Years after the end of the Cold War, the question of whether Russia is a stabilizing or destabilizing power, globally and in the post-Soviet region, has yet to be answered. Relations between Russia and its neighbors—as well as among Russia, the U.S. and other Western powers—have featured instances of both cooperation and conflict. On one hand, Russia allowed the Soviet Union to disintegrate largely peacefully and cooperated with the West on a range of issues, including German reunification, nuclear containment of Iran and North Korea, counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, and chemical weapons removal in Syria.

On the other hand, the West and Russia have butted heads over the Yugoslav war (1991–99) and Kosovo’s independence, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) eastward expansion, and the Russian-Georgian war (2008). Between Russia and its neighbors, points of contention have included the treatment of Russians and Russian-speakers in the former Soviet republics, as well as the newly independent states’ geopolitical orientation between Russia and the West.

Over the past year, these tensions reached crisis proportions. Russia’s response to street protests known as the Euromaidan, or “Euro Square,” and the overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych, as well as its annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula in March 2014, plunged Russia’s relations with the West to a new low.

How and why did it come to this? Are Russia’s actions in Ukraine a prelude to further aggressive acts in the areas of its former dominance? What can be done to contain Russia, and is it possible to restore cooperative relations between Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the West, and if so, how? To answer these questions we need to look into the causes of the current crisis and drivers of Russian foreign policy in its neighborhood and in relations with the West.

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Foreign policy in the 1990s

Foreign policy of the post-Soviet Russia has its origins in the late Soviet period. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and initiated a new approach in relations with the West. Gorbachev advocated a philosophy of “new thinking,” which postulated that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the West could coexist and pursue common interests. Nuclear disarmament, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the reunification of Germany, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of December 1991 were all made possible by Gorbachev’s “new thinking.”

The dissolution of the Soviet Union ushered in the first phase of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet period. Russia’s new foreign policy was initially shaped by pro-Western liberals, who believed that Russia’s interests were best served by pursuing closer ties and integration into an Euro-Atlantic world. These new Russian leaders saw Russia as an organic region but excluded the West. Neither the Westernizers nor the Atlantists had ever referred to as Eurasianists, who were suspicious of the West and saw Russia as a center of Eurasian civilization, which included the post-Soviet region but excluded the West. Neither the Westernizers nor the Atlantists had stood at the helm of Russian state policies unchallenged for long, so the backlash against unabashedly pro-Western policies of the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin era can be seen as a repeat of this historical pattern.

However, there have been more immediate reasons as to why the post-Soviet period following dissolution of the USSR proved to be so short-lived. This period in the early 1990s coincided with economic collapse that resulted in a sharp drop in living standards and imposed tremendous material hardship on
Russian citizens. In this context, the rhetoric of Yeltsin’s opponents—who argued that the West was actively weakening, or at least not sufficiently aiding, Russia by imposing free-market capitalism and fostering the rise of oligarchs—fell on receptive ears.

Yet another factor contributing to the abandonment of an explicitly pro-Western Russian foreign policy were the ethno-cultural consequences of the disintegration of the USSR. The USSR’s collapse left Russia with borders that mirrored its reach in the 17th century. Overnight, some 25 million ethnic Russians and 33 million Russian-speakers found themselves cut off from the new Russian state. Russians in the “near abroad”—the term coined in Russia in the early 1990s to refer to the former Soviet states, which reflected the perception that they are not “really” foreign—became a national minority and no longer members of the leading nationality as they had been in the Soviet era. In some cases ethnic Russians even faced discrimination in citizenship and employment matters. As a result, millions of former Soviet citizens, most of them ethnic Russians, moved to Russia from the former Soviet republics in the early- and mid-1990s. Migration came with its own set of socio-economic burdens, as the government had pledged to assist migrants and adopted special legislation to this effect. Mass migration of Russian-speakers from neighboring states also fostered resentment against the governments of the newly independent states Russians were fleeing and against the West.

This “ethnic unmixing” was prompted by a number of factors: citizenship denial in Latvia and Estonia; language policies in most state that elevated the status of titular languages, often at the expense of Russian; economic hardship; and armed conflicts that flared in some of the USSR successor states, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan. Many in Russia felt that the West, while criticizing Russia for rights abuses in Chechnya, turned a blind eye to the infringement of the rights of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet states, particularly in Western-aligned Estonia and Latvia. For similar reasons, the West and Russia also butted heads with regards to Russian support for separatists in breakaway regions, such as Transdniestria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. While Russia presented its support of separatists in these regions as a defense of the rights of Russian-speaking minorities against rising nationalism, Western governments saw as Russia’s meddling in its newly independent neighbors’ affairs and as attempts to keep them from leaving Russia’s orbit by creating simmering pockets of domestic instability that challenged their territorial integrity.

