

## Crimea: Anatomy of a decision

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President Vladimir Putin's decision to seize the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and incorporate it into Russia was the most consequential of his first 15 years in power.<sup>1</sup> It had profound implications for both foreign and domestic policy as well as for how Russia was viewed around the world. The intervention also took most observers—both in Russia and in the West—by surprise. For these reasons, it is a promising case from which to seek insight into the concerns and processes that drive Kremlin decision-making on high-stakes issues.

One can distinguish two key questions: *why* Putin chose to do what he did, and *how* the decision was made. In fact, as will become clear, the answer to the second question helps one choose among different possible answers to the first.

Why did Putin order his military intelligence commandos to take control of the peninsula? In the immediate aftermath, four explanations dominated discussion in the Western media and academic circles. A first image—call this “Putin the defender”—saw the Russian intervention as a desperate response to the perceived threat of NATO enlargement. Fearing that with President Viktor Yanukovich gone Ukraine's new government would quickly join the Western military alliance, so the argument goes, Putin struck preemptively to prevent such a major strategic loss and to break the momentum of NATO's eastward drive (see, e.g., Mearsheimer 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws heavily on “Why Putin Took Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2016.

A second image—“Putin the imperialist”—cast Crimea as the climax of a gradually unfolding, systematic project on the part of the Kremlin to recapture the lost lands of the Soviet Union. In this view, Putin never accepted Moscow’s diminished status and territory. Although at times artfully concealing his purposes, he was determined to push Russia’s borders outward and restore the state’s lost prestige (e.g. Grigas 2016). He merely used the opportunity provided by Kiev’s political crisis to advance a long-standing plan.

Third, there was “Putin the populist.” Perhaps grabbing the former Russian territory, while thumbing his nose at the West, was intended to rally popular support behind him at a time when the economic underpinnings of his previous popularity were fading. This third Putin sought a short victorious war to burnish his image. And, indeed, his ratings quickly soared to above 80 percent, making this version seem plausible.

The fourth perspective crosses over from the “why” question to the question of “how.” In this version—“Putin the improviser”—there was no consistent, long-term goal. Instead, the intervention represented a victory of tactics over strategy. Putin was a leader preoccupied with day-to-day choices, pulled in different directions, and reacting to events with no model to guide him. Crimea, in this view, was an accident into which he stumbled in the heat of a particular disorienting crisis. There was no “why” beyond short-term advantage, the determination to seize opportunities and to create problems where possible for those perceived as hostile.

How plausible are these interpretations of the Russian leader’s motivation? I use a variety of evidence, from interviews in Moscow, published analyses, and detailed press accounts. Of course, certain facts remain unknown and participants may aim to mislead. The truth could combine elements from more than one of the common views. While these points dictate caution, close examination of the record does suggest some conclusions.

### *The official line*

An obvious place to start is with the Kremlin's official explanation—but, not surprisingly, it turns out to be little help. A collage of disparate elements, it seems designed to appeal simultaneously to different groups of Russians. All four of the images find support somewhere in Putin's public comments.

On the one hand, he emphasizes improvisation. The intervention, he has said, was an impromptu response to the chaos unleashed by President Yanukovich's fall from power. At a reception in Sochi in October 2015, I asked Putin in person whether the operation had been planned long in advance. "Not at all. It was spontaneous," he replied. "We saw what was happening in Kiev and I made a decision."

At other times, Putin has hinted at a deeper motivation. Rather than a snap reaction to fast-moving events, the operation was an overdue correction of a historical injustice. "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia," he told the Russian parliament in March 2014. It is the place where Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and where Russian soldiers from the Crimean War lie buried. In losing the peninsula to Ukraine in 1991, Putin insisted, Russia "was not simply robbed, it was plundered."<sup>2</sup>

Concern about military encirclement also shows up. In the same speech, Putin complained that he had "already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO." NATO sailors were mostly "wonderful guys," he added, but he did not want to have to visit them in Sevastopol, from where their guns would threaten "the whole of Southern Russia."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Address by President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

And a little later, he turned to Russian public opinion. According to Putin, 86 percent of Russians saw Crimea as “still being Russian territory,” and almost 92 percent supported the region’s “reunification with Russia.” In short, bringing Crimea “home” was popular. That was lucky for the Kremlin since, as Putin put it, “any decision here can be based only on the people’s will, because the people is the ultimate source of all authority.”<sup>4</sup>

Putin has also mentioned several other motives—to protect Crimea’s Russian population against violent Ukrainian nationalists, and to respect the community’s right to self-determination. But since the threat from Ukrainian nationalists in Crimea was almost entirely fictitious and since Putin had shown little interest in the Crimeans’ self-determination during his previous 14 years in power, these points look more like an effort at justification than like true causes.

