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How Putin Outfoxed the West Maintaining Russian Power

By Christian Neef and Matthias Schepp

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In one of his many foreign-policy successes this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin has used power politics and blackmail to bring Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence. But what is the Kremlin leader's secret to success?

Six weeks ago, two men walked across Moscow's Red Square, one wearing a coat and the other a bishop's robe. They proceeded to the Monument to Minin and Pozharsky in front of St. Basil's Cathedral.

Kuzma Minin, a merchant, and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky were the leaders of an uprising against the Polish invasion of 1611. November 4, the day on which they liberated the center of Moscow more than 400 years ago, is now a national holiday, a symbol of how a united Russian people can defend itself against any foreign enemy.

Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia, and Vladimir Putin, the secular ruler of the realm, placed a bouquet of red carnations at the monument. Back at the Kremlin, the church leader had prepared a surprise for the president, a certificate honoring Putin "for the preservation of greater Russia."

"We know," Kirill said, launching into a hymn of praise for Putin, "that you, more than anyone else since the end of the 20th century, are helping Russia become more powerful and regain its old positions, as a country that respects itself and enjoys the respect of all others."

President Vladimir Putin has led this country for the last 14 years, but 2013 has been his most successful year yet. *Forbes* has just placed him at the top of its list of the world's most powerful people, noting that he had "solidified his control over Russia." According to the magazine, Putin has replaced US President Barack Obama in the top spot because the Russian leader has gained the upper hand over his counterpart in Washington in the context of several conflicts and scandals.

Indeed, at the moment, Putin seems to be succeeding at everything he does. In September, he convinced Syria to place its chemical weapons under international control. In doing so, he averted an American military strike against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and made Obama look like an impotent global policeman.

In late July, Putin ignored American threats and granted temporary asylum to US whistleblower Edward Snowden, a move that stirred up tensions within the Western camp. The Germans and the French were also outraged over Washington's surveillance practices.

Since then, Putin has scored one coup after the next. In the fall, when meaningful progress was made in talks with Tehran over a curtailment of Iran's nuclear program, Putin once again played a key role.

And now, by exerting massive pressure on Viktor Yanukovich, he has persuaded the Ukrainian president to withdraw from an association agreement with the European Union that took years to

prepare, just a few days before the scheduled signing at a summit of EU leaders. In doing so, he brought Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence, at least for now.

Russian Power Play with Ukraine

Many are impressed by Putin's self-assurance and his ability to question everything that is considered a political rule of the game outside Russia. Prominent American blogger Matt Drudge once called Putin the "leader of the free world," while another commentator dubbed him the "Chuck Norris of international politics." Norris, a star of action films like "The Way of the Dragon," has found a niche portraying hard-hitting, patriotic and deeply conservative loners. Men like Drudge admire Putin for seemingly ruling his giant country single-handedly, though often with ruthless methods.

For others, however, Putin is a man who rules in the style of a 19th-century despot, one who does not feel committed to the European political model. He favors a feudalistic approach instead, with a dominant state; courtiers who fulfill their ruler's every desire, no matter how arbitrary; an economy that purely serves the interests of politicians; and a motto that reads: "What's mine cannot be yours." And now the events in Ukraine and the role Putin has played in them raises the question, once again, of who the man in the Kremlin really is and what he wants. Is Ukraine, as it descends into turmoil, symbolic of a new turning point in the relationship between East and West?

In recent years, Western capitals have viewed Russia as a difficult but stable country -- and, most of all, as one that had lost much of its significance on the world stage. The conflict over Ukraine illustrates that the fate of not only 143 million Russian citizens, but also that of most of Russia's neighboring countries within the former Soviet empire, hinges on Putin.