The attempt to turn Russia into a “normal” Western state did not succeed, and many in Russia began to doubt that the transformation was in their interests. Western support was called into question as well. The West supported Yeltsin’s policies of questionable democratic merit, which instigated the country’s economic collapse and culminated in the rise of wealthy oligarchs. Western governments backed Yeltsin in his struggle with a Communist and nationalist-dominated parliament, and they took his side when Yeltsin ordered troops to shell the legislature in October 1993 during constitutional crisis. In the 1996 presidential elections, when an unpopular Yeltsin was challenged by the hardline leader of an unreformed Russian Communist party, Western governments stood by Yeltsin the “democrat,” who narrowly won by means questionable from the point of view of democratic process. Among such means was the infamous “loans-for-shares” scheme, wherein the state allowed a select group of Russian businessmen to take control of a dozen key state owned enterprises, including major parts of the energy, telecommunications, and metallurgical sectors, in return for receiving some $800 million in loans for the federal budget. The justification of the loans-for-shares was that it would create a permanent capitalist class with a stake in the Russian market. Instead, loans-for-shares gave rise to the so-called oligarchs, who, with their great wealth, became an independent source of political power and were able to wield vast influence over the state during Yeltsin’s second term.

Given the botched process and pitiful results of transferring Western economic models and democracy during the Yeltsin years, the second half of the 1990s led many to believe that Russia needed to pursue its own interests. With a powerful Communist and nationalist presence in the legislature, as well as the growing perception that the West is not taking Russian concerns into account, there was growing consensus that following the West’s lead was no longer an ideal path.
Foreign policy under Putin

Vladimir Putin rose to political prominence by developing a reputation for defending Russian interests, asserting its rightful place as a global superpower, and demonstrating a willingness to restore its damaged pride. These themes would come to form Russian foreign policies and its relations with the West after Putin became president in 2000, but they also underlined Putin’s meteoric rise from a virtual unknown in August 1999, when an ailing Yeltsin appointed him prime minister. As the new prime minister, Putin vowed to restore control of the breakaway Chechen republic. (The republic had been a site of lawlessness and gross human rights abuses in 1996-1999, after Russia lost de facto control of the republic following the 1994-1996 war.) Putin’s assertive stance against the Chechen separatists and his tough language—including his infamous promise to kill Chechen terrorists “in the outhouses”—catapulted him to popularity. His approval rating jumped from 31% in August 1999 to 79% in December 1999.

The need for a strong state and the subordination of private interests were important elements of Putin’s ideology before he assumed presidency. In his 1997 dissertation and in a subsequent article published in 1999, he wrote about the need for Russia’s mineral resources and key strategic enterprises managing them (the “national champions”) to be operated with state interests in mind, rather than private interests. As president, Putin put this vision into practice.

The most iconic case is that of Yukos, then Russia’s largest oil and gas company, whose owner and Russia’s richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested, imprisoned, and lost his assets. Khodorkovsky’s plight sent a clear signal to the oligarchs that Putin would not allow them to maintain independence. With his KGB background, Putin could rely on the support of the siloviki, or elites from the security and military sector. Critics argued that the Yeltsin-era reality of oligarchs wielding power over the state had been replaced by a new, and equally undemocratic reality, where siloviki control state polices and amass personal wealth.

Putin’s rise to power also coincided with the growth in oil prices, giving him the fortune to preside over the first major economic recovery after the disastrous 1990s. Economic recovery boosted his popularity at home and allowed him to lessen Russia’s dependency on Western loans and other forms of economic aid, which in turn put it in a stronger position to pursue more assertive foreign policies.

With the Russian government more willing and better able to stray from the West’s path, Western actions, such as the U.S. circumventing the UN Security Council to deploy NATO in airstrikes against Serbia in March 1999 and the incorporation of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO the same year, also contributed to the redefinition of Russian foreign policy goals and strategies vis-à-vis the West and its neighbors. During his first year in office, Putin signed new editions of Russia’s major security documents into law—the National Security Concept (January 2000), the Military Doctrine (April 2000) and the Foreign Policy Concept (June 2000). If the 1997 National Security Concept of the Yeltsin era saw internal problems, not international developments, as the greatest threat to Russian national security and regarded the post-Cold War international system as cooperative rather than competitive, the 2000 security documents saw the current trends in international politics as threatening to Russia. The documents considered Western security policy to be a threat to Russia and prioritized counter-balancing such threats with political, military and economic cooperation with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

By the early 2000s several factors came together, contributing to and enabling a more assertive Russian foreign policy and a rift in Russia’s relations with the West: the drastic political and economic fallout of the 1990s led to a definitive shift away from earlier Western-oriented policies, Putin’s personal beliefs in the strong state and great
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Russia, the period of economic growth under Putin, the West’s unilateral actions in Kosovo, and NATO’s expansion. None of these factors, however, ruled out the possibility of cooperation between Russia and the West on issues of mutual interest—indeed since Putin took helm of Russian politics, Russia cooperated with the West on nuclear nonproliferation, energy, and the war on terror. Under Putin, Russian and U.S. leaders signed and ratified the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and Russia joined the World Trade Organization (WTO).