So was it an act of imperial expansion, an attempt to halt NATO’s moves to the east, a populist move to shore up his approval rating? Or was it merely an improvised response to a particular short-run crisis, hastily initiated with no particular long-run objective in mind?

### ***Keeping NATO out***

Consider first the idea that the intervention aimed to prevent Ukraine’s entry into NATO. The way that the West had enlarged the alliance, without more than token attempts to integrate Russia, clearly helped to poison the relationship between the two over the preceding decades. The Kremlin was determined to prevent Ukraine from becoming a NATO member. But was that really a key factor in this case?

One problem is that Ukraine was *not* heading towards NATO membership at the time. Under Yanukovich, Ukraine had passed a law committing the country to non-bloc status

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

(Moshes 2013). It had settled for partnership with the alliance rather than membership, an outcome Russia seemed to accept. When, in his March speech, Putin mentioned the “declarations from Kiev” about joining NATO, he failed to mention one important detail—all such recent declarations had come *after* Putin’s troops appeared in Crimea.

The Russian leader might still have feared that Ukraine’s new government would reverse course—as President Viktor Yushchenko had done after the Orange Revolution. It was quite reasonable to anticipate that the new pro-Western leaders would revisit the issue. Yet, even if Ukraine wanted to join, NATO was not about to let it in. Putin had won that battle at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. At the urging of the leaders of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, the organization had rejected the proposal to give Ukraine and Georgia membership action plans.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, although NATO refused to say “never,” Germany’s Angela Merkel remained opposed to practical steps in that direction, and US President Barack Obama, unlike his predecessor, George W. Bush, took no action to advance Kiev’s membership. Moreover, NATO’s Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, had announced just months earlier, in October 2013, that Ukraine would definitely not be joining NATO in 2014, and there was little reason to expect that to change in subsequent years (Lekic 2013).

In fact, Putin’s Crimea intervention—along with his support for separatist rebels in Ukraine’s East—precipitated just the kind of military buildup near Russia’s borders that he ostensibly hoped to avoid. To deter challenges to its members, NATO created a rapid reaction force of 4,000 troops to rotate among Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria,

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<sup>5</sup> BBC, “NATO denies Georgia and Ukraine,” April 3, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7328276.stm>.

and stationed four warships in the Black Sea.<sup>6</sup> In early 2016, the White House proposed a quadrupling of US military spending in Europe.<sup>7</sup> If Putin's goal was to break out of containment, his actions were predictably counterproductive.

Even if objectively Ukraine was not heading towards NATO, Putin might still have believed otherwise. In that case, one might expect him to have raised the topic in his interactions with Western leaders. But did he? For three years—from 2009-2012—Michael McFaul served as special assistant to President Obama on Russia, and for the following two years he was the US Ambassador in Moscow. During that time, he was present for all but one of the meetings between President Obama and Putin or Medvedev. From the White House, he listened in on all the phone conversations between Obama and either Russian leader. In all those exchanges, McFaul said recently, “I can't recall once that the issue of NATO expansion came up.”<sup>8</sup>

In January 2016, I asked a source close to the commander of the military operation in Crimea if decision makers had been afraid of Ukraine joining NATO in the months preceding the intervention. “They weren't afraid of Ukraine joining NATO,” he said. “But they were definitely worried that the Ukrainians would cancel the lease on Sevastopol and kick out the Black Sea Fleet.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Garamone, “NATO Responding to Russia's Actions Against Ukraine,” US Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604333/nato-responding-to-russias-actions-against-ukraine>; Sneha Shankar, “Russia Boosts Military Presence in Response to Increasing NATO drills in Eastern Europe,” January 22, 2016, IBT, <http://www.ibtimes.com/russia-boosts-military-presence-response-increasing-nato-drills-eastern-europe-2275977>.

