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RUSSIA'S OPTIONS, AS RUSSIANS SEE THEM

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"[W]e are going to continue for long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with....Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism...demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige."

"X" (George F. Kennan), 1947.
The Sources of Soviet Conduct.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's former chief economic adviser (2000-2005) Andrei Illarionov¹ published a commentary in the online news portal *Echo of Moscow* on 5 July 2014 under the title "Operation 'Strategic Blackmail'."² Illarionov claims Russian leaders earlier in the week undertook a concerted effort to force the cessation of anti-terrorist operations in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. The "blackmail" element according to Illarionov was the threat that, if these operations continued, Russia would intervene militarily under the guise of a "peacekeeping operation" (*«миротворческой операции»*), the purport of which is to avoid two eventualities. The first, unsurprisingly, is the imposition of further sanctions by the West. The second, more troubling one is "an indignant outburst from Russia's *Novorossiya* coalition." Illarionov claims that the second eventuality would result in President Putin's branding as "the betrayer of *Novorossiya*" (*«национал-предателя Новороссии»*) as well as his "likely loss of power and possibly, life" (*вероятной утратой власти и, возможно, жизни*).

Mikhail Vladimirovitch Alexandrov is a political scientist with the Institute of the CIS, a Moscow-based think tank described by *Foreign Affairs* as "Kremlin friendly." In a commentary³ that appeared a few days before Illarionov's, he assessed President Putin's promise that Russia will never allow a repeat of the disaster of 1941, the year in which Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June, and the Romanian army entered Odessa in October. Alexandrov wrote:

¹ Andrei Illarionov is currently a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.

² Илларионов, Андрей (2014). "Операция «Стратегический Шантаж»." *Эхо Москвы*, 05 июля 2014.
<http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/ailar/1353698-echo/>. Last accessed 6 July 2014.

³ The title of his commentary in English is "The Collapse of Strategy: Does President Putin repeat Marshal Stalin's errors?" See: Александров, Михаил (2014). "Крах Стратегии: Не Повторяет Ли Президент Путин Ошибок Маршала Сталина?" *Информационное агентство REX* [online edition 2 July 2014]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/48916.html>. Last accessed 2 July 2014.

“Putin had surprising foresight: the crisis in Ukraine was a mortal crisis for Russia. The irony is that once he made his promise, the president of Russia, it seems, began to move in the opposite direction. One gets the impression he is on a path to repeating the mistakes of his great predecessor, Marshal Stalin.”

“Do not,” he warns, “turn Moscow’s current policy of diplomatic maneuvering into a ‘new’ 1941.”

It is dangerous to underestimate the role of personality in history, Alexandrov continues, something “greatly devalued during the Soviet period.” In “the current Ukraine crisis, the subjective factor again can have a decisive impact on the course of world events and the future of Russia, as it did in 1940-41.”

Stalin’s “mistake,” he asserts, was to misjudge Hitler as he maneuvered to delay a German invasion, and at the same time failing to prepare either the army or the people for war.

“The Germans were presented not as enemies but as friends, or as they say now, ‘partners’. A campaign against ‘alarmists’ and ‘war provocateurs’ was launched. Stalin, like Zhukov and Timoshenko, said: “Tease the Germans, and heads will roll...The Soviet people paid a high price for Stalin’s error”

Today, Putin “believed he could strengthen Russian sovereignty, increase its power and influence, and defend its national interests while at the same time maintaining good relations with the West, and developing economic ties and even joint projects...Perhaps Putin hoped that large-scale joint economic projects [read: pipelines] would give Europeans sufficient interest in trade with Russia enough to cause a split between the European Union and the United States. But this was a strategic mistake. Western elites, however, are sufficiently united and Russophobic never to allow a split over an issue like relations with Russia.”

Alexandrov is fatalistic that “a military confrontation with Ukraine will happen sooner or later.” The situation in Ukraine, he believes, leaves Putin, like Stalin in 1940, with only three options, none especially good for him or for Russia. The first is to become the West’s “protectorate,” something similar, he writes, to what Hitler offered Stalin in December 1940. Acceding to the West’s conditions would mean surrendering the Donbas, then Crimea, Transdnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It would make Russia’s dismemberment “inevitable.”