One popular explanation for Putin’s activity in Ukraine is NATO expansion. A number of experts have asserted that in 2014 the West essentially provoked Russia to take action in Ukraine in order to prevent NATO reaching there after the overthrow of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych. Others have pointed out that while Russia has consistently opposed NATO expansion since the mid-1990s, its relations with the West have evolved and Ukraine’s NATO membership was not forthcoming. The intention to enlarge NATO was made public already in 1994, and in 1999 the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined. In 2004 they were followed by seven more post-Communist countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The current crisis in Ukraine took place years after the last round of NATO expansion. Furthermore, no moves on the part of Ukraine or NATO have taken place since 2008, when the alliance declared that Ukraine and Georgia will be able to join one day but took no further steps to admission. For NATO, enlargement to the east became essentially a non-issue after Russia’s incursion into Georgia in August 2008 in response to Georgia’s attempt to retake control of the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Before Russia’s invasion of Crimea, NATO membership was mostly a non-issue in Ukraine. Russian aggression made support for NATO in Ukraine stronger than it has ever been, with a November 2014 poll showing 51% of Ukrainians would vote for NATO membership in a referendum.

Another causal factor behind the current crisis in Ukraine is Putin’s fear of popular mobilization against his regime. The political system created in Russia under Putin is centered on a strong presidency that cannot be challenged by the either opposition in the legislature, by regional elites or independent economic interests. Political elites loyal to the president, not voters, control the political process in the country. This political order is claimed to be the model best able to stimulate economic development, identify and address key social needs of the society, and ensure social stability. The Putin system was also presented as the return to law and order. Thus, independent societal mobilization in Russia’s backyard on a scale that would have the potential to unseat governing elites were seen as threatening because: 1) they would encroach on Russia’s sphere of influence through the installation of pro-Western governments in former Soviet states; 2) popular revolutions offered a model of political change and the destruction of authoritarian regimes through “people’s power.”

Of all the post-Soviet states, the removal of Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence by way of a popular revolution was, at least from the Russian perspective, the worst of the bad outcomes. Ukraine occupies a special place in Russia’s historical narrative and national identity. One historical mythology that originated in the tsarist period and perpetuated by the Soviets identified Ukraine and Russia (together with Belarus) as three “branches” of the same family tree. Kyiv, the center of the medieval kingdom of the Kyivan Rus’, was “the mother of Russian cities” and the cradle of Russian identity and culture. A separate Ukraine with a right to statehood, as well as the notion that Ukraine as a state could pursue “anti-Russian” policies was anathema in Russia, both
to the elites and to the public. One 2006 poll found that 58% of Russians said that there were no national differences between Russia and Ukraine; another in 2005 identified that 78% of Russians had a positive attitude toward the unification of Russia and Ukraine; yet another poll in 2007 showed 48% of Russians would vote for unification in a hypothetical referendum. Indeed, in April 2008, Putin told President George W. Bush that “Ukraine isn’t even a state” and that “there are only Russians” living in the south of Ukraine. What Russia saw in 2013–14 was the West attempting to drive Ukraine away from Russia, and ultimately into NATO, by supporting the Euromaidan uprising. To Russia, the West orchestrated the overthrow of an autocratic president by means of popular protests, brought a pro-Western government in office, and in so doing, was laying the groundwork for Ukraine’s NATO membership and a Ukrainian identity that was distinct, if not outright hostile, to the narrative of eastern Slavic unity.

**U.S.-Russia relations**

The roots of the current crisis in Russia-Ukraine and Russia-West relations goes back to 2004, when a popular uprising that became known as the “orange revolution” prevented Yanukovych from becoming Ukraine’s third president after flawed presidential elections. Russia perceived the orange revolution as a Western-financed ploy aimed at installing pro-Western government in Ukraine under the leadership of Yanukovych’s opponent, Viktor Yushchenko. Russia’s elites wanted to prevent Ukraine from moving westward, as well as a repeat of an electoral revolution at home. By 2004, Putin had already strengthened his presidential authority by taming business tycoons, taking over or closing all independent national television channels, and creating a pro-presidential party that dominated both houses of parliament. Following events in Ukraine in 2004, Putin delivered another blow to independent political activity and civil society by creating pro-Kremlin youth groups, passing an electoral law that abolished single-member constituencies and increased the electoral threshold for the party list vote, making it harder for smaller parties and independent candidates to win seats, as well as tightening state control over non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially ones that received funding from Western donors.

Russia’s fears that Ukraine’s orange revolution would lead to either a diffusion of electoral revolution to Russia or Ukraine’s decisive turn to the West did not materialize. Yushchenko’s tenure in Ukraine was marred by constant infighting between the former members of the “orange” team, in particular between Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, a key supporter turned bitter rival. Domestic gridlock damaged prospects for Ukraine’s integration into Western institutions, as well as domestic reforms. The disarray and disappointment that followed the orange revolution allowed Yanukovych to win presidential elections in 2010. Yanukovych relied on the support of his core electorate in the south and east, which were alienated by many of Yushchenko-era cultural policies. He narrowly defeated Tymoshenko in the second round (49% to 45%) after Yushchenko, eliminated in the first round, called on his supporters to abstain from supporting either candidate.

