

Fearful of a Nationalist Backlash, Putin Pursuing 'Creeping Annexation' of Donbas

Ukraine

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Russian nationalists want more; and under pressure from them, Andrey Strelets says, Putin is pursuing what may be called 'the creeping annexation' of that Ukrainian region.

By Paul Goble* for 'Window on Eurasia': August 21 -- Vladimir Putin has said -- and this case, he may even be telling the truth -- that he wants the Donbas to remain part of Ukraine thus giving Moscow leverage on Kyiv. But Russian nationalists want more; and under pressure from them, Andrey Strelets says, Putin is pursuing what may be called 'the creeping annexation' of that Ukrainian region. While Putin has been in Crimea, the Ukrainian commentator says, there have been 'two curious' developments in the Russian-occupied areas: there are reports that the LNR and DNR will hold referenda on integration with Russia after local elections, and the Russian ruble is being introduced as the currency of the two (nr2.com.ua/News/politics_and_society/Kreml-zateyal-polzuchuyu-anneksiyyu-Donbassa-104329.html). The first notion has been denied by occupation officials, but it continues to circulate in ways that mean it is either a trial balloon, intended for a different audience, or reflects real plans, Strelets says. The second has been applied in Abkhazia and South Osetia and so is nothing Moscow has not done before. Why is this happening? In Strelets's words, Russian policy has completely failed in Ukraine, given that Moscow has said 'Ukraine will fall apart itself,' something that has not happened. As a result, 'the Kremlin finds itself in the position of an inexperienced chess player, any move of which will only worsen his position on the board.' Russia doesn't want to risk fighting on a broad front as it did last summer, Strelets says, because the West would impose even more crippling sanctions and would supply Kyiv with modern weaponry. But at the same time, Moscow is not in a position to withdraw from its occupation. First of all, he says, 'no one can guarantee' that this would lead to the lifting of existing sanctions. Second, the Malaysian airliner downing looms over the Moscow elite. And third, the return of armed bandits to Russian territory would lead to an upsurge in crime and quite possibly a political challenge there. Because that is the case, Strelets says, it is 'difficult to predict' what the Kremlin will do. Over the last year, 'Putin and his command have shown how far they are from reality.' Only one thing is 'clear,' and this is this: 'the Russian government machine willingly makes use of half measures,' and 'the creeping annexation of the Donbas' would fit right in that paradigm. To get a better handle on what Putin might do next, the Novy Region-2 commentator says, it is 'much more important' to ask what might prompt Putin to proceed in that direction. The Russian president, he says, clearly 'is not concerned about economics. His attention is focused only on foreign policy,' which he believes will keep him in office for life. But 'already now it is obvious that inaction in the Donbas is much more dangerous for the [Russian] powers than any moves in the direction of its 'integration.' And those involve, Strelets says, the fear Putin and his entourage have of the Russian nationalists and their organizations. There are many indications of this fear, he says. Putin has repressed nationalist groups far more harshly than he has

liberal ones, even though the Kremlin's moves against the latter have attracted more attention. Moreover, for political reasons, Putin has less to fear from the liberals than from the nationalists. "The slogans of the liberals find a response mainly among residents of the major cities, the so-called 'creative class'. The social base of the nationalist opposition is much wider, and it affects many who have been on Putin's side. According to Strelets, 'part of the nationalists last year supported Putin's actions in Crimea and the Donbas, but now they are experiencing great dissatisfaction [with the Kremlin leader] because of what they see as Putin's 'betrayal of the Russians of the Donbas' by not annexing them as it had the population of Crimea. If Putin were to choose that path, he would have to destroy 'more than a hundred various organizations and informal unions' in Russia which have emerged to support the insurgents in the Donbas – and he would come into conflict with military and security organizations that are heavily interlinked with these groups. Moreover, were he to do that, Strelets says, he would, using the words of Yegor Prosvirin, 'quickly be transformed' into a traitor to the Russian cause and 'an agent of the State Department'. Indeed, arguments of that kind are already to be found on Russian social networks, Strelets says. But there is more to this Russian nationalist resistance than that, he continues. He points to the SOVA report which found that some Russian nationalists 'have gone underground and are actively involved in militant training. (On that, see 'A Calm Before the Storm?' – Russia's Radical Right Refocusing on 'Fifth Column', SOVA Says, March 25, 2015 at windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/03/a-calm-before-storm-russias-radical.html.) For most of the last year, Kremlin propagandists have put out the line that 'Russia 'needs not the Donbas alone but all of Ukraine,' that Putin has 'a clever plan' to achieve that, and that those who want more than has happened so far should be patient and wait for events. But Russian nationalist radicals are hardly prepared to wait forever, Strelets says. They are demanding evidence that Moscow is moving forward on their agenda. Those around people like Girkin have thus 'presented Putin with an ultimatum which he cannot fail to respond to,' the Ukrainian analyst continues. In order to counter that threat without creating more problems for himself, Strelets says, Putin is now taking steps to give 'the appearance of 'the annexation of the Donbas.' But whether that will be enough for his Russian nationalist critics is far from clear. One thing is certain: if he follows their urgings, he will pay a very heavy price.

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*The commentary above is from Paul Goble's 'Windows on Eurasia' series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com