<sup>7</sup> Rick Lyman, “Eastern Europe Cautiously Welcomes Larger U.S. Military Presence,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/europe/eastern-europe-us-military.html?ref=world&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/europe/eastern-europe-us-military.html?ref=world&_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Michael McFaul, “A New Cold War? Russia's New Confrontation with the West,” talk at UCLA, May 12, 2015, <http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/podcasts/McFaul-Podcast--edit-v5-llj.mp3>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with source close to commander of Crimean operation, Moscow January 2016.

This seems plausible. The Black Sea Fleet is crucial to Russia's ability to project force into the Black and Mediterranean Seas, and many of Ukraine's opposition leaders had criticized Yanukovich for extending Moscow's lease on the base. But it still leaves a puzzle. With a contingent of 20,000 highly armed troops in Sevastopol, a mostly pro-Russian local population, and many other sources of leverage over a weak regime in Kiev, Russia would always have been difficult to evict. Its old mode of pressure and negotiation had worked consistently to protect its interests. Annexing the territory—at the cost of international isolation, economic sanctions, a reinvigoration of NATO, and the alienation of most of the Ukrainian population—seems an extreme reaction to a real but probably manageable threat. The costs appear out of proportion to the expected benefit.

### ***Rebuilding the empire***

To those who see Putin as an imperialist, his move in Crimea seems almost *too* easy to explain. A former KGB spy, he notoriously characterized the Soviet disintegration as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”<sup>10</sup> In a private conversation with President Bush in 2008, he seemed to question Ukraine's right to exist: “You understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and a significant part was given by us!”<sup>11</sup> Russia has periodically used gas shut-offs to pressure Kiev and other dependent clients, and it has handed out passports to residents of contested territories, creating a pretext to intervene later to protect “Russian citizens.”

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>. Some controversy surrounds the correct translation of Putin's words—“крушение Советского Союза было крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века.” The word “крупнейшей” can mean either “the greatest” or “a very great...” This matters little for my point here.

<sup>11</sup> Olga Allenova, Elena Geda, and Vladimir Novikov, “Blok NATO razoshelsya na blokpakety,” *Kommersant*, April 7, 2008, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224>.

In 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia, and Moscow then recognized the independence of the separatist territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After Estonia moved a memorial to Soviet World War II soldiers in 2007, Russia was accused of inciting deadly riots, and in 2014 its soldiers crossed the border to kidnap an Estonian security officer.

Given all this, one might suppose Russia had been planning to annex Crimea for years, if not decades. Other signs hint at active preparations in the six months before Yanukovich's fall. In September 2013, Putin appointed his political guru Vladislav Surkov to handle relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as—unofficially—Ukraine. Surkov, who hung a pre-Revolution map in his office on which Crimea appeared as a Russian province, visited Kiev and Simferopol, the Crimean capital, numerous times in the following months.<sup>12</sup> Teams of Russian police and secret service officers were also seen around Kiev. Among other projects, Surkov was promoting the construction of a bridge across the Kerch Strait to connect southern Russia to Crimea—an essential transportation link in case of annexation.

The chairman of the Crimean parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, was making frequent trips to the Russian capital. In December 2013, according to the journalist Mikhail Zygar, he met in Moscow with Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of Russia's Security Council. According to Zygar's source, who witnessed the meeting, Patrushev was "pleasantly surprised" to learn from Konstantinov that Crimea would be ready to "go to Russia" if Yanukovich were overthrown.<sup>13</sup> Konstantinov was back in Moscow on the eve of Russia's intervention, meeting with senior politicians.

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<sup>12</sup> Darya Mazaeva, "Boris Rapoport: 'Surkov vsegda byl i ostaetsya storonnikom doktrinom 'Moskva—trey Rim''," *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 16 December, 2014, <http://www.mk.ru/print/article/1137993/>.

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Zygar, *Vsya Kremlevskaya Rat*, Moscow: Intellektualnaya Literatura, 2015, p.337.