Yanukovych’s electoral victory in 2010 was fairly clean, but regional vote polarization in Ukraine meant he entered office with the support of one half of the country and opposition from another. Yanukovych began pursuing foreign and cultural policies that further alienated the pro-Western electorate in central and western Ukraine. He rammed through the 25-year extension of the Russian Black Sea Fleet lease of naval bases in Sevastopol in Crimea, endorsed Russia-supported characterization of the 1932–33 killer famine in Ukraine as a “common tragedy” of all Soviet people (not “genocide of the Ukrainian people”), and dropped the language of Euro-Atlantic integration from the law on the foundations of Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy.

During his first year in office, Yanukovych not only dismantled the few accomplishments of the orange period, namely a free press and stronger parliament—he also undertook a number of changes to secure and widen his power, as well as to clamp down on the opposition. He had Tymoshenko arrested and imprisoned on abuse of office charges that independent observers uniformly saw as politically motivated. He changed rules governing coalition formation in the legislature to create a pro-presidential majority and pushed the Constitutional Court to revert a 2004 constitutional reform that had weakened presidential powers and strengthened the legislature. Yanukovych elevated elites from his home region of Donetsk to key positions in government and the judiciary, and the growing power of the so-called “family”—elites close to Yanukovych and his sons—as well as massive corruption were contributing to the growing dissatisfaction with Yanukovych rule in Ukraine.

The immediate precursor to the current crisis was Yanukovych’s decision in November 2013 not to sign the association and free trade agreement with the European Union. The preparatory process had been going on for several years, and in September 2013 Ukraine still intended to sign it. But the decision was not simple—the EU put pressure on Yanukovych to live up to democratic standards, commit to reforms and release Tymoshenko from jail. Russia, for its part, blocked exports from key Ukrainian industries in the months preceding the planned signing date to show that it can make Ukraine, which relied on Russia for a quarter of its exports,
It ultimately prefers to bring Ukraine the Armenia, which had also been in similar negotiations with the EU but agreed to join the Russian customs union instead. Russia welcomed Yanukovych’s decision not to sign the agreement with the EU.

After the Ukrainian government adopted a decree halting the effort to sign the agreement one week before an EU summit on Nov. 21 in Vilnius (where Yanukovych made an unexpected demand for an astounding 175 billion dollars through 2017 from the EU in compensation for the costs of adopting European standards), popular protests erupted in Ukraine. The protests, sparked by Yanukovych’s decision not to sign the agreement with the EU, became known as Euromaidan, or “Euro Square.” They culminated with Yanukovych’s escape from the country on Feb. 22, 2014.

Russian state media portrayed Euromaidan as a Western-financed ploy to unseat Yanukovych and tear Ukraine away from Russia. A number of Western leaders, including U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, visited the main protest sight in a show of support, and U.S. and European governments spent billions on the development of democratic institutions in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states since independence. Euromaidan, however, was hardly a Western pet project but a protest movement with complex causes, and the goals of the movement also evolved over time as the protests progressed. As surveys have shown, what started as a protest for the agreement with the EU became a protest against police brutality after violent dispersal of demonstrators by the end of November. When police violence was unpunished and escalated, demand for government resignation grew. Only at the tail end of the protests did the removal of Yanukovych and a return to the 2004 constitution take center stage.

Eventual success of the protests to drive out Yanukovych was a humiliating defeat for Putin’s strategy on Ukraine. Putin firmly backed Yanukovych throughout the protests as he came under increased pressure from the West. After a Dec. 17 meeting with Yanukovych, Putin announced that Russia would buy $15 billion in Ukrainian debt by investing in Ukrainian bonds and reduce the price of Russian gas delivered to Ukraine. Russian leadership also urged Yanukovych to take an aggressive stance against the protesters, but the escalation of repression and violence eventually backfired. On Jan. 16, Yanukovych supporters in the parliament voted by a show of hands a law that criminalized much of the protest activity and NGO work. This hateful vote energized but also radicalized the protests, and the first three protesters were killed in clashes with police on Jan. 22. A month later, on Feb. 18–20 dozens of people were shot dead by police on the streets of Kyiv during the violence following parliament’s decision not to consider returning to the 2004 constitution limiting presidential powers. The worst street clashes between police and protesters ensued and were followed by the police assault on the main protest site, as well as a subsequent shooting of the protesters in broad daylight on the morning of Feb. 20. As violence escalated in Kyiv, protesters in western and central Ukraine occupied government buildings.

On the morning of Feb. 21, in a last ditch effort to reach a compromise and prevent state collapse and civil war, foreign ministers from France, Germany and Poland, as well as a Russian special envoy, brokered an agreement between Yanukovych and the leaders of the three largest parties present on the Euromaidan. The deal—which would have restored the 2004 constitution in Ukraine, created a coalition government, but left Yanukovych in office until the end of 2014—was announced as protesters were holding public funerals for those killed in previous days. The three protest leaders were booed as they announced the deal. The deal was seen as too little too late, and the continuation of Yanukovych’s rule unacceptable. Protesters called on Yanukovych to resign, and a commander of one of the self-defense units protesters formed promised to drive him out if he does not resign by the following morning.

