What the Kremlin Is Thinking: Putin's Vision for Eurasia

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Abstract: Although Washington and its friends in Europe never considered Moscow a true ally, they assumed that Russia shared their basic domestic and foreign policy goals and would gradually come to embrace Western-style democracy at home and liberal norms abroad. Now the US and European officials need a new paradigm for how to think about Russian foreign policy -- and if they want to resolve the Ukraine crisis and prevent similar ones from occurring in the future, they need to get better at putting themselves in Moscow's shoes. With economic cooperation a success, political elites in the countries of the customs union are now discussing the formation of a Eurasian political union. Although the old ideas advanced by today's Eurasianists may seem somewhat artificial, the plan to establish a Eurasian union should not be considered so far-fetched. The culture and values of many former Soviet republics really do differ from what prevails in the West.

Full text: Soon after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Western leaders began to think of Russia as a partner. Although Washington and its friends in Europe never considered Moscow a true ally, they assumed that Russia shared their basic domestic and foreign policy goals and would gradually come to embrace Western-style democracy at home and liberal norms abroad. That road would be bumpy, of course. But Washington and Brussels attributed Moscow's distinctive politics to Russia's national peculiarities and lack of experience with democracy. And they blamed the disagreements that arose over the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Iran on the short time Russia had spent under Western influence. This line of reasoning characterized what could be termed the West's post-Soviet consensus view of Russia.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has finally put an end to this fantasy. In annexing Crimea, Moscow decisively rejected the West's rules and in the process shattered many flawed Western assumptions about its motivations. Now U.S. and European officials need a new paradigm for how to think about Russian foreign policy-and if they want to resolve the Ukraine crisis and prevent similar ones from occurring in the future, they need to get better at putting themselves in Moscow's shoes.

From Russia's perspective, the seeds of the Ukraine crisis were planted in the Cold War's immediate aftermath. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the West essentially had two options: either make a serious attempt to assimilate Russia into the Western system or wrest away piece after piece of its former sphere of influence. Advocates of the first approach, including the U.S. diplomat George Kennan and Russian liberals, warned that an anti-Russian course would only provoke hostility from Moscow while accomplishing little, winning over a few small states that would end up siding with the West anyway.

But such admonitions went unheeded, and U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush chose the second path. Forgetting the promises made by Western leaders to Mikhail Gorbachev after the unification of Germany-most notably that they would not expand nato eastward-the United States and its allies set out to achieve what Soviet resistance had prevented during the Cold War. They trumpeted NATO's expansion, adding 12 new members, including former parts of the Soviet Union, while trying to convince Russia that the foreign forces newly stationed near its borders, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, would not threaten its security. The EU, meanwhile, expanded as well, adding 16 new members of its own during the same period. Russian leaders were caught off-guard; they had expected that both sides would increase cooperation, remain responsive to each other's interests, and make mutually acceptable compromises. The Russians felt that they
had done their part: although never entirely abandoning the idea of national interests, Russia had shown that it was willing to make sacrifices in order to join the prevailing Western-led order. Yet despite an abundance of encouraging words, the West never reciprocated. Instead, Western leaders maintained the zero-sum mindset left over from the Cold War, which they thought they'd won.

It remains hard to say whether a different approach to the post-Soviet states would have produced a better result for the West. What is obvious is that the course Clinton and Bush took empowered those Russians who wanted Moscow to reject the Western system and instead become an independent, competing center of power in the new multipolar world.

Today, the West's continued advance is tearing apart the countries on Russia's borders. It has already led to territorial splits in Moldova and Georgia, and Ukraine is now splintering before our very eyes. Divisive cultural boundaries cut through the hearts of these countries, such that their leaders can maintain unity only by accommodating the interests of both those citizens attracted to Europe and those wanting to maintain their traditional ties to Russia. The West's lopsided support for pro-Western nationalists in the former Soviet republics has encouraged these states to oppress their Russian-speaking populations—a problem to which Russia could not remain indifferent. Even now, more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than six percent of the population in Estonia and more than 12 percent of the population in Latvia, most of them ethnic Russians, do not have the full rights and privileges of citizenship. They cannot vote in national elections, enroll in Russian schools, or, for the most part, access Russian media. The EU, despite its emphasis on human rights outside its borders, has turned a blind eye to this clear violation of basic rights within them. So when it came to Ukraine and the threat of NATO forces appearing in Crimea—a region for which Russia has special feelings and where most residents consider themselves Russian-Moscow decided that there was nowhere left for such minorities to retreat. Russia annexed Crimea in response to the aspirations of a majority of its residents and to NATO's obvious attempt to push Russia's navy out of the Black Sea.

Western leaders were taken aback by Moscow's swift reaction. In late March, General Philip Breedlove, NATO's supreme allied commander for Europe, said with surprise that Russia was acting "much more like an adversary than a partner." But given that NATO has acted that way since its founding—and never changed its approach after the Cold War—Moscow's actions should have been expected. It was only a matter of time before Russia finally reacted to Western encirclement.

