



# Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment

Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston

[www.rand.org/t/PE144](http://www.rand.org/t/PE144)

This Perspective provides an overview and analysis of sources of Russian foreign policy to help explain Russia’s actions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. It evaluates arguments based on Russian historical strategic interests, economic policy, and domestic policy to determine which explanations, alone or in combination, stand up best to the realities of Russian choices and actions.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Is Russia defending long-held strategic interests put at risk by an aggressive Western agenda?
- Was it fear of the potential economic repercussions of Ukraine’s partnership agreement with the European Union (EU) that drove Russia to annex the Crimean peninsula and intervene in Eastern Ukraine?
- Is Russia’s government just trying to keep domestic public opinion on its side and distract the public from other problems?
- Is this simply a matter of President Vladimir Putin himself, divorced from Russia’s interests and goals, pursuing a personal agenda?



## KEY FINDINGS

Russia’s Attitude Toward Ukraine Is Consistent with Historical Thinking and Influenced by Its Current Situation

- Russia has traditionally sought “buffer states” on its borders.
- Russians historically have tended to view Ukraine as fundamentally Russian by culture and background.

*continued on back*

- Russia seeks a great power role and influence, and perceives itself as being in competition with the United States.
- Long-standing beliefs about Russia's rights within its region are exacerbated by a consistent post-Soviet view that Western efforts at integration are a mechanism of controlling and weakening Russia.

Neither Elite Nor Public Views on Specific Issues Appear to Drive Russian Policy, Although the Regime Is Deeply Fearful of Elite and Public Opposition to Its Actions

- The Russian government has sought to shape public opinion, not respond to it. It has done so successfully by silencing political opposition and independent media.
- The Kremlin saw the Maidan uprising as dangerous because if such protests could happen in Ukraine, they might happen in Russia as well.

Russia's Behavior in Ukraine Is Evidence That Russia Puts Its Economic Interests Second

- It is difficult to find a sound economic argument for the Eurasian Economic Union. Its purpose appears to be primarily political.
- Although the extent of sanctions was unexpected, Russia's willingness to endure them underlines its priorities.

Putin's Personal Leadership Style and Viewpoints Were Likely Critical to the Specific Actions Taken, Although Not to the Attitudes That Drove Them

- Decisionmaking in the Kremlin has become highly centralized, with few alternative viewpoints aired.
- The Kremlin attributed the Maidan protests to Western "interference" in Ukraine and saw them as a challenge to Putin's personal belief in a strong state at the vanguard of society.