But the protesters did not drive Yanukovych out. As the stillborn deal was announced at the site of protests, Yanukovych’s party began to crumble in parliament. On Feb. 21 dozens of lawmakers defected from his party, and the parliament voted to dismiss Yanukovych’s interior minister, overturn the law under which Tymoshenko was convicted and jailed, and restore the 2004 constitution. By the end of the day, police withdrew from the streets and public buildings, and Yanukovych fled from his suburban estate by helicopter, first to the east, then to Crimea, and finally to Russia. Evidence subsequently uncovered at his estate suggested that he was pre-
paring for his departure ahead of time.

The following day, Feb. 22, the parliament met and voted by a constitutional majority of 328 votes to remove Yanukovych from office and to hold early presidential elections on May 25. Russia called developments in Ukraine a “constitutional coup” and slammed the opposition and European leaders for the failure to uphold the Feb. 21 agreement. The constitutional aspects of Yanukovych’s removal are complex, but independent experts described it as an extra-constitutional development, as Ukraine’s constitution—similar to the constitutions of most western states—did not prescribe a course of action for the president fleeing the country. Russia’s insistence that the Feb. 21 agreement was the best solution to the crisis was also not its original position, as the Russian representative was the only one of the negotiation participants to not sign the agreement in endorsement, possibly seeing it as not sufficiently reflecting Russia’s preferred outcome.

Was the crisis inevitable?

Was Euromaidan a triumph of people’s power over a corrupt authoritarian leader, or was it a Western-supported coup that brought a “fascist junta” to power in Ukraine? Because Russia has adopted a vastly different interpretation of the Euromaidan than the West and Ukraine, it is difficult to speak of an “objective reality” that can be understood by all sides. This gulf in perceptions has contributed to the current crisis, including Russia’s decision to swiftly annex Crimea after Euromaidan’s victory. It also makes the crisis difficult to end.

Euromaidan’s success triggered Putin’s annexation of Crimea, the rationale for which was multifaceted. The annexation was purportedly to save Crimea’s ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking “compatriots” from the “fascists” who took power in Kyiv, but it also aimed to prevent the Russian Black Sea Fleet from being evicted from its base in Sevastopol and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. Crimea’s majority ethnic Russian population and the fact that it was a part of Russia from the time Catherine II took it from the Ottoman Empire until the peninsula was transferred from the Russian republic to the Ukrainian republic within the USSR in 1954 were offered as additional justifications for Russia’s actions. If Russia’s objectives were to ensure non-discrimination of Russian-speakers in Crimea and Ukraine, to prevent Ukrainian membership to NATO and the country’s decisive tilt westward, and to keep its naval base in Crimea, it is not evident that annexation—which turned Russia into an international pariah and saddled it with sanctions as its economy was already lagging—was the best course of action for Russia to achieve these goals. Russia could have chosen to exercise any of the many levers it had over Ukraine—levers that did not disappear with the victory of Euromaidan and that were strong enough to enable Russia to advance these objectives.

Russia has enormous economic leverage over Ukraine. It is the destination for about a quarter of Ukrainian exports, and Ukraine is also heavily dependent on Russian gas. European markets could not fully replace Russian markets, and Ukrainian exports, especially its industrial output, will remain more attractive to Russian markets than to the West for a long time. Russia could have exploited extensive trade and economic links to undermine, on a case-by-case basis, moves by the new Ukrainian government that Russia considered undesirable. Ukraine’s new president, Petro Poroshenko, who took office after the May 2014 elections, is someone with whom Russia could have easily found common ground. Poroshenko is not a radical anti-Russian revolutionary but a long-term member of the Ukrainian political establishment and an economic tycoon with business interests in Russia. He is an interlocutor not much different from previous Ukrainian presidents, with whom Russia was always able to conduct business.

Domestic divisions in Ukraine that have time and again produced a substantial Russia-friendly, if not outright pro-Russian, lobby in the Ukrainian parliament did not disappear after the victory of Euromaidan. According to a February 2014 Gallup poll, 45% nationwide supported the Euromaidan protests while 51% did not. The same poll found that 41% favored economic integration with the EU, and 35% with the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Had Putin not invaded Ukraine, such popular preferences could have been leveraged to establish a strong pro-Russian lobby in parliament through which Russia could have continued to influence Ukrainian politics.