In this context, the government of Vladimir Putin has interpreted Western protests about the situation in Ukraine as nothing more than a case of extreme hypocrisy. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the Kremlin could think otherwise. Consider the EU's recent criticism of right-wing groups in Ukraine. In March, the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, condemned Right Sector, a militant nationalist group, for attempting to seize the parliament building in Kiev. But the EU had effectively supported Right Sector when it took to the streets to depose the government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych only months earlier. None of this is surprising, of course; Western leaders have never had any difficulty justifying the actions of such extremist groups when convenient, as when it assisted Croatians fighting in the self-proclaimed republic of Serbian Krajina in 1995 or nationalists in Kosovo in 1997-98.

Western hypocrisy doesn't end there. Washington has regularly chastised Russia for violating the sanctity of Ukraine's borders. Yet the United States and its allies have no leg to stand on when it comes to the principle of territorial integrity. After all, it was not Russia but the West that, in 2010, supported the ruling by the International Court of Justice that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 did not violate international law. And Moscow repeatedly warned that the precedents set by Western military interventions in such places as Kosovo, Serbia, Iraq, and Libya would undermine the existing system of international law—including the principle of sovereignty as enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Accords, in which the West formally acknowledged the national boundaries of the Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and the Warsaw Pact states.
In spite of such Western double standards, Moscow has offered up a number of proposals for resolving the Ukraine crisis: the creation of a coalition government that takes into account the interests of the eastern and southern regions, the federalization of the country, the granting of official status to the Russian language, and so on. But Western ideologues seem unlikely to ever accept such proposals. Working with Russia, instead of against it, would mean admitting that someone outside the West is capable of determining what is good and what is bad for other societies.

COLLISION COURSE
Given the growing distance between Russia and the United States and Europe, it was only a matter of time before their two approaches collided in Ukraine, a border state that has long vacillated between the pull of the East and that of the West. The struggle initially played out between opposing Ukrainian political factions: one that advocated signing an association agreement with the EU and another that favored joining the customs union formed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Western leaders have consistently viewed such Russian-led efforts at regional integration as hostile moves aimed at resurrecting the Soviet Union and creating an alternative to the Western system. Most officials in the United States and Europe thought that bringing Ukraine into alignment with the EU would deliver a heavy blow to those plans, which explains why they interpreted Yanukovych’s decision to temporarily postpone the signing of the EU agreement as a Russian victory that called for a counterattack.

Yet Western leaders are woefully misinformed about the idea of Eurasian integration. Neither Russia nor any of the states seeking to join a Eurasian system wants to restore the Soviet Union or openly confront the West. They do, however, believe that in a multipolar world, free nations have a right to create independent associations among themselves. In fact, the ruling elites of many former Soviet republics have long favored the idea of maintaining or re-creating some form of association among their states. In 1991, for example, they created the Commonwealth of Independent States. And of the 15 former Soviet republics, only a few of them, primarily the Baltic states, have used the collapse of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to permanently abandon all ties to the former union and join Western economic and political unions instead. The remaining countries struggled to arrive at a consensus on precisely what role the CIS should play.

In some former Soviet republics, leaders have actively sought to create new forms of integration, such as the Eurasian Economic Community, whose members include Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan (Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 2008). In others, such as Georgia, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine, the ruling elites considered the Commonwealth the primary means for obtaining a civilized divorce from Russia and dividing up the ownership rights and authorities that were previously held by a single, unified state. In most of these countries, at least part of the official establishment and a significant segment of the general population wanted to maintain close relations with Russia and the other former Soviet states. In Georgia and Moldova, for instance, various ethnic minorities feared increasingly assertive nationalist majorities and hoped that Russia would help protect their rights. In other states, including Belarus and Ukraine, significant parts of the populations had such close economic, cultural, and even familial bonds with Russia that they could not imagine a sharp break.

Yet economic problems have long stood in the way of real integration. Although Putin came to power convinced that the collapse of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century, he waited a decade until Russia had gained sufficient economic and political strength to do anything about it. It wasn’t until 2010 that Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia launched a customs union, the first real step toward meaningful economic cooperation among post-Soviet states. The union created a territory free from duties and other economic restrictions, and its members now apply common tariffs and other common regulatory measures in their trade with outside countries. Negotiations are currently under way to add Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to the union.

In addition to providing economic benefits, Eurasian integration has fostered security cooperation. Like NATO, the
Collective Security Treaty Organization—which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan—requires signatories to help assist any member that comes under attack. Many Eurasian countries put a special value on the CSTO; their leaders know that despite assurances from many other countries and organizations, in the event of a real threat from religious extremists or terrorists, only Russia and its allies will come to the rescue.