While pro-EU demonstrators built barricades not far from the seat of government in Kiev, the pro-Kremlin Moscow tabloid newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* ran a cover story predicting the collapse of Ukraine. The pro-EU western parts of the country, formerly part of the Habsburg Empire, were marked in purple. Meanwhile, the eastern provinces, closely aligned with Russia for centuries, along with the Crimean Peninsula were marked in red. At about the same time, a lawmaker in Crimea urged Putin to send Russian forces to Ukraine to "protect us from NATO aggressors, Western secret agents and paid demonstrations."

It was probably a mistake on the part of the West to stop treating Russia as a potent adversary in the last two decades. And the outrage over some of the things that have happened in Putin's realm has been justifiable. They have included, for example, the Kremlin's use of special police units to suppress the protests of tens of thousands of Muscovites over election fraud in the 2011 parliamentary vote, or the fact that Putin had two members of the protest band Pussy Riot locked away for two years, merely because they had staged a protest performance in a Moscow church.

The uprising of disappointed pro-EU Ukrainians against President Yanukovich is now revealing to the West the brutal methods with which Russia is beginning to defend its interests beyond its borders. Yanukovich's sudden change of course away from the EU was the result of a cold and calculating power play by the Russian president.

Blocking the EU's Eastward Expansion

The world is seeing a resurgence of Cold War sentiments. Following violent police crackdowns against protesters in Kiev, the United States is considering sanctions against Ukraine, US State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki announced. Her boss, Secretary of State John Kerry, had said earlier that he was disgusted by the police brutality, saying that the response was "neither acceptable nor does it befit a democracy." His words were not only directed at Yanukovich, but also at the man pulling the strings, Vladimir Putin.

Russia fired back. For the West, democracy isn't even the issue, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed. He argued that the West merely wants to secure Ukraine as a trophy, so as to deal Russia a strategic blow.

In Moscow last Tuesday, 444 of 450 members of the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, adopted a statement in which they accused Western politicians of "open interference ... in the internal affairs of the sovereign Ukraine." The remark was a reference to appearances by German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, former Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski and US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland on Kiev's Independence Square, where Nuland handed out sandwiches to demonstrators.

"Unsanctioned rallies, blocking access to state authorities, as well as the seizure of administrative buildings, rioting, and destruction of historic monuments" -- a reference to the toppling of a statue of Lenin in downtown Kiev -- "lead to destabilization in the country and may cause serious negative economic and political consequences for the Ukrainian population," the Duma deputies wrote, noting that a "coup d'état" was underway in Ukraine. Ukrainian state television referred to the European Union as an "anti-Russian" alliance because it was ignoring Moscow's interest by seeking closer ties with Ukraine.

The deep divide between Russian and Western mindsets has become especially apparent in Eastern Europe in recent months, where the EU has been trying to advance its "Eastern Partnership" program since 2009. In addition to Ukraine, the initiative relates to EU relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova. The West has been offering free-trade arrangements and financial support in return for reforms in the legal system, election laws and media in these six countries. Exports of Western goods would aim to foster closer ties between the eastern edge of the continent and the EU.

Brussels and its junior partners were discussing steel tariffs, wheat exports and the purchase of Eastern European wine. When such ties suddenly became an issue of geopolitics, the West was shocked. For the first time since the beginning of its eastward expansion, the EU encountered bitter resistance -- from Russia.

Exerting Pressure on Smaller Neighbors

Still, it wasn't a complete surprise -- and the EU should have expected it. Since the early 1990s, Russia has been trying to keep the former Soviet republics within its sphere of influence. Ignoring setbacks, Putin is now using his power to achieve this goal. He threatens these

countries, holds them hostage, blackmails them or plays them off each other. His actions, though cold and unscrupulous, have been highly successful. "He who pays the piper calls the tune," Putin said.

To this day, Russia uses Transnistria, a state that broke away from the Republic of Moldova in a 1992 civil war, to torpedo Moldova's sovereignty, although no UN member state formally recognizes Transnistria today. Moscow also plays the role of protector in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two regions that broke away from Georgia after the 2008 war, and it uses the puppet states to exert pressure on the government in Tbilisi.