Ironically, it was Putin’s actions that upended these long-standing domestic divisions in Ukraine and made it much less pro-Russian than before the annexation. By annexing Crimea and supporting the insurgency in the Donbas region, which have reliably voted for pro-Russian parties and politicians, Russia effectively removed several mil-

![Protestors clash with police on Jan. 22, 2014, in central Kyiv during Ukraine's escalating political crisis. (BRENDAN LUKATSKY/AP/CORBIS)](image-url)
lion pro-Russian voters (approximately 10% of the electorate) from election rolls in Ukraine. (Residents of Crimea and of the insurgent-controlled parts of the Donetsk—some 4.6 million registered voters—are now unable to take part in Ukrainian elections.) Unlike in previous elections where the margin of victory between “pro-Russian” and “pro-Western” parties or presidential contenders has always been narrow, 2014 marked the first time the electoral field shifted decisively away from pro-Russian forces. Poroshenko won by a wide margin in the first round in May 2014 presidential elections; in the October 2014 legislative elections, pro-European parties gained a constitutional majority for the first time in Ukrainian history. Only one party that can be considered pro-Russian made it into the parliament with 9.4% of the vote. As a result, the overall size of the pro-Russian lobby in parliament is unlikely to exceed a quarter of its composition.

The perceptions of Russian-speaking voters have also changed. In the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine—which Putin has referred to as Novorossia (“New Russia”)—Russian-speakers are no longer reliably pro-Russian or even Russia-friendly. One illustrative example is the victory of Dmytro Yarosh, the leader of the radical nationalist Right Sector, in a single member district race in the Russian-speaking Donetsk region, which Russia counts as belonging to Novorossia. In October 2014 legislative elections, the pro-Western parties in the southeast won more votes than pro-Russian parties in most southern and eastern districts. (In previous elections, virtually all districts in the southeast voted for pro-Russian parties.)

Ukraine’s NATO membership and the eviction of the Russian navy from Crimea were far from imminent. Indeed, as far as NATO membership is concerned, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and incursion in the Donbas may have made it more, rather than less, likely. Ukrainian NATO membership did not have significant support domestically or within NATO itself. Even pro-Western Ukrainian politicians had not advocated NATO membership for Ukraine, but now the tides are changing. After the October 2014 legislative elections, five pro-Western parties agreed to form a coalition and set NATO membership as a goal. Tymoshenko’s party, for example, has called for a referendum on NATO membership and started collecting signatures for it. The Ukrainian public also began to view membership more favorably, with 50% supporting membership in the alliance. Rising popular support for NATO membership in Ukraine is invariably a result of Russian aggression.

Likewise, the Russian Black Sea Fleet previously faced no danger of losing its bases in Crimea under a post-Yanukovych government. Yanukovych signed an agreement in February 2010 with Putin to extend the lease of the naval bases by the Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimea until 2042. (The earlier lease term was due to expire in 2017.) The lease extension was negotiated in secret and ratified through the Ukrainian parliament by pro-Yanukovych majority despite protest from the opposition. While it is possible that the new Ukrainian government would have wanted to revisit the agreement at some point, Russia was well positioned to secure favorable terms for any new deal, provided its control over Ukrainian energy and the pro-Russian population in Crimea. No Ukrainian leader spoke of revoking the lease after Euromaidan.

Further, the strength of radical nationalism and threat to Russian-speakers in the post-Euromaidan Ukraine was exaggerated by Russian leadership and state media. Radical nationalists and far right groups were present at the Euromaidan protests, and probably played a significant role in the violence from the protesters side, but the far right and extreme nationalists do not enjoy much support in Ukraine, as polling data and electoral results show. Under Yanukovych, Svoboda was the only far right nationalist party to gain legislative representation in 2012 parliamentary elections. (It received 10% of the vote.) In May 2014 presidential elections, leaders of Svoboda and the Right Sector, the two main nationalist groups, together received less than 2% of the vote. The post-Yanukovych government included a few individuals with connections to the radical nationalist parties, although the most prominent appointment—that of the head of the national defense and security council, Andriy Parubiy, who was also the commander of self-defense units of the Euromaidan—had a connection that was a decade old. The radical nationalists have been nowhere close to dominating political life in post-Yanukovych Ukraine and have little chance to do so, as both right-wing parties failed...
to clear the 5% threshold for representation in the October 2014 elections.

Finally, claims of assaults on the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine and in Crimea specifically were exaggerated. Since 1989 Ukrainian has been the only state language in Ukraine; in Crimea, which enjoyed autonomous status within Ukraine, there were three official languages: Ukrainian, Russian and Crimean Tatar. In the years since independence Ukraine’s government moved to reverse the Russification policies of the last decades of the Soviet era, particularly in government and education, but Russian remained widely used and dominant in the media, business and popular culture. The absolute majority of Ukrainians are bilingual and few were inconvenienced by Ukrainian lives. According to March 2014 Gallup poll, only 12% felt that Russian-speakers are under pressure because of their language. Among ethnic Russians this share stood at 29%; however, 66% of ethnic Russians (and 85% overall) did not consider Russian-speakers in danger of discrimination.