UNDER GOD, INDIVISIBLE

With economic cooperation a success, political elites in the countries of the customs union are now discussing the formation of a Eurasian political union. As Putin wrote in the Russian newspaper Izvestiya in 2011, Moscow wants the new union to partner with, not rival, the EU and other regional organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the North American Free Trade Agreement. That would help the member states "establish [themselves] within the global economy," Putin wrote, and "play a real role in decision-making, setting the rules and shaping the future." For such a union to be effective, however, it will need to evolve naturally and voluntarily. Moreover, taking post-Soviet integration to a new level raises the question of what deeper values would lie at its foundation. If the countries of Europe united to champion the values of democracy, human rights, and economic cooperation, then a Eurasian union must stand for its own ideals, too. Some political thinkers have found the ideological foundation for such a union by looking to history. The concept of a Eurasian space or identity first arose among Russian philosophers and historians who immigrated from communist Russia to western Europe in the 1920s. Like Russian Slavophiles before them, advocates of Eurasianism spoke of the special nature of Russian civilization and its differences from European society. But they gazed in a different direction: whereas earlier Slavophiles emphasized Slavic unity and contrasted European individualism with the collectivism of Russian peasant communities, the Eurasianists linked the Russian people to the Turkic-speaking peoples—or "Turans"—of the Central Asian steppe. According to the Eurasianists, the Turanian civilization, which supposedly originated in ancient Persia, followed its own unique political and economic model—essentially, authoritarianism. Although they valued private initiative in general, many of the Eurasianists condemned the excessive dominance of market principles over the state in the West and emphasized the positive role of their region's traditional religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. However dubious the Eurasianists' historical claims about the Turans may be, this theory now enjoys wide popularity not only among a significant part of the Russian political elite but also in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and other Central Asian states where the Turans' descendants live.

Although the old ideas advanced by today's Eurasianists may seem somewhat artificial, the plan to establish a Eurasian union should not be considered so far-fetched. The culture and values of many former Soviet republics really do differ from what prevails in the West. Liberal secularism, with its rejection of the absolute values that traditional religions hold as divinely ordained, may be on the rise in western Europe and the United States, but in these former Soviet republics, all the major religions—Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism—are experiencing a revival. Despite the significant differences between them, all these religions reject Western permissiveness and moral relativism, and not for some pragmatic reason but because they find such notions sinful—either unsanctioned or expressly prohibited by divine authority.

Most inhabitants of these post-Soviet states also resent that people in the West consider their outlook backward and reactionary. Their religious leaders, who are enjoying increasing popularity and influence, concur. After all, one can view progress in different ways. If one believes that the meaning of human existence is to gain more political freedoms and acquire material wealth, then Western society is moving forward. But if one thinks, as a traditional Christian does, that Christ's coming was humanity's most important development, then material wealth looks far less important, for this life is fleeting, and suffering prepares people for eternal life, a process that physical riches hinder. Religious traditionalists see euthanasia, homosexuality, and other practices that the New Testament repeatedly condemns as representing not progress but a regression to pagan times. Viewed through this lens, Western society is more than imperfect; it is the very center of sin.
A great majority of Orthodox Christian believers in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova agree with all of this, as do many people in Central Asia. And these beliefs have propelled to power leaders who support the integration of the former Soviet republics. They have also helped Putin succeed in establishing an independent power center in Eurasia. Western meddling, meanwhile, has only served to further consolidate that power.

MOVING FORWARD
The situation in Ukraine remains tense. It might very well follow the example of Moldova, effectively splitting in two. The United States has perceived Russian calls for dialogue as an attempt to dictate unacceptable conditions. In Russia, the continuing strife has fueled the activity of nationalists and authoritarians. The latter group has become especially active of late and is presenting itself as the only force capable of protecting Russia's interests. An uncontrolled escalation of the confrontation could even lead to outright war. The only solution is for the United States and its allies to change their position from one of confrontation to one of constructive engagement.

After all, a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis is still possible. Even during the Cold War, Moscow and the West managed to reach agreements on the neutral status of Austria and Finland. Those understandings did not in the least undermine the democratic systems or the general European orientation of those countries, and they even proved beneficial to their economies and international reputations. It is no coincidence that it was Finland, a neutral state with strong ties to both the West and the Soviet Union, that hosted the talks leading to the signing of the Helsinki Accords, which played a major role in easing Cold War tensions. The solution to the current crisis similarly lies in providing international guarantees for both Ukraine's neutral status and the protection of its Russian-speaking population. The alternative would be far, far worse: Ukraine could well break apart, drawing Russia and the West into another prolonged confrontation.

Sidebar
It was only a matter of time before Russia finally reacted to its encirclement. The West's continued advance is tearing apart the countries on Russia's borders. The values of many former Soviet republics really do differ from what prevails in the West.

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As vice president of Moscow's elite Diplomatic Academy, aleXander IUKin helps train Russia's future foreign emissaries, giving him an inside view not only of how Russia's foreign policy is made but also of who makes it. An Oxford-trained former diplomat himself, Lukin has written books on Russia's democrats and the history of Chinese-Russian relations. In "What the Kremlin Is Thinking" (page 85), he dissects the events that led up to the Ukraine crisis and discusses what Vladimir Putin is likely to do next.

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