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ARTICLE

The Ukraine crisis brings the threat of democracy to Russia's doorstep

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Abstract Russia has five fears about the events in Ukraine: foreign policy choice, security and sovereignty, the challenge to the entire post-Soviet order or the *sistema* (the corrupt and authoritarian economic and political system established in Ukraine and Russia since 1991), the growth of Ukrainian nationalism and the need to consolidate Putin's domestic rule. Of these, the fourth, which is Putin's stated reason for intervention in Crimea, is least important. The survival of his *sistema* is what is really at stake.

Keywords Ukraine crisis · Security · Buffer states · Maidan · *Sistema*

Introduction

Russia's reaction to events in Ukraine has very little to do with the threat of new Ukrainian nationalism, or the 'fascism' of Russian propaganda. It is based on fear of a threat to the *sistema*, the post-Soviet order in Russia and Ukraine, stabilised in the 2000s.

Russia's fears

During the crisis in Ukraine, Russia has acted like an endangered organism unleashing antibodies to kill a deadly virus. Rightly or wrongly, Putin seems to have detected some mortal threat to the system he has built in Russia since first

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assuming the presidency in 2000. In fact, there are at least five such fears: they all overlap and reinforce one another, so it is an open question as to which threat Russia fears the most—but the answer has little to do with Putin's public rhetoric.

The first fear is the choice of foreign policy direction for the six states of the Eastern Partnership. Putin is, in effect, trying to assert that they have no choice, but must ally with Russia.

The second fear concerns security and geopolitics. Russia under Putin, as has often been observed (Krastev 2014), thinks of foreign policy in traditional nineteenth-century terms. Hard power is better than soft power; even though Russia has supposedly invested in soft power in recent years, Russia's version of 'soft power' often looks more like hard power, or is undermined by the simultaneous use of hard power. 'Soft power' is when Russia cuts gas prices; 'hard power' is when they go back up.

Putin's Russia thinks it can expand its own security by reducing the security of its neighbours. As Putin's ideologue Vladislav Surkov has written, sovereignty or *samostoiatelnost'* ('self-reliance') depends on *konkuretnosposobnost'* ('strength' or the 'ability to compete'). According to Surkov (2007), strong states dominate the weak, because that is just what they do. Putin's assertion that states like Ukraine must ally with Russia because of history and culture is therefore also a mask for the underlying belief that they are small and 'uncompetitive', and so do not actually deserve sovereign foreign policy choice. Commentators, including Boris Mezhuev (2014), have openly called for the 'buffer states' between Russia and the West to join one side or another or be split up.

The danger with this doctrine is not just that it is old-fashioned, but that it is wrong. A ring of weak states subordinated to Russia will have enhanced security concerns of their own, and will attempt to suck in rival powers for their defence. A ring of mini-states, such as Transnistria, Abkhazia and now Crimea, will be even more unstable. Russia has not learned the lesson of 2008. It thought that the war in Georgia would enhance its power by cowing neighbouring states, both friend and foe alike. Instead, it did the opposite, multiplying the fear of Russian power. The long-term consequences of that misunderstanding are playing out today.

The third Russian fear is not just fear of the potential revival of democracy in Ukraine and elsewhere, but the desire of the demonstrators on the Kyiv Maidan to use this political opening to overhaul the entire political and economic system that has governed both Ukraine and Russia since 1991. Putin fears that the Ukrainians' overhaul of the *sistema* will spill over into Russia. In the vague but nevertheless accurate words of the deputy leader of Right Sector, Andrii Tarasenko, the aim of the Maidan protestors is to 'transform the relationship between people and power' (Harding 2014). In the precise but actually hard-to-translate Russian term, that system of power is the *sistema*, a self-sustaining post-Soviet leviathan.

The growth of anti-Russian nationalism only comes fourth in importance—both for Russia and on the ground in Ukraine. Although it is the one factor constantly mentioned by Russia in its caricature of what is happening in Ukraine, and the closest Russia has to anything remotely resembling a *casus belli*, the new Ukrainian nationalism movement is a way of expressing the desire to change the *sistema*, not

an extra factor in itself. A Ukrainian nationalism movement that supported the *sistema* (because of the threat of war with Russia) would quickly deflate.