In the mind of Putin, a former KGB officer, a country that was once a Soviet state and no longer wishes to be Moscow's vassal can only become one of two things: a vassal of Washington, or a vassal of Brussels.

Smaller states of the former Soviet Union that rebel against Moscow today can expect to face Putin's concentrated rage. In 2006, he banned imports of Georgian wine and mineral water when Mikhail Saakashvili, the country's pro-American president at the time, demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops.

Ahead of a summit meeting in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, where at least Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova planned to sign association agreements with the EU, Moscow boycotted Lithuanian milk products. Years earlier, Russia had shut down a strategically important oil pipeline to Lithuania, merely because the government in Vilnius planned to sell a large refinery to Warsaw instead of Moscow and cease its reliance on Russia.

The manner in which Russia exerted pressure on Armenia this year was especially conspicuous. Like Ukraine, the small Caucasus republic had spent four years negotiating an association agreement with Brussels. The country's president and prime minister rejected Moscow's demand that Armenia join a Russian-led customs union, arguing that it was "geographically impossible" and "pointless" -- until September 3, when Putin summoned his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sargsyan, to the Kremlin.

Shortly after the talks, Sargsyan told reporters that Armenia was not going to sign the agreement with Brussels, after all, but that it would join the customs union. Moscow had threatened to raise its prices for Russian natural gas and had started selling arms to Armenia's archenemy, Azerbaijan. Putin also offered the Armenians help in expanding its railway system and a nuclear power plant that had been scheduled to be shut down.

The Republic of Moldova was subjected to similar pressure. In September, Moscow had suddenly informed Moldova that it could no longer export its wine, the country's most important export product, to Russia. Putin's officials also reminded the government in Chisinau that hundreds of thousands of Moldovans earn a living as guest workers in Russia, and that close to 200,000 of them had no valid residency permits and could therefore be deported. Unlike Armenia, the Moldovan government chose to sign the EU treaty nonetheless.

The pressure Moscow exerted on Ukraine before the EU summit in Vilnius exceeded all of its previous efforts. In the summer, the Russians blocked duty-free exports of pipes from Ukraine, as well as shipments by Ukrainian candy maker Roschen, claiming deficient quality of the goods. The move adversely affected two important Ukrainian oligarchs and was designed to persuade them to talk President Yanukovich out of the planned cooperation agreement with the EU.

In October, not long before the Vilnius summit, Russia suddenly introduced new regulations for the transit of goods, causing long backups of trucks waiting at the Russian-Ukrainian border. Then it suspended imports of meat and railroad cars from Ukraine. Finally, the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom demanded payment of a €1.3 billion (\$1.8 billion) debt for gas that it had delivered at some point in the past.

Pulling Strings in Kiev

The Russian trade war was accompanied by an unprecedented propaganda offensive. President Putin dispatched his economic adviser Sergei Glazyev, a man with extremely nationalistic views, to Ukraine. He painted a disastrous scenario for the Ukrainians if they signed the agreement with the EU. Glazyev claimed that Ukraine would need at least €130 billion to comply with EU rules. This, he said, would sharply drive down the country's currency, so that Kiev would be unable to pay its debts, citizens would be without heat and the country would eventually be forced into bankruptcy.

"Why does the Ukrainian leadership want to drive its country into economic suicide?" he asked. On the other hand, Glazyev noted, Ukraine would generate an additional \$10 billion in revenues if it joined the Russian-led customs union.

Glazyev was named Russia's "Person of the Year 2013" at a ceremony in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on Nov. 28, the day the EU summit began in Vilnius, without Ukraine having signed the planned agreement. According to officials, Glazyev received the award for his contributions to "bringing Ukraine back into the economic union with Russia."