In February 2014, according to the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, a memorandum circulated in Russia's Presidential Administration that prefigured subsequent developments. Apparently composed by consultants working for a well-connected nationalist businessman, Konstantin Malofeev, it proposed a strategy for annexing Crimea and other Eastern Ukrainian regions. If Yanukovich fell, the memo warned, Ukraine would split into western and eastern parts, with the EU swallowing up the west. Moscow should then move fast to promote referenda in Crimea and Kharkov on uniting the regions with Russia. The memo's authors claimed that they could organize such referenda within two weeks.<sup>14</sup>

These details seem at first to indicate a long-prepared plan to seize Crimea. However, on examination, the case weakens.

One cannot be sure what Surkov discussed with local leaders on his visits to Crimea. But if he was preparing the republic's annexation, then Putin's next move seems bizarre. Rather than sending Surkov to Simferopol to implement his "plan," Putin took him off the case. Surkov apparently spent March in Moscow, where he found time to attend a gallery opening on March 6 and publish a short story on March 12.<sup>15</sup> He even managed, around March 20, to fit in a vacation in Sweden with his wife.<sup>16</sup> According to the journalist Zygar, Surkov's real assignment had been not Crimea but keeping Yanukovich in power. To Putin's displeasure, he failed, which explains his temporary sidelining. As for the police and secret service teams, had they been planning the

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<sup>14</sup> Andrei Lipsky, "Predstavlyaetsya pravilnym initsirovat prisoedinenie vostochnykh oblastey Ukrainy k Rossii," *Novaya Gazeta*, 24 February, 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67389.html?version=meter+at+0&module=meter-Links&pgtype=article&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click>.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.buro247.ru/events/photo-reports/proekt-chitay-po-gubam-v-galeree-art-podarkov-shal.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See [https://www.znak.com/2014-03-24/surkov\\_udivil\\_runet\\_sfotografirovavshis\\_v\\_stokgolme\\_nesmotrya\\_na\\_sankcii\\_es](https://www.znak.com/2014-03-24/surkov_udivil_runet_sfotografirovavshis_v_stokgolme_nesmotrya_na_sankcii_es).

Crimea operation, they would have visited Crimea, not Kiev. Their role was more likely to advise Yanukovich's staff on how to crush the Maidan.

Russia's interest in a bridge across the Kerch Strait seems at first consistent with an imperial design. Yet if Moscow had *really* been scheming for years to annex Crimea, it would not be just talking about such a bridge—it would have built it. In fact, negotiations had crept along for more than 10 years. Since 2010, when Yanukovich and then-President Medvedev signed an agreement, the Russians had not even managed to complete a feasibility study.<sup>17</sup> Construction began in 2015.

Indeed, many supposedly incriminating details actually point to the absence of any plan until shortly before the event. The *Novaya Gazeta* memorandum shows there was a lobby in the Kremlin for more assertive action. But that such a speculative document was circulating less than a month before the operation suggests that no concrete plan had yet been adopted. And why was Patrushev, the top security official in Russia and reportedly one of the strongest backers of intervention, “surprised” to hear in December 2013 that the Crimean elite would approve unification with Russia? If he were already contemplating a Russian occupation of the territory he should have seen intelligence reports on this.

That same month, Russia lent Ukraine \$3 billion as part of a deal under which Yanukovich agreed to postpone signing the EU association agreement. Had Putin suspected that Yanukovich would be gone in two months, he would have found some pretext to delay the disbursement. “It’s not Putin’s style to make such presents,” Aleksei Chesnakov, a former Kremlin official, told me. Ukraine defaulted on the bonds in December 2015.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Margarita Lyutova, “Most k soseadam,” *Vedomosti*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2014/02/14/most-k-sosedyam>.

<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with Aleksei Chesnakov, Moscow, January 2016

Overall, it seems that until shortly before the end the Kremlin was preoccupied with events in Kiev. Although the Russians were coming to see Yanukovich as hopelessly ineffective, Putin was still trying to save him. Only in Yanukovich's final days did the focus shift from Kiev to Crimea.