Russia seeks security, but not security in the traditional sense, either for the Russian state or for Russian 'compatriots' abroad. It wants security for the *sistema*—it wants the political and economic system first built under Yeltsin and then perfected under Putin to survive as the dominant modus operandi for public life in the former USSR. And it does not want the challenge to this that has occurred in Ukraine spreading to other states, such as Moldova, Georgia or Armenia.

Finally, Putin has relied on the 'conservative values project' to sustain himself in power since the 2012 election. This still matters, as it has proven traction. But now Putin also has the type of traditional internal or foreign enemy beloved of Russian political technologists in the 2000s. In the 1999–2000 election cycle it was the Chechens, in 2003–4 the oligarchs, in 2007–8 the West. Now it is a mythical Ukraine, full of fascists and disorder, backed, once again, by Russia's enemies in the West.

The Maidan versus the *sistema*

Thus it is not democratisation per se that is feared by the Kremlin, but democracy as a tool for undermining or even overthrowing the *sistema*. Scholars such as Alena Ledeneva (2013) have defined the *sistema* as the rules of the game for the inner circle, who have been made wealthy by exploiting rents and corruption and who are protected by the techniques of post-Soviet non-democracy. These techniques include the use of an arbitrary legal system to reward friends in the inner circle and to repel potential challengers from outside that circle; the use of political technology (the post-Soviet black art for manipulating the political process) to corrupt parties, politicians and the political process; and the abuse of 'administrative resources' just to make sure that façade elections are won (Wilson 2005).

In Russia all mainstream politicians are co-opted by the Kremlin to varying degrees. Ukraine has tried to do the same. After Viktor Yanukovych won the presidential election in 2010, his party, the Party of Regions, fixed the rules in the 2012 parliamentary elections to ensure a majority. Nevertheless, three 'opposition' parties made it into parliament: Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party; the new Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR, which also means 'punch'), led by the boxer Vitali Klitschko; and the far-right Freedom Party. One notable feature of the Ukrainian crisis has been the mutual distrust between the new forces on the Maidan and these 'official' opposition parties, widely regarded by Maidan protestors as also part of the *sistema*. The Fatherland Party is still dominated by politicians who failed in government in 2005–10. All three official opposition parties have taken money from Ukraine's notorious 'oligarchs'—money given to make sure they operate within the rules of the *sistema*. The Freedom Party is distrusted for its past role as a political technology 'scarecrow' party, ever-present in the Party of Regions' and oligarchs' media to frighten

voters into supporting Yanukovych. It has also been criticised for exploiting the demonstrations to further its own image (Shekhovtsov 2014).

The groups that led the Maidan protests, on the other hand—groups such as Self-Defence, Common Cause, AutoMaidan and Right Sector—organised themselves and often resented the appearances of mainstream politicians. They also accused those politicians of inaction, resulting in the whole movement drifting towards apparent defeat in early January, and of acting as an 'internal police force' on the Maidan; 'they stop us from doing anything other than standing on the square'.[1] The Freedom Party was even worse, as it was accused of only 'using violence against other protestors'.[2] However, the fact that 18 of its members were eventually killed has rekindled the Freedom Party's prestige to some extent (Harding 2014).

The political purism of the Maidan leaders has been reinforced by the murder of over a hundred of their number in Kyiv, who have already entered into martyrdom as the *Nebesna Sotnia* ('Heavenly Hundred'). The new government in Kyiv therefore had to create an alliance between the mainstream opposition parties (though UDAR declined to take part) and the Maidan leaders. The latter may turn into mainstream politicians in time. They may prove to be incompetent neophytes in government. But their critique of the last round of demonstrations on the Maidan and Ukraine's previous attempt at an 'Orange Revolution' was sound. The politicians who took power after the protests in 2004 were part of the *sistema* or were not radical enough in challenging the *sistema*, which swallowed them up and spat them out.

This radical challenge to the post-Soviet system is totally unlike Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004, and totally unlike the Russian protests in 2011–12, when the demonstrations led by Russia's capital city intelligentsia were unable to go beyond mere slogans. It was notable that the demonstrators in Moscow and St Petersburg in February were harshly treated for using Ukrainian slogans.