Some might be surprised by Russia's blatant efforts to pressure Kiev. But Ukraine, whose name is derived from an Old East Slavic word that means "borderland," is Europe's second-largest country, and Putin needs it if he hopes to build his planned Eurasian economic empire. Kiev is also the historic cradle of the Russian nation, and the first East Slavic realm was established there in the 9th century. In his speeches, Glazyev repeatedly spoke of "our shared intellectual and historic tradition."

At the same time, both Russians and Ukrainians are disdainful of each other. In Moscow, Ukrainians are called "Chochly," a reference to the unusual headdress of the medieval Dnieper Cossacks. Kiev residents refer to Russians as "Moskali," which is also a derogatory term. The Russians "have treated us as part of their property for the last 350 years," Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of independent Ukraine, once said.

Putin and Yanukovich are also not on good terms. The fact that the Russian president eventually strong-armed Yanukovich has to do with the mentality of the Ukrainian president. Yanukovich

is a man who never likes to commit himself and always keeps a back door open somewhere. Putin had not believed that Yanukovych would actually sign the agreement with Brussels. But when it became apparent in the summer that he was prepared to do so after all, Moscow stepped in.

Even Putin has actually been disinclined to use such coarse tactics. Russia is not "seeking a superpower status or trying to claim a global or regional hegemony," Putin said last Thursday in his annual state-of-the-nation address. However, the president still expects countries like Ukraine to remain within Moscow's orbit.

'New World Leader of the Conservatives'

Following Snowden, Syria, Iran and other foreign-policy coups, Putin now sees himself in a role that he finds equally gratifying: an "arbiter of global politics."

"For Putin, all it took was 20 minutes with Obama on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg to avert a bombing of Syria and to lay the groundwork for a solution to the Syrian chemical weapons problem," says a senior Russian diplomat.

According to an unpublished, 44-page report by the Institute for Strategic Studies, the Kremlin's most powerful think tank, to which SPIEGEL has gained access, Putin's authority is now "so extensive that he can even influence a vote on Syria in the US Congress." The report praises Putin as the "new world leader of the conservatives."

The report's authors write that the hour of conservatives has now come worldwide because "the ideological populism of the left" -- a reference to men like Obama and French President François Hollande -- "is dividing society."

According to the report, people yearn for security in a rapidly changing and chaotic world, and the overwhelming majority prefers stability over ideological experiments, classic family values over gay marriage, and the national-state over immigration. Putin, the authors write, stands for these traditional values, while the domestic policies of traditional democracies are hamstrung by the need for compromise. Last week, Putin himself stated that the objective of his conservatism is to "prevent a movement backward and downward, into the chaos of darkness."

These observations on the shift in the public mood may be correct, but who wants to see Russia as a role model? The protesters on Kiev's Independence Square apparently do not.

Putin's Russia is a poorly organized country whose power hinges on the price of oil remaining above \$100 a barrel. The colossus in the East, with its nuclear weapons, mineral resources and foreign currency reserves of \$515 billion resembles the pseudo-giant in the children's novel *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver* by German author Michael Ende: The closer one gets to him, the smaller he becomes.

Russia looks very good on paper, with a budget that has been almost balanced for years and a debt-to-GDP ratio of 14 percent (compared with 80 percent for Germany). But growth rates of 6

percent and higher are a thing of the past. The Kremlin expects a growth rate of only 1.3 percent this year, which is too low in light of the country's massive need for modernization.

In his address to the nation, Putin conceded that bureaucracy and widespread corruption are stifling innovation and entrepreneurial spirit in Russia.

To enhance this image and simultaneously counteract reporting critical of Russia in the Western media, last week, Putin established the media holding company "Russia Today," a modern propaganda machine intended to improve the country's image abroad. He also issued a decree to "dissolve" the long-established, historic RIA Novosti news agency, presumably because its columnists were too dependent on Western positions in their ideology.

