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## Putin and/or Russia: What Are We Dealing With?



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The cruel editors at AP Insights lay down the law for articles on the Ukraine crisis: *we must be clear that responsibility for this calamity lies with Vladimir Putin, not with 'Russia'*.

Agreed. It does. But Vladimir Putin and Vladimir Putinism look to fit comfortably within a very long tradition of despotism emanating from Moscow. So what in fact are we dealing with? The crazed but largely improvised thrashings of a tiny powerful Kremlin cabal? Or a much broader and deeper set of Russian policy instincts of which Putin/Putinism are just the latest manifestation? Both?

Stalin scholar Professor Stephen Kotkin looked at this issue in *Foreign Affairs* in 2016, and reminded us of some history (my emphasis):

Beginning with the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, Russia managed to expand at *an average rate of 50 square miles per day for hundreds of years*, eventually covering one-sixth of the earth's landmass ...

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow lost some two million square miles of sovereign territory - more than the equivalent of the entire European Union (1.7 million square miles) or India (1.3 million) ... Russia is still the largest country in the world, but it is much smaller than it was ...

So when [Vladimir Putin says that he just wants to keep 'what's ours'](#) he draws on almost inexhaustible historic precedents of Russian forces conquering territory in claiming a legitimacy for his actions that most Russians will understand, even if they may disagree with his methods.

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The UK's *Guardian* newspaper on 10 March carried an opinion piece that argued that '[R]upture is not an option: after this war, the west must learn how to live with Russia'. An oddly defeatist way to put it. Perhaps Russia must learn how to live with us? This way of presenting the argument echoes other British commentators and even Ministers who have been bemoaning our own

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'complacency' or 'naivety' in (it's said) assuming that following the end of the Cold War our relations with Russia had settled down into more or less normal cynical pragmatism.

Policy is all about balancing different sorts of risks. Looking at it all in a very broad sense, we see that for three decades our policies for post-Cold War Europe have worked really well for Europe and for Russia itself. Western Europe has stepped up its dependency on Russian energy supplies. The Russian government has stepped up its dependence on western money and technology. Not only is everyone getting far better off. Everyone has a growing interest in maintaining the stability that makes this possible.

Take Aeroflot. It has one of the youngest fleets in global aviation, full of Airbus and Boeing aircraft. Its operations depend on countless international contracts, insurance policies and certifications within intricate technical networks of operational cooperation. A few weeks ago both western governments and the Kremlin's smart economists would have found plenty of common ground. Why do anything drastic that might put at risk all that sophisticated yet delicate win-win strategic collaboration? Yet here we are now, with a barrage of sanctions effectively grounding Aeroflot for the foreseeable future.

Similar considerations apply to other key sectors of the Russian economy such as banking/finance and the energy technology sector itself. By attacking Ukraine in such an explicitly primitive way, Vladimir Putin has done startling damage to his own country's long-term well-being.

What is to be done?

Whatever we do, we need to be honest with ourselves about what we think we're dealing with.

Do we treat Russia's supposed 'fear of encirclement' as a brute fact of global diplomatic psychology life over which we (and Russian leaders) have no real control?

Or is it a reasonable human fear that requires patient therapy? What if it's a basically unreasonable if not paranoid fear that requires much sterner measures?

Western policy towards Russia in general and towards Vladimir Putin in particular zig-zags between contradictory positions.

One mainstream argument has it that for obvious reasons of history, geography, empire, Tsars, communism and climate, Russian leaders have no choice but to behave as opportunistic expansionist imperialists even when this looks to be ruinously expensive for them. So proceed warily. Keep the bear calm at all costs in his own space, even if he eats some of your neighbour's rabbits now and again.

Against that are those who insist that Russian leaders of course make their own policy choices, but that these decisions are made in a cultural tradition that sees western respect for pragmatic limits as a form of weakness. What we do is set a robust context in which they grasp that bad decisions have bad consequences. Eventually as all sides get used to modern networked cooperation, Russian leaders will come to see that they can exert power in new ways. And that they have no more reason to fear 'encirclement' by democratic NATO states than (say) Switzerland does.

Ukraine brings these tensions to a head. It's not that long ago that French and other EU diplomats were insisting that Ukraine was not a 'European country' and so by definition could never aspire to EU membership. Leave it within Russia's 'sphere of interest'.

That useless position has collapsed as EU prosperity has spread to the east. The Ukrainian population have started to see western Europe as a notably more attractive prospect than Putin's Russia. Vladimir Putin and his top Kremlin ideologists genuinely seem to believe that Russia could lose Ukraine to a rival and essentially hostile value-system. Hence their reckless lunge to try to keep Ukraine under 'Holy Russia'.

If one thing is already clear from this conflict, it is that Putin has done a stunning job in making millions of Ukrainians turn their backs on both Moscow and Putinism and want to fight to the end against that imperialist option. Western governments in turn no longer have the luxury of pondering what's at stake.

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