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What's Driving Putin's Ukraine Brinkmanship?

Що рухає Путіним до балансування на межі війни з Україною?

Як пише автор матеріалу, існують тактичні причини для загрози вторгнення Росії в Україну, але справжня причина може полягати в зацікленості Кремля на виправленні того, що він вважає історичною несправедливістю. Гамбіт В. Путіна може бути холодним розрахунком примусу, підкріпленим сигналами про реальну загрозу війни - способом змусити президента Д. Байдена визнати сферу інтересів Росії в Східній Європі.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-troops.html?searchResultPosition=1>

There are tactical reasons for threatening an invasion, but the real cause may lie in the Kremlin's fixation with righting what it sees as a historical injustice.

MOSCOW — As the Kremlin masses troops near Ukraine, it is signaling one core conviction: Russia cares more about the fate of its southwestern neighbor than the West ever will.

In speeches, interviews and lengthy articles, President Vladimir V. Putin and his close associates have telegraphed a singular fixation this year on the former Soviet republic. The Kremlin thesis goes that Ukrainians are “one people” with Russians, living in a failing state controlled by Western forces determined to divide and conquer the post-Soviet world.

Ukrainians, who ousted a Russia-friendly president in 2014 and are increasingly in favor of binding their country to Western institutions, would largely beg to differ. But Mr. Putin's conviction finds a receptive ear among many Russians, who see themselves as linked intimately with Ukraine by generations of linguistic, cultural, economic, political and family ties. Now, with a force of 175,000 Russian troops poised to be in position near Ukraine by early next year, in what Western officials fear could be a prelude to an invasion, centuries of shared history loom large.

Mr. Putin's gambit may be a cold calculus of coercion, backed by signals that the threat of war is real — a way to force President Biden to recognize a Russian sphere of interest in Eastern Europe. Mr. Putin in recent days said Russia would demand “legal guarantees” that Ukraine would not join the NATO alliance or host more Western forces, and he is scheduled to speak to Mr. Biden by videoconference on Tuesday.

But to Mr. Putin — and many other Russians — the nearly eight-year-old conflict with Ukraine is not simply about geopolitics; it is about a hurt national psyche, a historical injustice to be set right. One of his former advisers, Gleb O. Pavlovsky, in an interview described the Kremlin's view of Ukraine as a “trauma wrapped in a trauma” — the dissolution of the Soviet Union coupled with the separation of a nation Russians long viewed as simply an extension of their own.

To many Ukrainians, Mr. Putin's appeal to a shared history is little but a hollow attempt to appropriate the country's own heritage and justify territorial ambitions.

“They stole our past,” said Alyona Getmanchuk, director of the New Europe Center, a pro-Western think tank in Kyiv. “Now they're trying to steal our future.”

After Ukraine's pro-Western revolution in 2014, Russia invaded and then annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and fomented a still-running separatist war in the country's east. Mr. Putin has sought ever since to prevent Ukraine's drift toward the West — and has voiced growing anger that the United States is training with and helping arm Ukrainian soldiers.

The use of military force to bring Ukraine back into the Russian fold would harm Mr. Putin's domestic standing, polls suggest — one reason Russian analysts are skeptical that Mr. Putin would pull the trigger on an invasion likely to carry a terrifying price in Ukrainian and Russian lives. But Mr. Putin's conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are unjustly and artificially divided is widely shared in his country, even by Mr. Putin's opponents.

While other conflicts in the post-Soviet world have pitted one ethnic group against another, the one between Russia and Ukraine is more complicated. Ukrainian is Ukraine's official language, but Russian — which is closely related — is still widely spoken.

Russians often view Kyiv, now the Ukrainian capital and once the center of the medieval Kyivan Rus, as the birthplace of their nation. Well-known Russian-language writers, such as Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov, came from Ukraine, as did the Communist revolutionary Leon Trotsky and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, now speaks Ukrainian in public but first gained fame as a Russian-language comedian who performed across the former Soviet Union.

“One of the colossal problems pushing us into conflict is that Russian identity does not exist without Ukrainian identity,” said Ilya Ponomarev, a former member of the Russian Parliament who was the only lawmaker to vote against the Crimea annexation.

Mr. Ponomarev later fled to Ukraine, where he received Ukrainian citizenship and continues to live.

Millions of Russians and Ukrainians have family members in one another's countries, in part a product of migration during the Soviet era, when Ukraine was an industrial powerhouse. For instance, Aleksei A. Navalny, the Russian opposition leader imprisoned earlier this year, spent childhood summers in Ukraine, the birthplace of his father. While he is a critic of Mr. Putin's aggressive foreign policy, Mr. Navalny in 2014 said he disagreed with Ukrainians “to whom it is a matter of principle to prove that we are different peoples.”