### ***Raising the ratings***

Between May 2010 and November 2013, according to the Levada Center, President Putin's approval fell from 80 to 61 percent—equaling the lowest point of his entire time in office. The Crimean adventure is the only explanation for the dizzying leap that occurred in the subsequent months, driving his rating back up to 88 percent in October 2014. Given the close attention that Kremlin operatives are known to pay to the president's popularity, it is easy to conclude that securing this leap was the motive behind the annexation.<sup>19</sup>

Based on previous experience—in the war with Georgia in 2008 and the second Chechen war, from late 1999—the Kremlin could have anticipated a robust “rally around the flag” after Russian troops went into action. Given the gross disparity in military capacity between Russia and Ukraine, a quick victory was likely. As Putin revealed in his triumphant March 2014 speech, after the intervention the Kremlin had polled Russians to see if they would welcome Crimea's annexation. Chesnakov, the former Kremlin official, confirmed to me that both the main pro-Kremlin polling agencies, FOM and VCIOM, had done enormous nationwide surveys that had

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<sup>19</sup> Ellen Barry, “Before Voting, Russian Leaders Go to the Polls,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/17/world/europe/17polling.html>.

yielded similar results—overwhelming support for Crimea’s integration into Russia.<sup>20</sup> All this is consistent with a populist motive.

But there are problems. First, although Kremlin insiders could be dissembling, they dismiss the notion that Putin’s political team was seriously concerned in late 2013 about his falling rating. “They were hoping for the Olympics to raise it,” one Kremlin-connected pollster recalled. “There wasn’t panic.”<sup>21</sup> That the Kremlin would hope for—and expect—the Sochi Olympics to rally the public makes sense; and the first polls after Russia’s victory in the gold medal count did show an uptick in Putin’s support.<sup>22</sup> Could the goal of boosting Putin’s approval have factored into the Crimea decision, I asked Chesnakov, who had been part of Surkov’s team at the time. “Perhaps if it had been a pre-election period, that would be more plausible,” he replied. “But it was not.”<sup>23</sup> According to Chesnakov: “They don’t worry in the Kremlin when the president’s rating falls to 60 percent because there’s no alternative; no one else has support.”<sup>24</sup> Such insiders might seek to present a false image of confidence. But with his rating already buoyed up by Sochi—and outstripping those of almost all his Western peers—Putin hardly needed to resort to extreme measures to restore his popularity.

Second, although a leap in Putin’s rating was predictable, nobody could have foreseen how long this rating would, in fact, remain above 80 percent. According to the Kremlin-connected pollster, the political team did not anticipate this: “they were expecting Putin’s rating

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<sup>20</sup> Author’s interview with Aleksei Chesnakov, Moscow, January 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s interview with Valery Fedorov, director of VCIOM polling agency, Moscow, January 2016.

<sup>22</sup> A Levada poll taken in late February 2014, before Crimea but right around the end of the Sochi Olympics, showed Putin’s ratings rising to 69 percent (<http://www.levada.ru/2014/02/26/fevralskie-rejtingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya-3/>).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Aleksei Chesnakov, Moscow, January 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Aleksei Chesnakov, Moscow, January 2016.

to fall in the summer of 2014. They would not have been alarmed if it had.”<sup>25</sup> After the immediate rallies associated with the wars in Chechnya and Georgia, Putin’s rating had drifted downward, giving up much of the advance in subsequent months. In 2000, the economic recovery had offset the decline, while in 2009, the economic crisis had accelerated it.

Even if he was concerned about the level of his ratings, it is hard to imagine that Putin would have risked international isolation and severe economic disruption to secure what all must have expected to be a short-term bump. The potential to rally the public may have weighed on the scale. But had there not been other powerful motives to intervene in Crimea, it seems unlikely that this would have been enough.

### ***Muddling through***

The clearest evidence against a consistent plan for territorial expansion—and for Putin as improviser—is the chaotic way in which the Crimea operation unfolded. *How* the decisions were made—or, at least, what is known about this—says a lot about *why* they were made. The military component ran smoothly; a detailed military contingency plan had clearly been prepared, perhaps long in advance. By contrast, the political aspects revealed an almost farcical lack of preparation.