The new head of *Russia Today*, Dmitry Kiselyov, attracted attention when he said on a talk show that homosexuals should be banned from donating blood or sperm. "And their hearts, in case they die in a car accident, should be buried or burned as unfit for extending anyone's life," Kiselyov added. He has also compared the EU's bailout of Cypriot banks with Hitler's expropriation of Jews. At the first company meeting of *Russia Today*, Kiselyov said that the most important characteristic for employees of the new state-run agency is not objectivity, but "love for Russia."

The Rise of a 'Non-Liberal Empire'

It's been a decade since Anatoly Chubais, the architect of the privatization of the Russian economy and still an influential powerbroker in the Kremlin elite, wrote an essay in which he called for a "liberal empire." He argued that Russia should bring the countries lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union back into its sphere of influence by enhancing its own appeal through democracy, freedom and the rule of law. The same applied to Ukraine.

"Today the European Union is the liberal empire," says Moscow political scientist Vladimir Frolov. "Putin is offering a different, non-liberal empire," he adds, an empire that appeals to authoritarian rulers, such as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose countries, like Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, plan to join Putin's Eurasian customs union.

In Putin's model, only a leader knows what's best for his people. "The non-liberal empire helps to explain Russia's turning away from Europe by citing subversive European values," says Frolov, "and it allows the Kremlin to hold onto the illusion that it is playing in the same league as America, China and the EU."

No Putin project embodies this illusion quite as much as the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. They symbolize both Putin's dream of a new greatness and his weakness. The Kremlin chief has had new highways, tunnels and railroads constructed in the Caucasus, as well as a state-of-the-art train station and two winter resorts. Corruption and nepotism were partly response for an explosion in costs -- from the original estimate of €9 billion to more than €37 billion. And only a national leader with Putin's ambitions, and only a country with megalomaniacal tendencies,

could hit upon the idea of holding winter games in a Black Sea resort town with a subtropical climate.

Russia intends to use the Olympics to present its unique features to a marveling world, which explains why the Kremlin had 14,000 people carry the Olympic torch along a 65,000-kilometer (40,600-mile) route throughout Russia -- both of which are record figures. Naturally, the torch relay began on Red Square, and of course the ceremony coincided with Putin's birthday. The Kremlin sent a diver with the torch to the bottom of Lake Baikal, the world's deepest freshwater lake. Cosmonauts carried it into space in a rocket, camel riders took it across the southern Russian steppes, sled dogs pulled it through the Arctic and an icebreaker ferried it to the North Pole.

The Arctic Ocean is another place where the Kremlin is trying to impress the world. To gain access to the mineral resources hidden under the ocean floor, for which Russia is competing with other countries bordering the ocean, Putin instructed his defense minister last week to "expand Russia's military presence in the Arctic." This means rebuilding 10 Soviet-era bases in the Arctic Circle and beefing up Russia's Arctic military presence.

How the EU Has Misread Putin and Ukraine

Putin's strength is only relative because it feeds on the weakness of the West. Europe's policy toward Ukraine is a perfect example.

Germany and the EU long believed that if they could convince Kiev to sign a few dozen liberal laws, not even a politician as slippery as Yanukovich could question the country's growing alignment with the West. Instead of offering more money and clear prospects of EU membership, at the end of the negotiations, they demanded the release of jailed former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

In taking this approach, the EU wasn't exactly demonstrating a unique insight into Ukrainian sensitivities. Tymoshenko doesn't have what it takes to be a martyr, and Ukrainians have only limited sympathy for her. Many recall her career as an oligarch in the 1990s and her populist approach as prime minister. Indeed, they see no significant difference between Tymoshenko and Yanukovich.

But Yanukovich's mentality is similar to Putin's -- and therefore not at all like that of the EU. He isn't interested in values such as fairness, the balancing of interests and freedom for the individual. Like Putin, Yanukovich grew up in poor circumstances, where it was important to be stronger than others and capable of bluffing and pouncing quickly.

