

Putin Wants Ukraine Intact, But On His Terms

By [Josh Cohen](#)

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As fighting in the Donbass once again explodes, Western governments and military analysts from Berlin to Brussels are asking the same question they have been pondering for the last year: What is President Vladimir Putin's end game in Ukraine?

There is little doubt that Russia has escalated its support for its separatists in the Donbass. After a period of quiet, observers are reporting masses of Russian battle tanks, armored vehicles and artillery in the region, while NATO intelligence states it has detected "the signatures of air defense systems and electronic warfare systems that have accompanied past Russian troop movements into Ukraine."

But while intelligence regarding Russian military movements in Ukraine is fairly clear — even if the exact number of Russian troops is unknown — none of this sheds any further light on what is going on in Putin's mind.

According to a number of media outlets, many Western intelligence analysts are coming to the

conclusion that Putin is no longer interested in a negotiated settlement that preserves a united Ukraine, but rather now seeks to create some version of "Novorossia" in the Donbass that could stretch as far as Odessa and perhaps even be incorporated into Russia proper.

The problem with this analysis is that it misreads what has been motivating Moscow's policies since the protests on Kiev's Maidan Square first broke out. As Carnegie Moscow Center director Dmitri Trenin has noted, Putin is not interested in the "dismemberment of Ukraine for the sake of annexing bits and pieces of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. It is not instability for the sake of instability."

Rather, Moscow's primary goal has been about ensuring that Ukraine does not become part of the Western alliance system, and in particular that NATO membership for Kiev — something that Russians across the political spectrum would consider an existential threat — be firmly ruled out.

To achieve his goal of preserving Russian influence in Ukraine and ensuring that Kiev cannot join NATO, Putin would accept a settlement that would keep Ukraine intact — albeit intact on his terms.

Indeed, a recent online article in the Ukrainian outlet ZN.UA notes that Putin has actually transmitted his vision of a settlement to Kiev through aides such as Vladislav Surkov and Viktor Medvedchuk that is based on the following:

- Federalization of Ukraine.
- Special status for the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics, involving the formation of local political authorities over which Kiev would have no authority.
- Autonomous local budgets.
- Full linguistic and cultural authority for the DPR and LPR.
- The DPR and LPR have the right to choose "the vector of economic integration," meaning essentially that they could join Russia's Eurasian Economic Union project.
- Ukraine should be a neutral state.
- All of these points should be enshrined in the Ukrainian Constitution.

From a tactical perspective, this "Putin Plan" explains why the latest separatist offensive is focused on Debaltseve rather than on Mariupol and the creation of a southern "land corridor to Crimea" that would create a new Novorossia.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, Russia's escalation is actually about forcing Kiev to reach an agreement with Moscow on Putin's terms, under which the Donbass remains as a Trojan horse within a nominally united Ukraine in order to ensure Russia's influence over Kiev's future orientation.

To understand why Putin prefers a settlement that keeps the Donbass within Ukraine, consider how events might develop should the Donbass be separated from Ukraine.

In this scenario, the rump Ukraine — a country of more than 35 million people — becomes much more unitary. The population becomes overwhelmingly Ukrainian-speaking and views Russia as an implacable enemy.

Politically, there would no longer be a natural constituency within Ukraine for balancing the country's Western ties with any ongoing economic or political relationship with Russia. Without any need to take the desires of its Russian-speaking eastern regions into account, Kiev would be free to pursue full membership in the EU and even NATO, which Putin would not prevent absent a full-scale invasion of the rest of Ukraine. On top of that, consider the economics.

Having separated the Donbass from Ukraine, Russia would almost certainly be subject to additional Western sanctions, likely even excluded from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (better known as SWIFT), something British Prime Minister David Cameron has advocated.

SWIFT is a secure messaging system used by thousands of international banks. If the Russian financial system is cut off from SWIFT, Russian banks would find it very difficult to move money around, which would further devastate Russia's economy.

Finally, with the Donbass no longer under Kiev's control, Russia would now be stuck with rebuilding the region and helping it to recover from a devastating war. The costs for this could easily be in the range of tens of billions of dollars. This is money the collapsing Russian economy simply cannot afford.

While fully detaching the Donbass from Ukraine might in some sense be emotionally satisfying for Moscow, how do any of the outcomes from this meet Putin's objectives of keeping Ukraine outside of the Western alliance system?

Now consider how the world might look from the Kremlin if the Donbass remains within a "federalized," neutral Ukraine. In this scenario, Ukraine stays out of NATO, and the Donbass essentially becomes a separate region within Ukraine.

Politically, achieving his strategic objectives in Ukraine would provide a huge political boost for Putin, who would now be able to depict himself to the Russian people as the leader who restored Russia to its proper status as a great power.

Putin would also hope that a peaceful settlement would induce the West to remove sanctions imposed on Russia. While minor sanctions related specifically to Crimea would remain, the most damaging of the sanctions — the so-called "Tier 3" or "sectoral sanctions" — would be removed.

Russia could also arguably relieve itself from responsibility — or at least some responsibility — for the billions of dollars it would take to rebuild the shattered Donbass.

These costs would most likely be shared between Moscow, Kiev and international donors such as the IMF. Furthermore, from Russia's perspective, if the Donbass remained de jure part of Ukraine, Kiev would retain responsibility for the region's pension and other social costs.

In sum, while the latest surge of Russian troops and equipment into the Donbass certainly

represents a change in Russia's strategy, from a tactical perspective Putin's ideal end game — a negotiated settlement with Kiev that protects Russia's interests in Ukraine — remains the same.

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