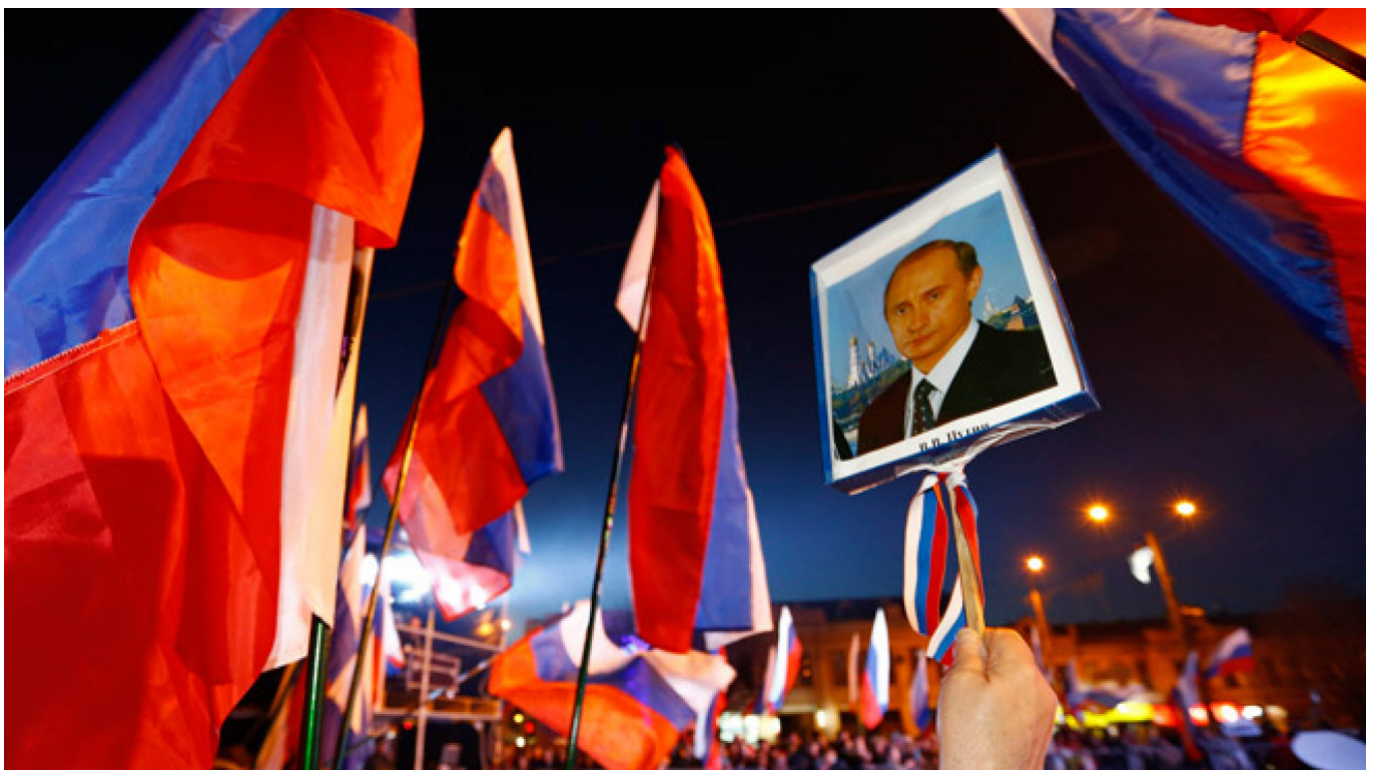


Russia Will Stick With Putin Till the Bitter End

By [Alexander Morozov for Riddle](#)

January 14, 2015



Russia's actions in 2014 were shocking both for their scale and abruptness. Tossing aside all concern for world rankings, economic considerations and the standards of international cooperation — all of that boring baggage of today's global system — the Kremlin set sail for uncharted waters. According to philosopher Mikhail Yampolsky, "Russia moved from the post-modern world to the modern" — that is, back to the first half of the 20th century.

In 2015, Russia is facing consequences that nobody in the Kremlin could have imagined in their worst nightmares just two years ago. Russia was evicted from the G8, its relations with Germany are mired in deep crisis, the United States and the European Union have imposed hard-hitting sanctions and many European firms have stopped supplying Russia with much-needed high-tech equipment.

Russia is losing its place as the world's eighth-largest economy, its credit rating will likely get downgraded to junk status in 2015 and in place of the attractive investment climate that

Russia has offered for over a decade, it has become an extremely vulnerable economy. The fall of oil prices and the plummeting value of the ruble have forced real monthly incomes down from an average of \$1,000 in June 2014 to \$600 or lower today — levels not seen for several years.

