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“Russia Recognizes the Independent Statehood of the so-called ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ and ‘Luhansk People’s Republic’: Implications”

Context:

Following a request by the heads of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR - Denis Pushilin) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR - Leonid Pasechnik) that Russia recognizes them as independent states, President Putin convened an emergency session of the Russian Security Council on 21 February 2022. The meeting was presented as being broadcast “live” (with evidence suggesting it was pre-recorded). All members present publically supported recognition.

President Putin then broadcast an hour long speech to the Russian people supplying a historically legitimized rationale for recognition. In this surreal speech Putin stressed the importance of “ancient Russian lands”, and *Novorossiya* and stated that “Ukraine was a creation of Russia”. He bemoaned Lenin’s “time-bombs”, the USSR’s collapse and in that process how “Russia was robbed” by a Ukraine with no tradition of statehood. Ukraine, Putin asserted, is “a colony with a puppet regime”, represented by “greedy interests”, oligarchs, corruption and US control. In effect, Putin posited the notion of a ‘Russian Ukraine’ and advanced a doctrine of Russian national imperialism. Putin does not recognize Ukraine can freely exercise choice, that it has its own sense of identity and nationhood: it is an object to be subjugated. This speech reprised and updated his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, 11 July 2021.

An ‘ideological Putin’ mindset was on display. Putin was belligerent, alone, aloof, contemptuous and certain of his own judgement. Judging from the extraordinary meeting earlier, his inner circle appeared as a subservient and intimidated echo chamber. The notion of Putin as *primus inter pares* is fiction. The speech was a nostalgia-laden, revisionist litany of his unresolved grievances, resentments and phobias. Firmly entrenched in power for two decades, Putin attacks the past, avoids the future, desperately himself seeking the recognition he bestows on Donbas but withholds from Ukraine.

After the speech Putin signed two identical decrees ‘On ratifying the treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance between the Russian Federation and the DNR’ and ‘the LNR’. Russian “peacekeepers” were immediately deployed, though it remained unclear whether Russia had recognized LNR and DNR according to the *de facto* borders of 2022 i.e. 40% of the two *oblasts*, or according to the *de jure* administrative borders of 2014. The Russian legislature approved the recognition on 22 February 2022. This recognition violated the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the 8 December 1991 Agreement Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States, the 21 December 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, and the 2015 Minsk Accord.

Russia’s Intent and Risk/Rewards Calculus:

One understanding of Putin’s choice to recognize the statehood of ‘DNR’ and ‘LNR’ is that he seeks to avoid the risk of a major disaster (further escalation of war engages Ukraine’s army and militia directly) and move beyond the stalemated Russian mid-December 2021 security guarantees ultimatum. Several additional benefits can be identified. First, full-scale sanctions are avoided. Second, President Putin has a ‘win’ that is acceptable to and supported by the Russian population, so increasing his popularity. Third, this incremental approach has the best chance of dividing the West. Fourth, pressure on Ukraine is maintained, and the pervasive sense of insecurity ensures that Ukraine loses \$3bn a month, so weakening it and its ability to resist Russian influence. Putin may conclude that he can coopt and suborn

local elites in certain regions within a weakened Ukraine and so create a Russian Ukraine from within and at low cost. Fifth, the creeping annexation of Belarus can continue apace and sixth, Russia has symbolically underlined its status as a great power.

However, the opposite can also be argued. Recognition is a necessary step to forward stationing of Russian troops, providing the pretext for full restoration of the *de jure* administrative borders of the two republics. This draws Russia into a wider war with Ukraine. Indeed, the logic of recognition without further escalation suggests a referendum and then annexation. This represents a *de facto* strategic defeat for Russia: Moscow loses its ability to instrumentalize the Donbas to influence Ukraine's politics and strategic orientation, even as its remaining soft-power in Ukraine is squandered.

Broadly, five factors support the understanding of recognition as prelude to escalation. First, Putin's rhetoric strongly suggests that Russia only sees Ukraine in terms of 'Russian Ukraine' – not a neutral or non-aligned Ukraine. The same reasoning applies to Belarus. For Putin, Finlandization would apply to Georgia and Moldova, given that he recognizes these nations do not fall within so-called "ancient Russian lands". Putin seeks to extinguish Ukraine as a politically pluralist democratic polity with a vibrant civil society on Russia's doorstep, removing a legitimation challenge to a dictatorial and quasi-monarchical Russia. Second, Russia's mixed messaging around the recognition of *de facto* or *de jure* borders of the two *oblasts* suggests at the very least that Russia wants to keep the prospect of further escalation on the table. Third, the evacuation of the elderly, woman and children from Donbas also enables further escalation. Fourth, Russia is a power player and 'escalates to dominate' to achieve its goals: 'in the absence of carrots, one can only use a stick'. Fifth, as the Russian invasion of Donbas incurs Western sanctions, Russia may escalate to deter further sanctions. Irrationality and miscalculation dominate in kinetic contexts. Putin appears to have priced in sanctions to his decision-making, though these sanctions will have costs and signal unity and resolve.

The lead indicator for either scenario is how the borders of the states are defined. On 22 February, President Putin subsequently stated: "*We recognize the states. That means we recognized all of their fundamental documents, including the constitution, where it is written that their [borders] are the territories at the time the two regions were part of Ukraine.*" Kinetic activity has yet to occur, but further escalation is more likely, with Mariupol and Kramatorsk in the Donetsk *oblast'* the test-cases.

Implications:

The current crisis underscores a fundamental schism between Russian autocracy and Western democracy and it is orchestrated by President Putin. However, Russia has lost control of the dominant narrative: President Zelensky through words and deeds does not reinforce the Russian discourse regarding Ukraine as 'genocidal' and 'neo-Nazi' and Zelensky himself as 'Hitler'. US intelligence sharing has surprised Russia and may indicate attempts at strategic reflexive control. US and allies have expected and predicted Russian invasion. Putin apparently believes that to be strategically relevant he must be unpredictable; to be unpredictable is not to invade.

China 'wins' in any scenario. Russia's invasion of Ukraine distracts the US from fully focusing on the China challenge. Russia, in confrontation with the West, may be forced gradually to accept junior partner status as its least bad option, while China can maintain its narrative of 'peaceful coexistence'. China, however, can perhaps mitigate Russian escalatory confrontation in Ukraine, shaping Russia's risk calculus. In this sense, Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents an inflection point in Russia-Chinese relations.

Putin's ultimate vision may be to navigate the Russian ship-of-empire between three broad currents: 1) the establishment of his own legacy by the 'regathering of Russian lands' and restoring Russian 'imperial greatness' while suppressing democratic impulses; 2) provide a foreign policy and international environment characterized by managed confrontation but not outright conflict with the West as this allows core sub-institutional actors in Russia to best achieve their competitive goals; and 3) domestically, Putin can further impose a national emergency security regime, which guarantees the 2024 transition of power through to 2036.

Disclaimer: This summary reflects the views of the authors (Hannes Adomeit, Pavel Baev, Pal Dunay, Dmitry Gorenburg, and Graeme P. Herd) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.