

FIIA 7/2014 COMMENT

Katri Pynnöniemi
Senior Research Fellow
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Understanding Russia's actions in Ukraine: The art of improvisation

Understanding Russia in the current crisis calls for a combination of three frames: one that sees Russia's actions as defensive ones, another one that sees them grounded in geopolitics and great-power thinking, and a third one that takes them as an open-ended process with little predictability.

Are we actually witnessing an unexpected discontinuity in Russian foreign and security policy, or should we have foreseen Russian reactions to the crisis in Ukraine based on the trajectory of Putin's responses to internal or external threats? This is the key question that Russia analysts are struggling with at the moment as they try to make sense of Russia's actions. To this end, the ongoing discussion that seeks to understand and explain Russia's actions in the face of the Ukraine crisis can be roughly divided into three interconnected, yet distinct, frames of analysis.

First, Russia's actions during the Ukraine crisis can be seen as defensive ones – aimed not at enlarging but preserving the domain that is considered vital for Russia's strategic interests. Consequently, the subsequent annexation of Crimea plays out as an anomaly, rather than the first step in the restoration of something akin to the Soviet space.

The second strand of thought frames Russia's actions in terms of imperialism, geopolitics and great-power thinking. This frame is perhaps the one that has been elaborated on the most, and the one that is readily used both in scholarly discussions and in the official

Russian parlance, which represents the Crimean peninsula and East Ukraine as a part of 'historical South Russia'. The main threat identified in this context is that the crisis has set in motion a process that will destabilize the order of the post-Soviet space, and the European security environment as a whole.

Thirdly, it can be argued that Russia's actions in the crisis are prone to zigzagging, that is, abruptly diverging from what can be considered the general line. The 'art of improvisation', as the concept suggests, is a combination of improvisation and the non-linear logic of policy-making that cannot be derived solely from well-defined principles and goals, as anticipated in the defensive and imperialist frames of analysis. The novelty of the third frame lies in the fact that it fosters an understanding of Russia's actions in the crisis as an open-ended process that has little predictability, but which can be influenced by proactive means.

The difficulty is that each of these three frames produces a different set of explanations that are not necessarily incongruent, but which do result in different policy options with regard to Russia. The defensive and imperialist frames are often

identified as binary oppositions, which is an over-simplification. In effect, the underlying logic of these explanations is geopolitical and, perhaps in some instances, reflects a realist tradition that indicates how the great powers are supposed to behave in crisis situations. Analyzing the crisis in terms of historical and/or geopolitical factors may help us to understand, for example, how the articulation of Russia's relations with Ukraine has legitimized a certain course of action, and undermined others. However, it should be noted that defensive and imperialist frames of analysis also emerge as arguments in the public discussion, irrespective of the analysis of the crisis in Ukraine.

The improvisation frame, unlike the other two, explains those elements that seem out of place, be they pop-up soldiers in Crimea, or any other type of unexpected discontinuity in the general line. Here, the point of departure is that the dynamism of the crisis in Ukraine is driven by events, phenomena and actors that are not directly controlled by Russia, but which could not exist without it either.

The way in which Russian politicians have distanced themselves both from the pro-Russian groups in

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

PL 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decision-making and public debate both nationally and internationally.

The Institute undertakes quality control in editing publications but the responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

Eastern Ukraine, and from attempts to resolve the crisis through international negotiations, provides an insight into how the ‘art of improvisation’ works. It relies on existing resources – be they ideas, networks or agencies – which are then used to activate underlying tensions in society or to invent threats and risks that demand Russian action. Russia’s ability to generate tensions in the Ukraine crisis through multiple channels, and by what appears to be non-linear means, renders traditional ways of resolving the crisis ineffective. Furthermore, although Russia has been able to toy with the inherent weaknesses of Western governments and international agencies, the situation also opens up possibilities for interaction. What seems like an irregularity in the general line (of the defensive or imperialist frame) can in fact be regarded as a tactical pause waiting to be filled by a proactive response from others.

Understanding Russia’s actions in the crisis calls for a combination of some version of the first two frames with the improvisation frame. Merely focusing on the probability of Russia’s next move misses the point. In fact, the hardest part is trying to understand how forethought and improvisation interact. But the

analysis of this interaction may, in turn, tell us what to expect in the future and how to prepare for it.