For Yanukovich, the planned rapprochement with the EU was purely a question of what he stood to gain from it. He wants to be re-elected in 2015, and there are two people, in particular, who could get in his way: Tymoshenko and heavyweight boxing champion Vitali Klitschko.

The Germans have since dropped Tymoshenko like a hot potato, and now they are focusing their attention on the man who is supposedly the only leader of the opposition. Their goal is to build

Klitschko into an adversary of Yanukovich. But they are ignoring the fact that there are actually three opposition leaders in Ukraine.

They also fail to recognize that the opposition is not the true leader of the protests on Independence Square in Kiev, and that many Ukrainians actually see their party leaders, including Klitschko, as collaborators with the ruling elite. According to a poll, only 5 percent of the protesters on Independence Square are there because opposition leaders called upon them to participate. In fact, most have come to the square for their own reasons.

As long as the West sugarcoats the reality in Eastern Europe, Putin will hold onto his trump cards. He is more familiar with the situation, and he enjoys better leverage to influence the former Soviet republics. He also has no scruples when it comes to using ruthless tactics.

Backtracking and Bluster

It is Wednesday of last week as we meet for lunch with one of Putin's top advisers at an upscale Italian restaurant near the foreign ministry in Moscow. In Kiev, the protesters are building even higher barricades in a heavy snowstorm.

The Kremlin official's eyes are bloodshot. The long nights at summit meetings and the 19 foreign trips he has been on with Putin this year have taken their toll. The official has brought along a message from Putin. Over a meal of pickled squid and salami, he explains that his boss is someone with whom "deals are possible as long as you talk to him." But talking to Putin to achieve compromises, he notes, is something the West does "far too little." Senior politicians like German Foreign Minister Westerwelle, he says, should not associate with the opposition in Kiev, and appearances on Independence Square are, "to put it diplomatically, not correct." After all, he points out, there are no Russian cabinet ministers there.

The man is persuasive. Russian ministers have no need to hurry to Kiev, he says, since the Ukrainian president himself has been summoned to Moscow on an almost weekly basis. Nevertheless, this time, Putin may have miscalculated when it comes to Ukraine.

When Kiev went to the barricades for the first time in 2004 and the Orange Revolution began, Ukrainians were protesting against election fraud. To Moscow, it was ultimately irrelevant whether Ukraine was run by men or women like former President Viktor Yushchenko, Tymoshenko or Yanukovich. They were all representatives of different clans who were fighting each other for the country's leadership -- and they were people with whom Moscow could more or less come to terms.

But now there are people protesting on Independence Square who feel cheated of their hopes for stronger ties with the EU because their leadership has allowed itself to be bought by Russia. To them, Europe is synonymous with democracy, self-determination and honesty, with an end to despotism and corruption.

Moscow's clumsy attempt to put pressure on Kiev has changed the situation, says Russian political scientist Vladislav Inozemtsev. Ukrainian society, he notes, cares less about which

member of the elite is currently in power than about the direction in which the country is headed. The number of pro-EU Ukrainians jumped dramatically this fall, says Inozemtsev.

Yanukovich senses this. Last Thursday, he changed course and let it be known that he did intend to sign the EU treaty at some point. But it sounded like yet another one of his tricks, designed to finally get the protesters off the streets.

He held a roundtable discussion on Friday afternoon, but it ended disappointingly when Yanukovich failed to concede to any of the opposition's demands. Instead, he had his staff make preparations for a major rally of his supporters. Nevertheless, his prime minister suggested the possibility of resigning, while former President Leonid Kuchma described Ukraine as "bankrupt."

The game involving Kiev, Moscow and the EU hasn't been decided. It is already clear, however, that Putin has done Ukraine a disservice with his intervention and has reduced Yanukovich to a puppet. Russian political scientist Inozemtsev believes that Yanukovich's chances of winning the next election are slim. "It's highly unlikely in 2015 that someone will be elected president who is prepared, once again, to exchange Europe for cheap Russian gas."