A key piece of evidence Russian leaders evoked when justifying the need to “defend compatriots” from the “fascist junta” in Kyiv was Ukrainian parliament’s recent decision to repeal a 2012 law that gave Russian the status of a regional language in areas where over 10% of the population were Russian-speakers. The provocative nature of the vote was quickly recognized, and the parliament speaker and acting president at the time refused to sign it. As a result, the 2012 law remained in force. But even if the 2012 law was repealed—a law which at the time of its adoption was bitterly contested domestically and criticized by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for undermining the position of Ukrainian—the situation of Russian-speakers was unlikely to worsen. The 2012 law was more symbolic than consequential in practice; before and after promulgation of the law, the language policies and the situation of Russian-speakers in Ukraine were not distinct in any discernible way. Ukraine ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority languages in 2005. Russian had been designated as one a regional language by then, and the courts routinely upheld decisions of local authorities to use Russian as regional language based on the charter’s provisions. To advance language rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine, Russia could have worked with and pressured Ukraine through European institutions to uphold the rights of Russian-speakers even in the absence of the 2012 language law.

So why, instead of exercising one or more of the many levers it had over Ukraine to influence the policies of the new Ukrainian government, did Putin opt for open conflict, upending the post-World War II security system and making Ukraine more anti-Russian than it has ever been? One compelling explanation is that Putin acted because the success of the Euromaidan uprising—and the possible success of Ukraine as a democracy in its aftermath—posed a great threat to the political system Putin has created. Putin may be pursuing a twin goal: first, preventing Ukraine from turning West and leaving the Russian sphere of influence by creating simmering conflict within its borders and a territorial dispute; and second, destabilizing post-Yanukovych Ukraine to discredit the people-led model of political and economic change in the country that is Russia’s closest neighbor.

Policy options

As the crisis over Ukraine plunges U.S.-Russia relations to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, the West continue to puzzle over how to reverse Russia’s aggressive behavior in Ukraine, deter any similar future actions by Russia against other states in its neighborhood, and normalize relations with the Kremlin so that cooperation can continue in areas of mutual interests. Failing to accomplish these goals could lead to an even greater crisis in Ukraine and the spread of the crisis to other states. The possibility of Russia pushing further into Ukraine cannot be excluded. The areas Russian-backed insurgents control in the Donbas region are smaller than the territory of Novorossia envisaged by Putin. Since Crimea is dependent on mainland Ukraine for most of its supplies of fresh water and electricity and that the insurgent-controlled areas of the Donbas are home to Ukraine’s rundown heavy industry and mines that need subsidies to stay operational, Russia may at some point look to carve a land corridor to Crimea. Russia may even push further along southern Ukraine into Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria, which has been under a pro-Russian unrecognized government since 1992.

If tensions created by the current crisis in Ukraine are not diffused, the possibility that Russia will violate the territorial integrity of other post-Soviet states under the pretext of protecting Russian-speakers is not out of the realm of possibilities, albeit more remote. The Baltic states—particularly Latvia and Estonia, which have large Russian minorities and tense relations with Russia over issues such as citizenship, language rights, and commemorative politics—could be future targets. However, because Latvia and Estonia are members of NATO, Russia is unlikely to risk open military action. Russia nevertheless could destabilize these states by acting aggressive but short of an outright invasion. Provocative moves, like Russia’s kidnapping of an Estonian security officer from Estonian territory two days after President Obama visited the country, could become more frequent.

Kazakhstan is another state where a large and territorially concentrated Russian minority along the Kazakh-Russian border in the north of the country could become the locus of destabilization or conflict. Kazakhstan has been a reliable ally of Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, and its president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has been an active proponent of Russia-led Eurasian integration projects, such as a common economic space, the customs union, and the Eurasian economic community. But Kazakhstan is not a democracy, and Nazarbaev, who is 74 years old, does not have a designated successor. Hence, any transition from Nazarbaev to the next leader will be unpredictable, and mass mobilization and another “colored revolution” cannot be ruled out. Some have interpreted Putin’s recent statement that Nazarbaev has
“done a unique thing” because he “created a state in a territory that had never had a state before” as an ominous warning that if Kazakhstan were to depart Russia’s orbit, its borders may be challenged.

So what options do the U.S. government and its Western allies have when dealing with Putin? It will not be easy to diffuse the current crisis in relations with Russia, prevent new ones from emerging and continue cooperation on areas of mutual interests for several reasons. For one, the West and Russia have different views of what lead to the current crisis in Ukraine. These varied interpretations of reality are profound; in fact, after several conversations with Putin over Crimean crisis in March 2014 German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly told President Obama that Putin is “in another world.” Following the October 2014 meeting in Milan between Putin and European leaders, Putin’s spokesman said that the West shows “complete unwillingness to understand the real situation in the southeast of Ukraine.” An inability to agree on the nature of the problem makes it so much harder to solve it.

One mechanism the West does have at its disposal are sanctions. Western sanctions, which both targeted individuals and companies in Russia, have already had a considerable impact on the Russian economy, resulting in a weakened ruble, growth in consumer prices and substantial burden on the state budget. Targeted energy companies have asked the government for funds to offset the losses caused by sanctions. Rosneft, Russia’s largest state-owned oil company, for example, asked for more than $49 billion to help withstand Western sanctions. That sum amounts to over half the cash stored in Russia’s National Welfare Fund, a sovereign wealth fund created as a backstop to Russia’s pension system.