Putin has said he gave the first order on the morning of February 23, after Yanukovich’s flight from Kiev. In fact, according to my source close to the commander of the operation, Russia’s special operations forces in the southern port of Novorossiysk and in the Black Sea Fleet’s base at Sevastopol were already put on alert on February 18. Then, on February 20, they received an order from the President to begin a “peace-keeping operation” to blockade Ukrainian

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<sup>25</sup> Author’s interview with Valery Fedorov, director of VCIOM polling agency, Moscow, January 2016.

military installations in Crimea and prevent bloodshed between pro-Russian and pro-Kiev groups.

Although it contradicts Putin's account, the earlier date is consistent with other evidence. For instance, medals that the Kremlin awarded to participants were engraved with the dates of the operation: "20/2/14-18/3/14."<sup>26</sup> Russia's "little green men" did not begin blockading buildings until at least February 23, so the mission could still have been aborted if the agreement that Yanukovich signed on February 21 with opposition leaders and EU foreign ministers had held.

How was this decision made? The official line is that Putin acted alone, without consulting any of his aides. "It was a personal decision of the head of state. He was the only person who could and had to make it and who made it," Putin's press secretary Dmitri Peskov told the TVC television channel.<sup>27</sup> This is consistent with what Putin told me at the reception in Sochi and with the account in the propagandistic movie broadcast on Russian state television, "Crimea: Path to the Motherland."<sup>28</sup>

Some press accounts reported that Putin reached the decision in a meeting with three key associates—his chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov, the head of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and FSB chief Aleksandr Bortnikov.<sup>29</sup> However, the *New York Times* account said this meeting

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<sup>26</sup> Glen Kates, "The online debate over a mysterious Russian 'medal'," *RFE/RL*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/the-online-debate-over-a-mysterious-russian-medal/25361367.html>.

<sup>27</sup> TVC, April 19, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> When I asked if he had consulted aides, he replied: "No, I told them we will do this and then that. I was even surprised at how well it went!"

<sup>29</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "Russia's Move Into Ukraine Said to Be Born in Shadows," *New York Times*, March 7, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/europe/russias-move-into-ukraine-said-to-be-born-in-shadows.html?ref=ellenbarry&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/europe/russias-move-into-ukraine-said-to-be-born-in-shadows.html?ref=ellenbarry&_r=2).

occurred on Feb 25 or 26—at least five days after the original order was given, according to the source close to Belaventsev and the dates on the medals. This meeting might have been when Putin decided to progress from preparations to the actual blockading of installations. Of course, the occurrence of such a meeting in no way demonstrates that the participants influenced Putin’s decision; he could simply have used the occasion to give them orders.

If others influenced Putin’s decision, it was probably by shaping the flow of information to him. As explained by Soldatov and Rochlitz (this volume), Putin was by this point receiving briefings primarily from the security service chiefs—and, in particular, Bortnikov. How such reports framed and shaped the facts must have affected how imminent the loss of Sevastopol looked to the president as Yanukovych fled Kiev. Nothing from the briefings has leaked into the press, so one cannot check exactly what was communicated.

Ordering the troops into action in the “peace-keeping operation” was only the first step. That left open the political leadership and status of the region. The commander of Russian forces, Oleg Belaventsev, arrived in Crimea on February 22, according to my source. A long-time aide to Russia’s defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, Belaventsev was unfamiliar with Crimea’s political scene. After consulting locals, he pressured the incumbent prime minister, a Yanukovych appointee disliked as an outsider, to step down. To replace him, he chose an elderly Communist, Leonid Grach, who had been known in Moscow since Soviet times. Shoigu himself called Grach to urge him to take the job and, according to Grach, told him that Putin had personally approved his appointment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Pilar Bonet, “La misión del Kremlin para elegir a su hombre en Crimea,” *El País*, 18 March, 2015, [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/03/17/actualidad/1426620920\\_045185.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/03/17/actualidad/1426620920_045185.html).

