

## Russia: Putin In the Driving Seat, But To Where?

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### Countries

[Russia, Ukraine, United States of America](#)

### Key Factors

[Business Security, Cultural & Religious, Demographics, Military Issues, Personal Security, Political Developments, Rule of Law, Stability](#)

### Industries

[Agriculture, Banking, Finance and Insurance, Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals, Defence and Security, Energy, Iron and Steel, Mining, Oil and Gas](#)

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The Russian deputy foreign minister said yesterday that the Duma's approval for the use of troop did not mean that they would be used quickly. If things run as smoothly as seems likely for Moscow, and Kiev responds to Western pressure for restraint, it is not inevitable that they would be used at all. The initiative is with Moscow.

The position they have established on the ground can only be changed by force, and no one is in a position to challenge them, either in the Crimea or eastern Ukraine. These are of course legally part of the Ukraine, but what events have shown beyond doubt is that they are henceforth ungovernable from Kiev, and not just because of the Russian presence.

**The only way Russia's de facto invasion could be challenged would be by a war the West does not want and the Ukraine is in no position to wage.** Nationalist hotheads may of course start some shooting. It is also possible the Russians will provoke a skirmish in order to frighten the West into even greater quiescence, but that would be risky and unnecessary. We are quiescent enough already.

**What matter now are the modalities of the division of the country: whether it is done peacefully or messily, how far it will**

**go, and the economic consequences.**

The Russian Duma has said that **democratic elections in Ukraine as a whole were “now impossible,” and it is hard to contradict them.**

The Russians should know, it is they and their Crimean and East Ukrainian kith and kin who have wrecked them in advance.

If the election due on 25 May takes place it will be in a truncated country, since the Crimea has brought forward its referendum, also due on 25 May, to 30 March. So unless they and their Russian backers unaccountably fail to get out the “Yes” vote for unity with Russia, that will be it. Politically it will be a grossly cynical gesture but realistically it will not be such a big deal.

The transfer of the Crimea to the Ukraine by Khrushchev, a Ukrainian himself, was a relatively recent affair (1954) and in the eyes of its mainly Russian population an unnatural act. The re-transfer of the Russian Black Sea Fleet back to Russia will also be seen as natural. To Putin there will seem no reason not to do it, since no one is going to stop him, and a referendum would province democratic sanction.

**More important will be Moscow’s decision of where to stop.** Will there be similar scenarios arranged in the Donetsk (formally Stalino) oblast and the Luhansk and Kharkiv regions, where Yanukovich scored over 90% in the 2004 elections? Or will Russia provoke even greater outrage by pushing their expansion further westwards, where his score was 60-70%, and make the risk of a bloody reaction from the nationalists greater?

Economically the decision will be crucial: Russian speakers are 17% but mining, steel and manufacturing are dominant in the East where they are thickest on the ground. All this discounts any significant Western reaction, since it remains unclear what this might be. As Obama has already hinted

the main punishment could be economic. Assuming he is in a rational frame of mind – and he must be very, very sore – this could weigh with Putin. Having shown the mailed fist, defied the West and grabbed back Russia's nearest thing to a Côte d'Azur, is not too late for him to stay his hand and confine himself to swallowing the Crimea. But Donetsk and the East would still be ungovernable from Kiev.