Still, sanctions are unlikely to change Russia’s course, especially in the short term. Russian leaders have said they have no intention of returning Crimea to Ukraine under pressure of sanctions. Despite mounting evidence, Russia continues to deny that its troops are aiding insurgents in the Donbas. That covert support for the insurgents is unlikely to be cut, given that the Ukrainian army came close to defeating the insurgency in August and that local support for the insurgency, while substantial, is not enough. The West faces a choice between two problematic options: to continue with sanctions that are unlikely to yield results in the short term (and possibly long term as well)—Putin is widely popular in Russia and his term in office can go until 2024), or to relax or annul the sanctions, effectively signing off on Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its violation of the international law, and its sponsorship of insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

Since NATO countries ruled out military action against Russia over Ukraine, the West has few options. Two sets of additional specific actions may prove effective—even if not immediately—in influencing Russia’s behavior and the course of events in its neighborhood going forward. These would be helping democracy succeed in Ukraine, and recognizing and responding to legitimate Russian concerns.

Helping democracy succeed in post-Yanukovych Ukraine would offer long-term benefits, not only to Ukrainians but also to Russia and other countries in the post-Soviet space. It would show that regime change driven by popular mobilization could serve public interests and welfare as well or better than the model of managed democracy, which limits pluralism and public participation. The success of democracy in Ukraine should not be confused with success of pro-Western foreign policy or political dominance of pro-Western elites, however. The West should scrutinize its pro-Western allies and call them on violations of democratic standards, just as it has been doing with regard to the pro-Russian actors. This will both aid democratic prospects in Ukraine, and may earn some good will with Russia, which has maintained that the U.S. has supported pro-Western forces in Ukraine without question.

More specifically, such a policy would involve recognizing the danger the far right can pose for democracy in Ukraine, even if it is not strong electorally. Rights groups have documented worst-case practices already, such as extrajudicial detention and ill treatment of suspected separatism supporters by the volunteer militias with links to the far right. Questionable frustration policies, physical assaults on political figures from the old regime, and legislation that limits basic constitutional rights in areas where a state of emergency or anti-terrorist operation is in force (including the right not to be detained without a court order) are clearly undemocratic and should be recognized as such, even if they are initiated by Ukrainian political forces friendly to the West.

Finally, addressing Russia’s legitimate concerns when it comes to developing closer partnerships between states in Russia’s near abroad and the West could serve to improve U.S.-Russian relations. Here, the West needs to walk a fine line between recognizing Russia’s concerns about what happens in its neighborhood and working in good faith to address them without letting Russia veto integration of its neighbors in Western institutions if they so choose. The one year delay in the implementation of free trade part of the EU association agreement with Ukraine to allow time for consultations on the impact of this agreement on Russian economy and its trade with Ukraine is one example of a compromise solution. This considers the consequences such an agreement could have on Russia’s economy. Distinguishing between “wants” and “needs” on a case-by-case basis, while not easy, is necessary on the part of both the West and Russia to prevent the crisis from deepening and spreading.
discussion questions

1. The brief period that followed the fall of the Soviet Union was characterized by Russia’s attempts to adopt pro-Western principles. Explain why Russia initially sought foreign policies with the West. How did Russia try integrating itself into the Western world? Identify the goals it hoped to achieve by doing so. In addition, name some of the challenges that it faced.

2. The rise of Vladimir Putin to power resulted in Russia’s pursuit of assertive foreign policies, and relations between Russia and the West have become strained. What are some of the causes of this rift and crisis in Ukraine? How does Putin’s leadership style differ from that of Yeltsin’s? How has his leadership style changed throughout his time in politics?

3. How big of a role does ideology play in Putin’s treatment of Ukraine? Are Putin’s actions motivated by ideology or purely out of political and economic interests?

4. The crisis in Ukraine can be traced back to the 2004 orange revolution. This prevented Viktor Yanukovych from becoming the third Ukrainian president, due to flawed presidential elections. How did Russia respond to the orange revolution? Why did Viktor Yanukovych decide not to sign the association and free trade agreement with the European Union, and what role did Russia play in this particular event? In light of the Ukrainian demonstrations and protests that ensued, how have Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Western relations been affected by Euromaidan?

5. How did Russia’s removal of several million pro-Russian voters (through its annexation of Crimea) from Ukrainian election polls affect Ukraine’s 2014 presidential and legislative elections? How will the changes in Ukraine’s Russian-speaker demographics affect its foreign policy?

6. In response to the crisis, Western sanctions have been imposed on Russian individuals and companies. How effective is this method in the long- and short-run? In addition, NATO countries have since ruled out using military action against Russia over Ukraine. In your opinion, what other options does the West have in dealing with the crisis?

suggested readings


Gvozdev, Nikolas and Christopher March. Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors. Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2014. 436 pp. An up to date volume that provides a comprehensive overview of actors shaping Russia’s foreign policy, and an account of these policies in different regions of the world.


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