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# University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



## Putin and Ukraine

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*The Dayton Daily News published on March 13 this opinion piece by Jaro Bilocerkowycz, University of Dayton associate professor of political science, about Russian President Vladimir Putin and his relationship with Ukraine, prompted by Russia's involvement in Ukraine. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the policies or opinions of the trustees, faculty or administration of the University of Dayton.*

Russia is subjecting democratic Ukraine to intense political, economic, military and psychological pressure, even going as far as to militarily occupy Crimea, part of sovereign Ukraine, with the threat of annexing the province. So far Ukrainians have demonstrated remarkable restraint, discipline and unity during this unprovoked crisis.

Why is Putin doing this and why is he so anti-Ukraine?

Putin finds the precedent of a democratic and pro-Europe Ukraine on his border, one which ousted an authoritarian and corrupt leader that tilted toward Russia, especially dangerous. Other post-Soviet states might be inspired to follow suit. Even the Russian public might favor political and economic changes if Ukraine makes a successful transition. Putin also hopes to build a Eurasian Union, a political and economic bloc which aspires to compete with the European Union. Ukraine's potential membership in this bloc is considered vital to Putin given Ukraine's size, resources, and importance. This represents a neo-imperial project to replace the fallen USSR.

In addition to the military presence in Crimea widely reported around the world, Putin has taken less-reported steps to weaken and dismember Ukraine. There are plans to hold an illegal referendum on Crimea joining Russia. Armed gunmen have blocked international monitors from entering Crimea and United Nations special envoy, Robert Serry, was physically threatened. Russia also is stoking separatism in parts of eastern Ukraine with paid Russian "tourist protestors" that are bused in with Russian flags to organize and agitate against the Kiev government and for secession. Even before the intervention in Crimea, high-level members of the Russian parliament met with pro-Russia groups in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, to discuss and coordinate plans to destabilize Ukraine. Putin and the Russian state media are determined to distort and misrepresent the Maidan Revolution as an "armed coup" by "extremists" and "terrorists." In reality it was a revolution for democracy, economic reform and the end of corruption – which would be ensured long-term via political and economic association with Europe rather than alignment with Russia.

Putin's power play in Ukraine has created a dangerous crisis for Ukraine, Europe and the international community. Russia is blatantly breaking international law, as well as international and bilateral accords signed with Ukraine, including one which facilitated the destruction of Ukraine's nuclear weapons. Putin seeks to impose his will by military force and intimidation knowing he has certain advantages given the geopolitical situation.

Putin wants a strong Russian state and increasingly relies on nationalism to provide a unifying ideology. Thus, he rails against Western plots, democracy and gay rights as threats to Russia. The pretext of "protecting Russian minorities" or "Russian speakers" abroad provides a means to meddle in and pressure neighboring states. In Ukraine's case, there was no threat to ethnic Russians in Crimea or elsewhere.

Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." For many imperial-minded Russians, the loss of empire has been difficult. Putin's playing of the Russian minority card and efforts to establish Russian control over Crimea, and parts of Georgia and Moldova, are intended to weaken those neighboring states while enlarging Russian territory and spheres of influence.

A strong international response is necessary to support Ukraine and penalize Russia, as well as to reassure Eastern Europe and uphold international law and norms. Tough economic sanctions and political isolation, if done collectively, could raise the costs for such international aggression. Getting Europe, especially Germany, on board, given their reliance on Russian natural gas, will be very challenging. Providing strong economic and political support for Ukraine and military arms and training for its troops if Russia expands further would enhance Ukraine's capacity to defend itself. The stakes in the Ukraine crisis are huge

for Ukraine and Russia as well for Europe and the international community.

A war between Russia and Ukraine must be avoided, but so too Putin's imperial power play should not be accepted or legitimized as it would destabilize the region and Europe.

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