Propaganda overdrive

So one reason why Putin reacted with such speed was to head off any potential unrest at home, potentially fuelled by Russians copying Ukrainian tactics. It is also why the Russian media have been whipped up into such a propaganda frenzy—it is primarily designed for domestic consumption. The claim that the key Maidan actors are all fascists and the invasion of Crimea are clearly designed to divert attention from a faltering economy and growing corruption in the energy sector. For Russian nationalists and even some liberals, Putin can be forgiven everything in return for the 'ingathering' of Russian lands (Prokhanov 2014).

The Kremlin cannot really be so concerned about the threat of the new Ukrainian nationalists in the Right Sector and elsewhere, because they are not really a threat, certainly not to Russians or Russian-speakers in Crimea. In fact,

[1] Author's interview with Oleksandr Danyliuk, leader of Common Cause, 13 February 2014.

[2] Interview with Oleksandr Danyliuk; see footnote 1.

one reason why pro-Russian politicians took over the Crimean government at gunpoint was to forestall the arrival of a new moderate government in Crimea, potentially made up of Crimean Tatars, some local Ukrainians and local elites tired of the misrule of Yanukovych's outsider clique since 2010.

The propaganda campaign is therefore a smokescreen to achieve Russia's other aims of domestic consolidation and undermining the sovereignty of neighbouring 'buffer' states.

A Ukrainian Bosnia or a Russian Crimea?

Russia's next aim is probably broader—some sort of radically federalised Ukraine in which the Russia-friendly parts are loyal foreign-policy allies and where the *sistema* is able to survive and Russia is able to continue to do business as usual. So Russia will likely try to co-opt and convince the leaders of the still-extant Ukrainian *sistema*, such as leading east-Ukrainian oligarch Renat Akhmetov, that this is the best way to protect their interests too.

But a Ukrainian version of Bosnia and Herzegovina—a loose confederation of three parts, with only the most minimal of central government—will, of course, be deeply unstable. Even a Russian Crimea will hardly be a security gain. Russia seems to have woken up late to the problem of the Crimean Tatars, some 13 % of the Crimean population. The Crimean Soviet, which is full of virulent opponents of the Crimean Tatars, had its arm twisted on 11 March to promise concessions for the Crimean Tatar language, a quota of government posts and special status for the would-be Crimean Tatar parliament, the Qurultay. Russia's Kazan Tatars were enlisted to try to placate their brethren's fears.

But the Qurultay is an elected body. Its leaders quite rightly fear that they will be repressed and replaced by the *sistema*—by the heretofore marginal Russophile Crimean Tatar groups known locally as the *Kazany* (for always saying life is better in Russia for the Tatars who live in Kazan). A rebellion by, or repression of, the Sunni Crimean Tatars, will have massive consequences for Russia's own Muslim population, the vast majority of whom are also Sunni. And Russia will have problems in the Crimean area as it tries to stabilise the front line—all of Crimea's transport, gas and water comes through the northern isthmus.

Conclusion

Whatever happens, Russia cannot succeed in addressing all five of its fears at once. If Crimea is secured and/or Russia is tempted further north, the government in Kyiv will make ever-more radical appeals to the West. If the government in Kyiv fails or falls, this will likely spawn even more bitterly resentful Ukrainian nationalism, and security chaos. If the government stabilises, it may have some initial successes in dismantling the *sistema*, pushing forward with lustration and high-level corruption trials. If national Ukrainian elections are held in May, and Crimea's 1.5 million voters do not participate, the balance will shift

to the politicians and parties of central and western Ukraine. If, on the other hand, the Ukrainian government reverts to the bad habits of the *sistema*, the Maidan representatives will walk out of office and create an even more radical opposition. The same will happen if Russia succeeds in pressurising the new government to revert to some version of the 21 February agreement (which collapsed when Yanukovych fled) and form a coalition government with leading members of the ancient regime, that is, the Yanukovych *sistema*.

Russia has stumbled into a situation where it cannot possibly get everything that it wants. But the contradictions may also undermine the new government in Kyiv. The Ukraine crisis looks set to rumble on. And Putin has artificially inflamed both Russia's appetite and threat perception by defining such a broad agenda.

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