

West does not understand **Putin**

Q&A with Ukraine expert Dr. Taras Kuzio on international attitudes towards Ukraine crisis

Do European and American leaders understand Vladimir Putin?

Not fundamentally, in the sense that they fail to realize he is a person tied to organized crime since the 1990s, and an authoritarian sociopath who has built a neo-fascist state that is a threat to Russia's neighbours. American President Barack Obama and many EU member states have invested heavily in the 'cuddly teddy bear' version of Russia as a country desperate to become like the West. They were therefore left shocked by the Crimean annexation, the shooting down of MH17, the invasion Ukraine, and the continued fuelling of the Donbas conflict. The reality they are confronted by now is not so cuddly – instead, they face an angry grizzly bear that hates the West.

How have attitudes towards Russia in the West evolved over the past year?

There has been a discernable change in attitudes but it is still taking place far too slowly. The Crimea annexation hardly jolted international perceptions, even though it was the first European land grab since the days of Adolf Hitler. It took the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and Russia's invasion of east Ukraine with regular army forces in July-August 2014 to somewhat change perceptions. However, as Western diplomatic efforts during the first and second rounds of the Minsk ceasefire talks served to demonstrate, EU leaders and the Obama White House continue to harbor illusions about the nature of Putin and his desire to subjugate Ukraine's independence. The West's continued investment in denial over the reality of the Russian threat is matched only by Ukraine's investment in a so-called ATO operation ('anti-terrorist operation') when in reality the country is at war.

How serious is the danger of 'Ukraine fatigue' setting in across Europe?

I do not see 'Ukraine fatigue' as a serious threat yet, largely because Putin keeps upping the ante. Fatigue is more of a longer-term problem for Ukraine in general and it is tied to the country's ability to reform and fight corruption. There remains much skepticism about the commitment among Ukraine's political leaders to real policies of reform and reducing high-level corruption. In this respect, the country's international partners are very similar to the Ukrainian general public, which is also very skeptical about the credibility of the reform drive. Ukrainian leaders, in turn, still seem to believe that there are free lunches to be had and do not want to listen to Western advisers.

They are also inclined to exaggerate their geopolitical importance to the West.

Can Ukraine make progress towards European integration with a frozen conflict in the Donbas?

Putin is confident Ukraine cannot make progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration in such circumstances, and I

would have to agree that this is indeed the case. The conflict drains budgetary resources, manpower and saps the energy of civil society, leading to widespread despondency. Putin seeks to maintain a high level of destabilization throughout Ukraine via his hybrid war in the Donbas itself, and through terrorist campaigns in other regions of the country. European integration is also held back by the EU itself, which still has to offer Ukraine the prospect of potential future membership. This is also the case regarding NATO – at the 2008 NATO congress the possibility of future membership for Ukraine was held out, but as of today this idea has been de facto vetoed by Germany and France.

Where would Ukraine be today if the Euromaidan protests had never materialized?

In early 2015 presidential elections would have been held as per the existing schedule. Yanukovich would have 'won' the vote at all costs and with Putin's backing. This would have likely involved massive manipulation, censorship, voter fraud and other tactics seen commonly in today's Russia and witnessed in Ukraine itself in the flawed 2004 presidential election which served as the immediate cause of the Orange Revolution. The revolutionary protests and violence which rocked Ukraine in 2014 would therefore likely have still taken place, but they would have started one year later. Violence was inevitable, whether in 2014 or 2015, as a result of Putin's and Yanukovich's sociopathic and kleptocratic personalities. Losing a free and fair vote and not being in power for a second term in office was never considered an option for Yanukovich. He would not have relinquished his control over the country without being forced to do so.

Many people have argued that Putin has inadvertently become the architect of a united Ukraine. Do you agree?

He has helped to spread Ukrainian patriotism to the country's Russian speakers in eastern and southern Ukraine, but this has come at a tremendous cost. The Crimea is annexed and I do not see Putin ever returning it. The Donbas will never be a classic frozen conflict. Instead, it could serve to spark violent conflict for many years to come. If Ukraine were to succeed in recapturing the Donbas, how would it pay the trillions of dollars required to rebuild it? How would Ukraine convince the Ukrainophobes of the DNR and LNR that they are not CIA-trained 'fascists'? Putin may have indirectly helped to unite Ukraine, but only if the new Ukraine no longer includes the most Ukrainophobic and Sovietized regions of the country – namely Crimea and the Donbas. Putin has already seized the first of these territories outright. It is up to Ukraine's leaders to decide what to do about the latter. Perhaps a genuine referendum might be a good way to decide the future fate of the Donbas.



Dr. Taras Kuzio is Senior Research Associate at the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta), Senior Research Fellow at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies (University of Toronto), and Non-Resident Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations (Johns Hopkins University-SAIS).