“The second option,” he writes, “is to strike first and send troops to restore political power to the people of southeastern Ukraine.” Once Russia intervened:

“The Ukrainian people would have to defeat and purge fascist elements, and to hold new democratic elections. They would have to decide for themselves whether to live in a single country or to split Ukraine into parts. For its part, Russia would have to recognize the independence of Transdnistria and Gagauzia, and purge pro-Western “Fifth Columnists” from its government and media.”

This option is not without consequences for Russia. “Naturally, the deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine would lead to a serious confrontation with the West, to the introduction of numerous anti-Russian economic sanctions, and to freezing the assets of Russian oligarchs and state-owned companies held in the West.” Europe will only go so far following the lead of the United States, however:

“[A] complete cessation of trade with the EU is not going to happen, as it did not happen during the Cold War. Things have changed as well: the economies of the US and Western Europe now account for less than half the world’s economy. Therefore, Russia can quite easily, though not without some disturbance, live without economic ties with the West. The disruption in the European Union will far outweigh the effect on Russia, as a global economic collapse sweeps over it like a wave.”

The third option is the most likely, according to Alexandrov, who believes Putin is being pushed in this direction by “Russian elites”: “[T]o do as Stalin did in 1940-41, making concessions to the West in order to drag out the situation.” This option does not mean certain defeat, he writes, “but the cost of exercising it goes ever higher.” While Putin has already made some largely symbolic concessions “apparently in the hope that the West will agree to a compromise...the West only demands more and pushes Russia to concede more.” Alexandrov would no doubt

cite, albeit disapprovingly, a 3 July report by the German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*:

“Foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France meeting in Berlin on Wednesday agreed to seek new ceasefire talks involving the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), starting no later than Saturday in crisis-torn Ukraine... The goal was to reopen talks no later than Saturday ‘with the goal of reaching an unconditional and mutually agreed sustainable ceasefire’ to be monitored by the OSCE.”⁴

For Alexandrov, “even if the proponents of surrender among Russian elites do not prevail, Moscow’s refusal to take an active role in Ukraine, whether in terms of deploying troops or just providing military and technical assistance to the Donbas, will cause very negative consequences for Russian national security.” Russia’s relations with the West will not improve, and “at the same time, Moscow’s refusal to make further concessions right away will result in further economic sanctions.”

Russian journalist Viktor Litovkin⁵ believes Russia similarly ignored “the lessons of 1941” vis-à-vis Georgia circa 2008:

“We suffered similar setbacks during the August 2008 war with Georgia. The Russian army was not prepared for Georgian aggression... I believe that the lessons of 1941 were lost. Our military capabilities, hardware and combat support are at a different level now, but, regrettably, Russia only pays attention to the needs of its military after the fact.”⁶

Two of Alexandrov’s prescriptions bear special notice. His first is to abandon looking for fracture lines in the Western alliance:

“Moscow’s attempts to play on contradictions and to cause a rift between the United States and the European Union are a waste of time and resources. Russia would be better served by channeling these resources toward creating a threat to Western interests in different parts of the world. Only this can push the West into serious negotiations on issues of importance to Russia.”

Some in Europe share Alexandrov’s assessment if not his conclusion: for example, Alexander Neu believes the 2008 Georgia crisis was “the first warning shot” that NATO intended to expand eastward.⁷ NATO expansion is not, however, “as Russia claims, a breach of international law” since Russia and NATO never entered into a treaty commitment. Instead, he suggests, it was “a gentlemen’s agreement,” one made possible by “Russian credulity” about Western intentions, something that happened in the past as well. Last week’s European Union association agreements with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine “clearly demonstrate the West’s indifference to Moscow’s protests.” Likewise, NATO naval maneuvers in the Black Sea “do not contribute to détente but instead are a provocation in a region Russia has long claimed as its sphere of influence, and so will be challenged.”⁸

This leads directly to Alexandrov’s second prescription: that ‘Russia has only obtained a positive outcome in circumstances where it demonstrates and applies its own strength, as, for example, in South Ossetia and Crimea. Russia should take exactly the same approach in Ukraine.’

⁴ “Fresh Ukraine ceasefire talks to begin by Saturday.” *Deutsche Welle* [online edition 3 July 2014]. <http://www.dw.de/fresh-ukraine-ceasefire-talks-to-begin-by-saturday/a-17754475>. Last accessed 3 July 2014.