Putin's actions in 2014 have focused the world's attention on Russia. Now all things Russia — from its cash reserves, penetration into European economies and foreign policy activity — have shifted from the periphery to center stage. Now every armchair analyst is counting Russia's remaining cash reserves and predicting the date they will run out.

Even now, those reserves are dissipating faster than the Russian economy can diversify them. A hopeless situation is forming in which the Russian people are forced to bear the burden of recession.

Political historians in the future will be extremely interested to learn how Russia's leaders made the decision to annex Crimea. Apparently, they wagered on the breakdown of the Ukrainian state and the strategic opportunity to create the major new state of Novorossia. However, this plan failed, and now the Kremlin finds itself in a very difficult position. It is clearly enlisting all of its resources in diplomacy, foreign propaganda and pro-Russian business circles in Europe to create a movement for the official recognition of Crimea.

The Kremlin is prepared to pay the price for that. In fact, European politicians and businesspeople initially made many statements calling on the West to view Russia's actions as a manifestation of justified anxiety, fear, or even as the result of misguided Western policy during the post-Soviet period. However, Putin could have capitalized on that support if he had not annexed Crimea in February and had only destabilized the situation in Ukraine without violating that country's borders.

As a result, 2015 begins in an atmosphere of absolute deadlock and with no strategies for curbing the confrontational rhetoric. The consensus in Europe is that the Kremlin's escapade in Crimea has stripped Russia not only of its earlier recognized status of a regional power, but has made a moot point of Kremlin ambitions to become a leader in restructuring the political architecture of Europe and even the world.

However, foreign policy and economic losses are only half the picture. The most important event of the year has been the regressive transformation of Russian society. The Crimean adventure has driven Russians into a narrow corridor of "renewed loyalty" to the authorities — effectively forcing the Kremlin to renew its social contract with the Russian people.

The overriding focus on Ukraine in Russia's domestic policy has led to a rapid reconfiguration of the social order. Tens of millions of officials, state employees and businesspeople whose enterprises are tied to the state budget — and that previously held varying views concerning Russia's future — now find themselves inextricably bound to Crimea.

The same applies to historians, journalists, college professors and high school teachers. Fully 20,000 journalists employed by the state are now compelled to help the Kremlin fight its propaganda war with the outside world. The education system must not only assimilate the explanation for the conflict with Ukraine, but also the mythology surrounding Russia's

confrontation with the West.

Every Russian family has felt the effects of the Ukrainian crisis. Those who doubt the correctness of the Kremlin's actions must hold their tongues to avoid conflict with family, friends and colleagues.

But what exactly is that contract between the Kremlin and the people? In short, it contains three main points:

- Without Putin, there can be no Russia.
- Isolationism — the course that Putin will pursue until the end of his life or rule, one that places Russia among the enemies of the West.
- The country will not undertake any fundamental reforms on its own initiative.

The last point — the complete rejection of any progressive development — is the end result of Russia's 25 years of post-Soviet transition. It is obvious that the post-Crimea social contract will shift Russia from the status of a weak democracy to that of a regime controlled by a single man. Now, Russia's future depends on Putin alone — his moods, his personal health and his eventual departure or death.

Comments on social networks indicate that many thousands of people clearly understand that this new social contract contains a ticking time bomb. They know that Russia can end its current isolation and embark on the path of reform only as the result of a large-scale civil conflict, a major military defeat of Russia's armed forces or else a fundamental economic collapse. The "Ukrainization" of Russian politics has devoured this country's future.

Even if the warring parties reach a truce in eastern Ukraine, that will not change the state of Russian society. According to Russia's current rhetoric, the West is incapable of offering any response that would warrant restoring a dialogue with it. That leaves no option but for the West to go away, to disappear.

But before that, Moscow demands that the West repent for its centuries of anti-Russian policy — starting with the fall of Byzantium and ending with its alleged role in organizing the coup d'etat in Kiev. The Kremlin and Russia's new post-Crimean society will accept nothing less.

What's more, the new social contract contains no provision for ending the conflict with Kiev. That means Ukraine should simply disappear along with the West. In fact, Putin's rhetoric over the last six months clearly lacks even a single reasonable stance that the Kremlin could take with regard to the West.

The social contract is based on a dense layer of mythology that society is expected to not only perpetuate, but also believe. The very sweep of that mythology precludes any possibility of backtracking.

The extremity of the Kremlin's position shows that Russian leaders have literally "blown a fuse." Their ability to reflect upon their own words and deeds has given way to knee-jerk reactions that, in contrast to Putin's rule from 2003 to 2011, provide for no rational end to the

current escalation of tensions.

Now it is unclear what set of conditions would help Kremlin leaders restore their powers of rational thinking. More than any other, this is the worst result of 2014.

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