

Ukraine invasion: a sign of Putin's mental problem, or a mere miscalculation?



by Lev Tsitrin

By now, I read several articles questioning Putin's mental health (the latest of those being on NER pages), and I confess I find it hard to accept this argument as an explanation of his invasion of Ukraine. Sure, the attack is an act of naked aggression; sure, the prospect of political and economic repercussions should have made him desist. Yet the explanation that he "lost the touch with reality," as some put it politely, is not necessarily adequate, though indeed tempting. I think there exists an explanation that is much simpler (and therefore, by the Occam's standard, more adequate) than Putin's unsound mind.

I watched two of Putin's addresses on youtube in their original Russian – the one which laid down the philosophical grounds for the invasion, and the other which actually

announced it. Both struck me as rather lawyerly, labored efforts which fell far short of making a case for invasion – but there was nothing in either substance or delivery to convince me that Putin was of unsound mind. What I saw was a lawyer trying to prove that his client who was caught red-handed, was in fact innocent. Cunning? Yes. Twisting facts and logic? Sure. But of unsound mind? Not at all.

One does not have to be mad to make a blunder – and that, I suspect, is what Putin did. He may have spent too much time ruminating on Russian imperial glory and taking its loss a little too close to heart. But I very much doubt – given that Russia is a nuclear superpower armed with thousands of nuclear warheads – that he indeed believes that by joining NATO, Ukraine will become a bridgehead for fulfilling US’ demonic designs of attacking Russia and tearing it apart – either by a direct attack, or by instilling the rotten ideology of the West so as to convince Russian men to become women, and to convince Russian women to become men, thus emasculating and extinguishing Russia as a nation – which was the gist of his justification for the attack on Ukraine. Rather, it seems to me, his first speech disclosed Putin’s real grievance and real fear – that once Ukraine joins NATO, he can bid goodbye to his glorious dream of reconstituting the Russian empire, which fell apart, in his narrative, through Bolsheviks criminally putting constituent republics’ legal right to secede right into Soviet constitution.

That combination of the deep-seated desire to restore Russia’s past imperial glory, and the subterfuge of achieving it through “liberating” brotherly Ukrainian nation from the oppressive and unnatural rule of the violently-imposed “Kiev regime” that was manned by Nazi drug addicts taking orders from NATO which was, in turn, taking orders from the diabolical US, was on full display, and there is nothing controversial in what I’m saying here. What may indeed (as I will be first to admit) sound controversial, is my reading of

Putin's underlying calculations in planning and executing his attack on Ukraine.

I strongly suspect that he was guided by what he saw unfolding in Afghanistan – and not so much the fact or the manner of American withdrawal that taught him that US was on the run – as by the manner in which Taliban took over the country, Afghan army – an artificial construct propped by the US – simply melting away when coming in contact with the force what was native, natural to Afghans: Taliban. That, I suspect, was a vivid illustration to Putin of the power of sheer attachment to deep-rooted custom and history that ultimately repels what is foreign and accepts what is native. In Ukraine, Putin likely thought, the Western mores were an artificial importation, while the Russian rule was natural and native. Hence, at the approach of the liberating, native, brotherly Russian forces the Ukrainian army would just lay down its arms, it would melt away just as the artificial Afghan army did; the only task remaining would be to mop-up the Neo-Nazi holdouts who forgot their Slavic roots and treacherously went over to the Western side, pulling the unwilling nation along with them.

I of course have no definite proof, but can only point out that the operation started taking shape just a month or so after the Afghan events, so it was likely inspired by them – and that it took the form of Taliban-like massing the troops at the border indicating inevitable takeover, that was triggered by the invitation of the newly-seceded Russian-speaking “republics” – an ages-old scenario of invasion well-described in Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

What followed, proved that Putin's central thesis that the government which he kept calling “Kiev's regime,” implying that it was artificial, being installed via a coup, and kept in power by the demonic, Nazi-supporting US that is hell-bent on destroying Russia, was wrong. The reaction to the invasion proved that Ukrainian government was solidly organic, having

full support of the country and its people. As a result, the Ukrainian army, instead of meekly dissipating at the approach of brotherly Russian armor, offered fierce, determined resistance, civilians arming and joining the fight. Europe, appalled at the prospect of recreation of the Russian empire, and seeing that Ukrainians actually do fight, picked up the heart and implemented punishing sanctions to make Putin reconsider the costs – and started pouring weaponry into Ukraine, proving that US withdrawal from Afghanistan was not a total withdrawal from every confrontation.

So, it seems to me, Putin merely made a mistake – a mistake of transposing the Afghanistan situation upon Ukraine; deducing from American withdrawal from Afghanistan that the US would swallow Putin's swallowing of Ukraine and deducing from Taliban's bloodless takeover of Afghanistan that Ukrainians would as willingly accept Russia as Ukraine's historical and rightful ruler.

Those are mere miscalculations; they do not point to any derangement. Interestingly, Machiavelli has a chapter in *The Prince* on whether the ruler should act impetuously or be calculating. He concludes – if I remember correctly – that there are circumstances in which it is better to be calculating, and circumstances in which it is best to not over-analyze, but to act. He adds though, that the same person cannot do both, so the result is largely a matter of luck – when circumstances fit the method which naturally fits the ruler, he will be successful – but that eventually, every ruler's luck runs out, because every situation has its own circumstances. Putin was calculating, and successful so far – in Georgia, in Crimea, in Syria. He may succeed in Ukraine too – but not because of his calculations, but by virtue (or vice) of the sheer brute force he brought to bear on Ukraine. But even that success will be short-term, and likely short-lived. Given the amount of hate he stirred up, his long-term success in Ukraine is not assured at all.

But the bottom line is: I for one do not believe that Putin is out of his mind. The finest mind can make an error, and I would argue that this is what we see unfolding in Ukraine – a fundamental miscalculation about the nature of Ukrainian society. It is just a hypothesis, but not an unreasonable one, I think.