As Grach tells it, the security services, acting separately from the Defense Ministry, had also settled on him as their candidate. As he was dining with Belaventsev and two other naval officers, he got a call from an FSB general in Moscow, who asked Grach to meet his local representative. After dinner, Grach drove to meet the local FSB man, who he says told him that the FSB and GRU also thought he should become Crimea's prime minister.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, as Belaventsev soon found out, Grach did not have the backing of important local power brokers. To his embarrassment, Belaventsev had to call Grach the next day and rescind his offer. He then turned to Sergei Aksyonov, a local pro-Russian businessman and former semi-professional boxer, who was known to locals by the underworld nickname "Goblin."<sup>32</sup>

If Grach's account is accurate, the security services and the Defense Ministry team seem to have been operating in parallel. That they would both separately seek meetings with Grach to recruit him to lead the republic suggests a lack of coordination except at the very highest levels in Moscow. That they would later take back their offer, apparently under pressure from Konstantinov and Aksyonov, shows a shocking lack of intelligence and improvisation on all sides.

Even more surprising than this leadership musical chairs, the Kremlin apparently did not yet know what it wanted to do with the region. The Crimean parliament, after voting to confirm Aksyonov, agreed to hold a referendum on May 25. Residents would be asked whether they agreed that Crimea "is a self-sufficient state and is a part of Ukraine on the basis of treaties and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "The 'Goblin' king: Crimea leader's shady past," *Japan Times*, March 9, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/03/09/world/the-goblin-king-crimea-leaders-shady-past/#.Vq1do1KGx1F>.

agreements”—in other words, whether Crimea should have stronger autonomy while remaining in Ukraine. At that point, Putin had apparently not decided on full-fledged unification.<sup>33</sup>

The following week, as planeloads of Russian notables flocked to the peninsula, obeying a Kremlin instruction to go down and counteract Ukrainian propaganda, a secret debate raged in Moscow over the next move. On March 1, Crimea’s parliament rescheduled the referendum forward from May 25 to March 30. Then, five days later, the deputies advanced it again, to March 16, and they changed the question to: “Are you for the unification of Crimea with Russia with the rights of a subject of the Russian Federation?”<sup>34</sup>

Why did Putin raise the stakes from autonomy within Ukraine to full unification with Russia? It is possible that the whole series of events was a smokescreen, that the decision to annex had been made long before. But then why not, from the start, announce that the referendum would be on unification with Russia? And why change the date twice? It is hard to find any secret logic in these changes. If the Kremlin’s thinking did evolve during these few days, one factor may have been lobbying by the pro-Russian Crimean leaders. Konstantinov feared ending up in a semi-recognized statelet like Abkhazia or South Ossetia. “That would be pure adventurism, which would ruin us all,” he said.<sup>35</sup> But, more importantly, Putin found himself trapped. Having plunged in, he discovered there was no acceptable exit option.

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<sup>33</sup> Grach, in the *El Pais* interview, said that Shoigu had already told him on January 26 that Putin had decided to annex Crimea, but this could have been misinformation aimed at persuading Grach, a longtime advocate of reunification, to serve as prime minister. It is not consistent with the repeated changes in the referendum details described below.

<sup>34</sup> The involvement of the Kremlin was confirmed by a leak of documents hacked by the group Anonymous International from the email of one presidential administration official, Aleksei Anisimov, whose email attachments included a copy of the final referendum wording a day before it was voted on by the Crimean parliament and released to the public. The involvement of the domestic politics department of the presidential administration is also suggested by analysis of who received medals for their participation in the operation. The head of the domestic politics department, Oleg Morozov, two of his deputies, Anisimov and Viktor Seliverstov, and an advisor to the department, Dmitri Kiryukhin, were all rewarded.

<sup>35</sup> Natalya Galimova, “Kak Rossia prisoyedinyala Krym: Rassledovanie Gazety.ru,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 12, 2015.

To simply withdraw, allowing Ukrainian troops to retake the peninsula and prosecute Moscow's supporters there, would make him look intolerably weak. And then Kiev might well cancel the lease for the Black Sea Fleet. The only way Russia could leave safely would be if the West recognized the proposed referendum vote for Crimean autonomy as legitimate and persuaded the Ukrainian government to accept it. Western leaders—outraged by Russia's invasion—made clear they would do nothing of the sort.

That meant Russia would have to continue to defend the pro-Russian government in Crimea against Kiev's attempts to restore order—a complicated task, given the 22,000 Ukrainian military personnel on the peninsula. Were Russia to expel these soldiers and defend Crimea militarily against a Ukrainian counter-offensive, that would arouse almost as much condemnation and pushback from the West as if Russian annexed the territory outright. By March 4, the advocates of annexation had won.