⁵ Viktor Litovkin is executive editor of *The Independent Military Review* (Russian: *Независимое военное обозрение*. Russian transl.: *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*) and directs the ITAR-TASS military news editorial office.

⁶ Viktor Litovkin (2011). “Lost lessons of 1941.” *RIA-Novosti* [online edition 24 June 2011]. http://en.ria.ru/valdai_op/20110624/164821405.html. Last accessed 2 July 2014.

⁷ Neu is a political scientist and a member of Germany’s *Bundestag*, where he sits with *Die Linke* (“Party of the Left”). See: “NATO im Schwarzmeer.” *Radio Stimme Russlands* [online report 4 July 2014]. http://german.ruvr.ru/2014_07_04/Nato-im-Schwarzmeer-6477/. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

⁸ Nau goes on in the interview to offer an interesting perspective on Germany’s role in the Ukraine crisis. Germany is not “a brakeman” in Ukraine, and “has its own agenda, both in cooperation and in competition with the United States.” Vis-à-vis Russia, “that relationship is cooperative, but Germany nevertheless competes with the United States as it seeks to consolidate a German sphere of influence in Ukraine.” Right now, “Germany lags behind the United States because President Poroshenko hears more American voices than French or German ones.” See endnote (5).

The Russian news portal *Kavpolit* [*Кавполит*⁹] recently pointed out a serious risk associated with this approach: “the emergence on Russia’s southern border of an ungovernable territory with an armed population, the negative consequences of which are self evident.” It points to the example of Ichkeria:

“As a result of the First Chechen War of 1994-1996, Russia recognized the independence of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The August 1996 Khasavyurt agreement provided for Russian troops to withdraw from Chechnya, and postponed determining the Republic’s final status until December 2001.”

“However, the separatist leadership failed to seize the opportunity to create stable, functioning state institutions. Although Ichkeria received de facto independence, no functioning government emerged during the period of the next three years. The real power belonged to the warlords, who were engaged in kidnapping and drug trafficking. This resulted in the Second Chechen War, and the final consolidation of Chechnya within Russia in 2003.”

Today, *Kavpolit* observes, “The actions of the Ukrainian security forces have transformed a political conflict in a full fledged national liberation struggle,” like Russia’s intervention in Chechnya two decades earlier, when the “refusal to solve the conflict by political means increased the ranks of the Chechen separatists by those who did not support Dudayev but were ready to fight for Chechnya.”

The *Kavpolit* commentary assessed several possible analogues to today’s Ukraine. The first is Nagorno-Karabakh, where the predominantly ethnic Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast seceded from Azerbaijan in February 1988 and unified with Armenia as the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, setting off a conflict that lasted until a Russia-brokered a ceasefire agreement took hold in May 1994. While “the difference between Russians and Ukrainians in the eastern regions of Ukraine...is certainly not as striking as those between Armenians and Azerbaijanis,” an acute ethnic identity should not be underrated: “The idea of the ‘divided nation’...was one of the most important in the victory of the Armenian side, despite Azerbaijan’s superiority in manpower and equipment.”

The second analogy is one that has been drawn many times before: the 1992-1995 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Kavpolit* rejects it, though, as ill fitting, given what it described as Russia’s “overriding interest in an intact federated Ukraine”:

“Ukraine continued existence as a single political entity, even a nominal one, keeps the current confrontation from reaching a point of no return, while at the same time giving Russia a sphere of influence in the de facto independent eastern regions with broad powers.”

It also cites the sheer size of Ukraine’s Donbas—Russia can ill-afford the cost to absorb the 6.5 million people living in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts—and the fear that Ukraine’s financial collapse would lead to anarchy.

Here, there is something of a Catch-22 for Russia. While “the implementation of a ‘federal’ scenario is possible only if Kyev agrees to officially recognize Donetsk and Lugansk as full participants in negotiations on the future of the country, and to support their right under the ‘New Ukraine’ to take as much sovereignty as they could carry”:

“If (when) the unrecognized republics win their struggle for independence, the leaders of this victory will gain enormous prestige in the eyes of most Russians, something that can easily transform into political capital within Russia itself. It should be recalled that the current political leadership in Armenia, including its last two Presidents, Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, are ‘children’ of victory in the Karabakh war.”

