

Tectonic Tremors: The Ukraine Crisis and Multiple Failures of Empathy

This Insight, by Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London, explores failures of empathy by Putin and the West in relation to the Ukraine crisis. He argues that while empathy cannot be the sole basis for foreign policy-making it has real utility for decision-makers, especially in understanding ground-level political movements.

All political leaders find it difficult to understand ground-level political movements, and this is the case for those leading authoritarian states. Consider President Putin's response to the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia of the early 2000s. By one account, the origin of the Ukraine crisis is President Putin's concern about the expansion of NATO and the EU, with these revolutions seen largely as western plots. This account is reinforced by the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, which spoke about potentially bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, and which was soon followed by a Russian push to consolidate its enclaves within Georgia of Ossetia and Abkhazia.

From Putin's point of view we can recognize that he may have seen this as gradually threatening Russia's independent political system, of which he was at the center. He may have seen the 2011-2 demonstrations in Moscow as a continuation of this threat. This is what led to closure of foreign NGOs, a clampdown on the press, growing authoritarianism and intimidation of opposition leaders.

Being empathic, we can see that these factors help explain how he reacted when Ukraine emerged as a major issue 2013. Ukraine was about to make a critical decision: whether to accede to the European Union's offer of an Association Agreement, or to opt for the Eurasian Union, which meant accepting that Ukraine was part of Russia's sphere of influence. Putin even offered a US \$15 billion loan to incentivize the latter. Subsequent events led to the Ukrainian revolution, with his client President Viktor Yanukovich fleeing from Kyev and anti-Russian elements taking over.

Broadly, that is probably Putin's perspective on the crisis, and more or less how he has described it himself. But did it represent a real understanding of the political movements that had led to this point? Did he understand why former members of the Warsaw pact and even of the Soviet Union preferred to be in a Western sphere of influence rather than in his? The Russian belief in the ability of an elite to manipulate the masses should not be underestimated. They have long believed in information warfare – precision guided efforts to change people's thinking – and suspect that it could be used against them even as they clumsily try to use it against their opponents.

Did Putin empathize with Ukrainians and could he understand why the uprising happened? This is especially important as the "Euromaidan" revolution was quickly characterized by Russia as a fascist movement manipulated by the far right. It is true that the far right was involved, but the wellspring of the opposition was an anti-corruption movement – not something to which Putin would be sympathetic. A security challenge for Russia therefore arises from any ground level political movement, because it poses a challenge to the underpinnings of Putin's government. He was forced to demonize the movement, because if he accepted it as legitimate he would have problems of another kind.

In this way, Putin is a victim of the discourse trap identified by Jeff Michaels: the more an actor keeps describing things in a particular way, and possibly believes them, the more they limit their policy options. The more that Putin was understanding Euromaidan in these terms, the more he (a) was not prepared for the speed and enthusiasm with which Yanukovich would be forced out, and (b) the less he understood how the rest of Ukraine was going to respond.

He appears to have believed that what was happening from late February–March 2014 in Kyev was creating the potential for a counter-revolution, particularly in the East. But the potential was limited and it did not materialize – Crimea, hosting a Russian naval base, was an exceptional case. So Putin

attempted to manufacture a counter-revolution in the Donbass, the eastern most region of Ukraine, but it did not really get traction. The larger point here is the difficulty of recognizing what makes political movements move. If they are mischaracterized at the start, policy responses are likely to be inept and counter-productive. This is what happened to Putin. Now he is stuck in Eastern Ukraine, which is in political limbo, and without far bolder moves than he is able to contemplate he is unable to get out.

Was the Western response to the Ukraine crisis empathetic? Policy-makers generally did understand where Putin was coming from but there were two flaws. First, once the West found itself in an antagonistic relationship with Russia, having largely gotten along for over a decade, we created our own discourse trap. The West described what was going on in Ukraine in largely polarized terms, as “goodies and baddies”, which meant that the problems of corruption in Ukraine were played down (until recently) and the potential tensions between Moscow and the separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk were also played down. The corruption issue became inescapable. The separatist issue was harder to make out, because the leaders were materially dependent upon Moscow, who could have them replaced. Yet they had their own character and interests. Though reasonably assumed to be Russian puppets, which is what Putin wanted them to be, structurally, in their position, they had other interests. Notably, in no circumstances did they wish to be integrated back into Ukraine. They enjoyed their artificial autonomy for the power, and in some cases criminal opportunities, it gave them. Putin has a similar problem with Assad in Syria, who is now dependent upon Russia but also knows that Putin dare not dump him. It is not easy to be the puppet master: proxies or clients have their own interests and leverage. The credibility of their patron depends on them not failing.

Second, we insufficiently understood a problem that arose in 1980 in Afghanistan. Once an actor does something aggressive but principally for defensive purposes, there is a tendency to assume they are capable and have the intention of acting with aggression more generally. It brings to mind the old saying that the only safe borders for Russia are those with Russians on both sides. In Afghanistan the regime had declared itself as in the Soviet camp but was in danger of falling apart, prompting the invasion. It was not, as claimed at the time, largely about preparing a push for Middle Eastern oil fields. Switching back to Europe, Putin’s actions in Ukraine are about Ukraine and not about preparing a push against the Baltic states. This problem is aggravated because it suits Putin’s purpose to create an aura of military menace as a form of deterrence.

Yet, if we are thinking in policy terms, can we assume that he does not pose a wider threat? It is all well and good to say that Putin was actually acting defensively in Ukraine and does not have ambitions in the Baltics. It would be strategically stupid when he is already overstretched. But if we are going to be empathic with the Baltic states, it is quite hard to ignore the possibility that we might be wrong.

Thus, geopolitically, empathy has real utility for decision-makers – but it is not suitable as the only basis for policy-making, because there are so many actors to empathize with. We can understand why Estonians and Latvians would be concerned. In complex foreign policy settings there are a lot of actors and there are only so many that we can manage to understand at once. Choices must be made, which means discounting some peoples’ concerns.

Returning to Putin’s deficiency of empathy, there is an inherent problem in oligarchies, which can be very acute. The lack of checks and balances provided by open politics and a free press, means that the confirmation bias of the country’s leaders is confirmed on a daily basis. Democracy gives us hope of correction. What has been fascinating in recent times has been Putin’s belief that his success in manipulating Russia’s own processes can be replicated elsewhere, with support for Le Pen in France and, most dramatically, using hacked materials, for Trump in the United States. Putin may think that there is no risk in this. He takes the view that everything is deniable, whatever the evidence, and that in the end the West has to deal with him. But we have now reached the stage where even if Russia was telling the truth it would not be believed and Western political leaders do not forget who has lined up with their opponents.

There is also a major problem of understanding popular movements, and what is driving them. Today, that’s where a lot of political action is centered. If leaders do not empathize with and

understand these movements, then they will mischaracterize them in ways that either exaggerate their inner goodness and appeal or else dismiss their concerns, and so demonize people with genuine grievances. That creates future perils. As was observed some time ago, if you tell someone he is a rat often enough, he will grow whiskers and bite you!

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