### ***Conclusion***

Closely examined, Russia's Crimea operation does not look like the climax of a revanchist campaign. Any halfway competent imperialist would know whom to appoint as local satrap after the invasion and would have already decided whether the population was to "vote" for independence or annexation. Such an imperialist would have built a bridge to the target territory rather than fiddling around in planning for 10 years. This does not mean that there was not a group in the Kremlin with imperial appetites and that the commander-in-chief did not also get twinges of temptation. But that is not the same as a concerted plan.

NATO enlargement was a chronic irritant and a rhetorical rallying point. But in the years before Crimea, Putin seemed less concerned about it in his talks with Obama than one might

guess from his speeches. As his sources of information and analysis narrowed more and more to just the security services, the notion that the West would use any opportunity to weaken his regime was being regularly reinforced. He was primed to see the hand of the US in any crisis around his borders. But this had little to do with NATO expansion per se. A more plausible fear was that a post-Yanukovych government would cancel the lease on the Sevastopol base and demand that Russia's Black Sea Fleet leave.

Although the recapture of Crimea proved extremely popular with the Russian public, that does not mean that increasing Putin's popularity was the main motivation. His political team would have expected the operation to give him a boost in the polls, but for six months to a year, a significant but limited benefit. The associated risks—of international isolation, military and economic reactions by the West, capital flight, and the definitive refusal by Ukraine to join Putin's Eurasian Union—seem so much greater that it is hard to believe Putin would have struck were popularity the only motive.

Although other factors must have set the stage, the initial intervention seems most likely to have been prompted by a panicked attempt to rule out the loss of the Black Sea base at Sevastopol, with the potential risks and costs either poorly understood or disregarded. The subsequent decision to annex the territory appears to have been made because at that point all options involved heavy costs and annexation would at least provide a concrete and highly symbolic benefit.

What can one learn from the details of the Crimea case about Russian political decision-making? Even in very high stakes cases, some familiar features appear. First, decision-making seems to have been extremely centralized. Before he ordered the operation, there is little evidence that Putin consulted anybody. That is the story he tells, and no one has claimed credit

for influencing the decision. Second, we see an extreme reliance on the security services, both for information and implementation of decisions, even those of a fundamentally political nature. Those with useful experience or genuine expertise were sidelined and ignored at key points. We also see hints of rivalry among different sets of siloviki, with the FSB and GRU apparently trying to influence political appointments themselves in parallel to the operation's nominal commander.

Third, Putin showed himself ready to gamble at moments of high tension, taking actions that were both highly risky and hard to reverse. Fourth, we see a remarkable lack of accurate information about the political facts on the ground, and, partly as a result of this, a highly improvisational and muddled process of implementation. Fifth, perhaps out of dissatisfaction with the performance of the security services, Putin relied to a considerable extent on informal allies and freelancing agents—from the Orthodox businessman Malofeev, with his network of ultranationalist volunteers, to the Night Wolves motorcycle gang, which turned up in Crimea to help blockade buildings, and odd Cossack units. We also see the official military and security agents of Moscow, against their initial inclination, choosing to promote a local strongman with a criminal history and underworld ties.

A final familiar feature, not yet mentioned, is the rapid resumption of the battle among local factions over corrupt rents. The center's attention quickly moved on. That left a complicated kind of two-level game, familiar from other regions. Within Crimea, smoldering conflict prevailed between local powerbrokers and the security services, who were either fighting corruption or using corruption as a pretext to fight. Meanwhile, the local leader insisted on a direct relationship with Putin. "No one, except the president [Putin], will tell me what to do," Crimean Premier Aksyonov said in July 2015. "I will not be pushed around and no services

[likely a reference to the Federal Security Service, the FSB] can force me to change my position on anything.”<sup>36</sup> He seemed to be appealing for the kind of personalized relationship with Putin that Kadyrov enjoyed in Chechnya, to the chagrin of the security services. Whether he would get it was not clear, but hardly seemed likely.

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<sup>36</sup> Eurasianet, “Crimea: Corruption Fueling Feud between Local and Federal Elites,” July 16, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74266>.

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