Here, *Kavpolit’s* outlook is especially pessimistic. While Bosnia-Herzegovina’s ethnic enclaves were tightly compacted, *Novorossiia* by comparison extends much farther than Donetsk and Lugansk:

⁹ Проценко, Николай (2014). “Пять вариантов будущего Украины: боснийский, ичкерийский, карабахский, косовский, южно-суданский.” [Prosenko, Nicholas (2014). “Five options for the future of Ukraine: Bosnian, Ichkeria, Karabakh, Kosovo, and South Sudan.”] *Kavpolit* [online edition, 30 June 2014]. http://kavpolit.com/articles/ukraina_2014_stsenarii_raspada-6609/. Last accessed 3 July 2014.

“[T]his means the self-determination of these regions (at least within a confederation) will not stop Ukraine’s disintegration, but only make matters worse. Secession attempts by other regions in south and east Ukraine almost certainly cause further bloodshed. Also, do not forget about territorial claims to Ukraine by the European countries, as well as latent separatism in Transcarpathia.”

What is more likely, it suggests, is a “Somali scenario, where Ukraine remains on paper as a United Nations member-state, but in fact turns into a conglomerate of opposing, unrecognized territories in which the internationally-recognized government controls only part of the country.” It then compares and contrasts two self-declared states that emerged from so-called *frozen conflicts*, the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Abkhazia,¹⁰ for which:

“Recognition (or non-recognition) depended on a relationship with a particular state—the United States— which was the chief initiator of Kosovo’s secession, and the general sponsor of the ex-president of Georgia. Mikheil Saakashvili.”¹¹

While *Kavpolit* speculates Donetsk and Lugansk are more likely to go the way of Abkhazia than Kosovo because the Donbas “is too large and economically developed an area to remain in an interim status for long.” This leads to a central consideration: that the Donbas industrial base is too important—to both Ukraine and Russia—for eastern Ukraine to join the list of frozen conflicts:

“The western regions of Ukraine underwent rapid deindustrialization after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In contrast, eastern Ukraine retained its industrial base, which emerged here long before the 1917 revolution, and tried in the new environment to preserve its central position in the economy. What is at stake today is the economic future of the Donbas industrial region as a vigorous part of Ukraine’s economy. And who knows, perhaps in the future, the Donbas will be the economic engine of a New Ukraine. Or, at least, of *Novorossiia*.”

These two provocative, if very different, commentaries offer us three lessons. The first is that neither Ukraine nor Russia can risk the Donbas degrading into an ungovernable territory. The considerations here are both political—avoiding the frozen conflict dilemma— and, perhaps more important, economic—the Donbas as the economic engine of Ukraine or *Novorossiia*, but not both.

The second lesson is described by another commentator in characteristically prosaic Russian style as “the post-Soviet desire to sit on two chairs.”

“After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was not fashionable to believe in something in particular, to have a clear opinion...the post-Soviet disease is, always and everywhere, ‘to want to sit on two chairs’. Yanukovich was sitting on two chairs between the EU and Russia, and now the new Ukrainian ‘revolutionaries’ want to sit on two chairs, between an independent Ukraine and complete surrender to the West. And the citizens of Russia and the Crimea, too, want to sit on two chairs.”¹²

Underlying this metaphor is a serious point too often dismissed in the West: President Putin confronts a bloc that fervently believes Russia, in earlier conflicts, won only when it used military force. Beyond mere annoyance with what many Russians dismiss as American hypocrisy—distant interventions by the United States, e.g., Libya, are routinely cited by Russian commentators— this judgment underlies Russian opposition to “accommodation” with the West—Alexandrov’s point about “Stalin in 1941”. And as Alexandrov warned, the practice of making

¹⁰ Stepan Sulakshin makes a similar argument in his commentary “What’s the difference?” (*В чем разница?*), adding Transnistria to the *Kavpolit* roster. See: Степан Сулакшин (2014). “В чем разница?” *Россия Навсегда* [03 июля 2014]. <http://rossiyanavsegda.ru/read/2100/>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

¹¹ Kosovo, *Kavpolit* argues, was a de facto NATO protectorate from 1999 until it formally declared independence from Serbia in February 2008. Saakashvili was Georgia’s President during the Five-Day War in 2008, in which Georgia was defeated by a mostly Russian force. Afterward, Russia recognized the Republic of Abkhazia— which achieved de facto independence from Georgia after the 1992-1993 war—as an independent state (along with South Ossetia). Only five other states have joined Russia in recognizing the Republic of Abkhazia, however.