“I don't see any difference between Russians and Ukrainians, none at all,” he said in a radio interview then.

Emotions aside, the idea of a Western-allied Ukraine as a security threat to Russia is widely shared in Russian foreign policy circles. Ivan Timofeev, program director at the government-funded Russian International Affairs Council, said that NATO troops in Ukraine would drastically alter the military balance, even though the alliance already borders Russia in the Baltic region and the Arctic.

“If it's also Ukraine, then the potential theater of military action becomes very large,” Mr. Timofeev said of NATO expansion. “The longer the front line, the less clear it will be where the attack will come from.”

In an article last month for the Valdai Club, a foreign policy forum with close ties to the Russian government, Mr. Timofeev said that a full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine was highly unlikely, in part because it could stir domestic discontent. Even if Ukraine will always be a higher priority for Russia than for the United States, he cautions, Western sanctions and military assistance would make a Russian

invasion enormously costly. Rather than auguring a wider war, he said, Russia's military buildup is meant as a signal to the West of Russia's extreme discontent with its expanding influence in Ukraine.

"If reuniting with Crimea was met with enthusiasm by the Russian public for many reasons, a great war is unlikely to find such support," Mr. Timofeev wrote.

Still, Mr. Putin has seized on the emotional weight many Russians attach to Ukraine for his own ends, both on the global stage and in domestic politics. Mr. Pavlovsky, a longtime Kremlin adviser until he turned against Mr. Putin in 2011, said Ukraine has now become a vehicle for Mr. Putin's ambitions of resurrecting Russia's status as a global power. In particular, that means talks with the United States — as has been on display in recent weeks, with Russia pushing for Washington to negotiate on Ukraine even as its troop movements have the West fearing it could be about to mount an invasion.

Understand the Escalating Tensions Over Ukraine

Card 1 of 5

A brewing conflict. Antagonism between Ukraine and Russia has been simmering since 2014, when the Russian military crossed into Ukrainian territory, annexing Crimea and whipping up a rebellion in the east. A tenuous cease-fire was reached in 2015, but peace has been elusive.

A spike in hostilities. Russia has recently been building up forces near its border with Ukraine, and the Kremlin's rhetoric toward its neighbor has hardened. Concern grew in late October, when Ukraine used an armed drone to attack a howitzer operated by Russian-backed separatists.

Ominous warnings. Russia called the strike a destabilizing act that violated the cease-fire agreement, raising fears of a new intervention in Ukraine that could draw the United States and Europe into a new phase of the conflict.

The Kremlin's position. President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who has increasingly portrayed NATO's eastward expansion as an existential threat to his country, said that Moscow's military buildup was a response to Ukraine's deepening partnership with the alliance.

A measured approach. President Biden has said he is seeking a stable relationship with Russia. So far, his administration is focusing on maintaining a dialogue with Moscow, while seeking to develop deterrence measures in concert with European countries.

"Ukraine is a field of strategic maneuvering for bringing Russia back into a strategic dialogue," Mr. Pavlovsky said. "He's interested in the global level, not the regional one."

Domestically, the annexation of Crimea, a glittering Black Sea peninsula, shot Mr. Putin's approval ratings to near 90 percent in 2014. This year, the Kremlin has escalated its attacks on Ukraine's pro-Western leadership by appealing to Ukraine's place in Russian identity; Mr. Putin opened a July article about why Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" by describing their current divisions as "a great common calamity."

The West, he wrote, was trying to turn Ukraine into a "bridgehead against Russia," akin to how he claimed the Poles and Austrians had tried to wrest Ukrainians away in earlier centuries. As evidence, Mr. Putin presented trends as varied as laws promoting the use of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine, as well as the country's deepening cooperation with Western militaries.

“It would be no exaggeration to say that the course of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state aggressively oriented against Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of a weapon of mass destruction against us,” Mr. Putin wrote.

The messaging is having an impact. The share of Russians who say they have a negative view of Ukraine rose to 49 percent in August from 31 percent in February, according to polls this year by the independent Levada Center in Moscow.

In fact, it was Mr. Putin’s policies that turned Ukrainians against Russia in large numbers, Ms. Getmanchuk, the think tank director in Kyiv, said. Support for joining NATO among Ukrainians rose to 54 percent this year, compared to 14 percent in 2012, according to the Razumkov Center, a research institution in Kyiv.

“Unintentionally, of course, he contributed to developing Ukraine as a nation,” she said.

Alina Lobzina contributed reporting.