

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## *Russia, Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's Worldview*

Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea in Ukraine has upset the world order established after the fall of the Soviet Union. Its ramifications are still being analyzed, but it is at best unsettling, at worst destabilizing. Can we discern Putin's worldview? Can we figure out his motives and goals in Crimea? Several thoughts:

- First a few historical observations. In the modern period, Crimea has had a relationship with Russia that dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Russia gained control of Crimea when the Ottoman empire was collapsing, giving Russia a warm water port in the Black Sea, thereby giving it access to the Mediterranean Sea and the world's oceans. Crimea was also the center of the Crimean War of the 1850s, which, although Russia lost this war, it was able to maintain control of Sevastopol. Finally, in 1954, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made Crimea a part of Ukraine. Joseph Stalin, in one of his brutal acts as dictator of the USSR, forced the original inhabitants of Crimea, about 200,000 Tatars, out of the region and settled Ukrainians into Crimea to replace them. Khrushchev's actions apparently were to facilitate increased Ukrainian ownership of Crimea and thereby accelerate Ukrainian migration into Crimea. In 1991, Ukraine voted for independence from the Soviet Union, thereby sealing the collapse of the Soviet Union. About 90% of Ukrainians voted for independence, with even 54% of Russians in Ukraine supporting independence. So, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US and Europe began to incorporate the various satellites of the USSR into the European Union and NATO. The goal was an integrated and free Europe. For this reason, Putin's speeches of late betray themes of resentment, retaliation and plans to deal with what he perceives as the national humiliation of Russia. He appears determined to restore the glory of Russia and annexing Crimea, and perhaps all of Ukraine, could be a step toward that goal. Putin is no Adolf Hitler, but his speeches and actions resemble the same themes Hitler developed as he laid his plans for the rejuvenation of Germany after its humiliating defeat in World War I. Russia's economy remains basically a third world one, with its oil and natural gas reserves its only primary asset. This fact has permitted Putin to buy the support of Russia's elite and the acquiescence of the larger Russian population.
- Second, can we discern Putin's larger motives? Putin evidences a dependence on three 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosophers—Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Solovyov and Ivan Ilyin. According to columnist David Brooks, Putin was personally involved in getting Ilyin's remains re-buried on Russian soil. At that event, Putin said, "It's a crime when someone only begins talking about the separation of Russia and the Ukraine." Ilyin's writings are apparently most influential in framing Putin's worldview. Ilyin wrote that "We trust and are confident that the hour will come when Russia will rise from disintegration and humiliation and begin an epoch of new development and greatness."

He also wrote that “We know that Western nations don’t understand and don’t tolerate Russia’s identity. . . They are going to divide the united Russian ‘broom’ into twigs to break these twigs one by one.” Another Putin favorite is a utopian novel set in 2054 (*Third Empire: The Russia that Ought to Be*), in which a ruler named Vladimir II integrates eastern Ukraine into a new Russian Union. Brooks cites three specific ideas from all these writers that inform Putin’s worldview: (1) Russian exceptionalism: “the idea that Russia has its own unique spiritual status and purpose.” (2) Devotion to Orthodox Christianity. (3) A commitment to an autocratic form of government. Brooks concludes that “Mashed together, these philosophers point to a Russia that is a quasi-theocratic nationalist autocracy destined to play a culminating role on the world stage.” Further, Solovyov argued that the historic mission of Russia is to lead the way to human unification. Russia would transcend secularism and atheism and create a unified spiritual kingdom. “The Russian messianic conception,” wrote Berdyaev, “always exalted Russia as a country that would help to solve the problems of humanity.” Brooks concludes this summary with this astonishing observation: “All of this adds up to a highly charged and assertive messianic ideology. If Putin took it all literally, he’d be a Russian ayatollah. Up until now, he hasn’t taken it literally. His regime has used this nationalism to mobilize public opinion and to explain itself to itself. But it has tamped it down every time this nationalistic ideology threatens to upend the status quo. The danger is that Russia is now involved in a dispute in Ukraine that touches and activates the very core of this touchy messianism. The tiger of quasi-religious nationalism, which Putin has been riding, may now take control. . . The Russian nation may now be motivated by a deep, creedal ideology that has been wafting through the culture for centuries and has now found an unlikely, cynical and cold-eyed host.” With this worldview as a context, Ukraine’s attempt to embrace the West is a betrayal of Slavic brotherhood. Putin cannot therefore permit the “emergence of an alternative civilization on its territory.”

- Finally, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, an “understanding” emerged concerning the broad parameters of a new world order: The US would keep the sea lanes open, maintain respect for international borders and overall see that international law was observed. Putin is now destroying that. As *The Economist* editorially observes, “Mr. Putin’s new order, in short, is built on revanchism, a reckless disdain for the truth and the twisting of the law to mean whatever suits those in power. That makes it no order at all.” Putin is in effect challenging the creation of a Europe that is whole, free and at peace, and one which encouraged the expansion of NATO and the European Union to include the former Soviet satellites. But as Robert Kaplan has argued, Putin “will use every geographical and linguistic advantage to weaken Ukraine as a state. Ukraine is simply located too far east, and is too spatially exposed to Russia, for it ever to be in the interests of any government in Moscow—democratic or not—to allow Ukraine’s complete alignment with the West.” The United States under President Obama has attempted to draw Russia closer to the West. Obama tried to “reset” US-Russian relations. He supported Russian membership in the World Trade Association in 2012 and other efforts to integrate Russia into the international community. But, Putin has evidenced little respect for Obama and has mocked his attempts at friendship. In this context, NATO becomes much more important in dealing with Putin. This Atlantic alliance will now need to ensure that Article 5—its commitment to collective defense—is firm and strong.

Putin's actions could bring the genuine threat of military conflict on the European continent once again. Despite the globalization of the international economy and the phenomenal technological advance that has minimized international borders, Putin and Ukraine demonstrate a rather fundamental axiom of the human condition: "Territory and the bonds of blood that go with it are [still] central to what makes us human" [Robert Kaplan]. Kaplan goes on to make an important observation: "what we're witnessing now is geography's revenge: in the East-West struggle for control of the buffer state of Ukraine, in the post-Arab Spring fracturing of artificial Middle Eastern states into ethnic and sectarian fiefs and in the unprecedented arms race being undertaken by East Asian states as they dispute potentially resource-rich waters. Technology hasn't negated geography. . . Putin's actions betray a singular truth, one that the US should remember as it looks outward and around the globe: international relations are still about who can do what to whom." How the West, and especially President Obama, respond to Putin will profoundly shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century. May God give them much wisdom.

See Robert D. Kaplan, "Old World Order" in *Time* (21 March 2104), pp. 30-35; *The Economist* (15 March 2014), p. 49, (22 March 2014), p. 13, (8 March 2014), pp. 22-24; David Brooks in the *New York Times* (4 March 2014); Fareed Zakaria in *Time* (17 March 2014), p. 20; Steven Erlanger in the *New York Times* (19 March 2014); and Serhi Plokhy in the *Wall Street Journal* (15-16 March 2014).