¹² “Александр Феникс” [pseud.] (2014). “Постсоветское стремление усидеть на двух стульях.” «Однако» [online version 27 June 2014]. <http://www.odnako.org/blogs/postsovetskoe-stremlenie-usidet-na-dvuh-stulyah/>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

concessions to the West to protract the situation in Ukraine will leave Russia with fewer, more expensive options there: as the earlier commentator put it, “the chairs are leaving, and if you do not make a choice, you’ll find yourself on the floor.” While his metaphor again is colourful, it belies a serious observation:

“The time to choose always comes,” he writes, and “those who have not made their choice are doomed to suffer and die. Yanukovich decided late and fell. The Kyev junta does not want to decide, and as a result is rapidly nearing defeat.”

Therein lies the danger when Western leaders glibly refer to Russia in public statements as a second-rate, “regional” power that acts out of weakness¹³: it is that Russia will respond by acting as it believes a first-rate power acts, which is to intervene unilaterally and forcefully.

The third and final lesson relates to appreciating the Donbas’ indispensability to the economies of both Ukraine and Russia. As Fahraddin writes, the view of pro-Western Russians (or to their detractors, “Fifth Columnists”) is that Russia “will proceed on a happy European path” (“*страна проследует по счастливому Европейскому пути*”).¹⁴ The other view is that there is every “reason to worry about the fate of both Putin and Russia as a whole in the coming era of destructive events in Ukraine and the countries along Russia’s borders.” This camp sees the current situation in Ukraine as dire: as a central figure in Russia’s Eurasian movement, Alexander Dubin, wrote on 3 July, the Kyev government “to the best of its ability is trying to strangle *Novorossiya*, cutting it off from Russia and surrounding it.”

Aboszoda Fahraddin writes, “A troubled ghost haunts the Kremlin corridors.” For him, that ghost is Vladimir Putin. There are other views as well: for Alexandrov, the ghost is Stalin, as in a Krylov fable. In an earlier period, Sergey Markedonov suggested it was “the ghost of the Soviet Union” and that Russia consequently learned a hard lesson:

“In the absence of common rules, standards and criteria for self-determination, political expediency has become a major driver in world politics...powerful states could chose to recognize the legitimacy of any sub-state entities as dictated by their interests.”¹⁵

Today, it seems, as Vladimir Pavlenko writes, Russia labors under “the syndrome of the last quarter century”¹⁶ and the burdensome legacy of earlier conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and elsewhere. In fairness, the same might well be said of the United States.¹⁷ That factor might be worth bearing in mind as the United States engages with President Putin.

Pavlenko concludes his essay with a sardonic observation: “Putin, in contrast to you and me, has no right to errors.” We might do well to remember that he wrote that sentence in jest, not as a policy prescription.

¹³ Wilson, Scott (2014). “Obama dismisses Russia as ‘regional power’ acting out of weakness.” *The Washington Post* [online edition 25 March 2014]. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

¹⁴ Aboszoda, Fahraddin (2014). “После Эйфории: Призрак Смуты Бродит По Коридорам Кремля.” *REX* [online edition 2 July 2014]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/48939.html>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

¹⁵ Markedonov, Sergey (2010). “The ghost of the Soviet Union.” *Abkhazworld.com* [online edition 7 August 2010]. <http://abkhazworld.com/aw/analysis/863-the-ghost-of-the-soviet-union-by-sergey-markedonov>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

¹⁶ Павленко, Владимир Борисович (2014). “Без Права На Ошибку: Все Проблемы Путина Не Внутри, А «Снаружи».” *REX* [online edition 4 July 2014]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/48974.html>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.

¹⁷ A recent headline lamented, “First Syria, Now Ukraine: What Explains the U.S. Public's Reluctance to Intervene?” See: <http://sitrep.globalsecurity.org/articles/140428933--pda-review-during.htm>. Last accessed 4 July 2014.