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EUROPE

Russia's Move Into Ukraine Said to Be Born in Shadows

By STEVEN LEE MYERS MARCH 7, 2014

MOSCOW — The day after he returned from the Winter Olympics, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia gathered the 12 members of his national security council for a crisis meeting to manage a political implosion in Ukraine that, by all accounts, had surprised Russia's political and military elite and, above all, infuriated Mr. Putin himself.

One prominent member of the council, Valentina I. Matviyenko, chairwoman of the upper house of Parliament, emerged from the meeting declaring that it was impossible that Russia would invade Crimea, yet a couple of days later Russian troops were streaming into the peninsula.

When Mr. Putin made his first public remarks on the crisis on Tuesday, he said that Russia would not support Crimea's efforts to secede. On Friday, the Kremlin allowed a mass pro-secession rally in Red Square while senior lawmakers loyal to Mr. Putin welcomed a delegation from Crimea and pledged support to make it a new province of the Russian Federation.

An examination of the seismic events that set off the most threatening East-West confrontation since the Cold War era, based on Mr. Putin's public remarks and interviews with officials, diplomats and analysts here, suggests that the

Kremlin's strategy emerged haphazardly, even misleadingly, over a tense and momentous week, as an emotional Mr. Putin acted out of what the officials described as a deep sense of betrayal and grievance, especially toward the United States and Europe.

Some of those decisions, particularly the one to invade Crimea, then took on a life of their own, analysts said, unleashing a wave of nationalistic fervor for the peninsula's reunification with Russia that the Kremlin has so far proved unwilling, or perhaps unable, to tamp down.

The decision to invade Crimea, the officials and analysts said, was made not by the national security council but in secret among a smaller and shrinking circle of Mr. Putin's closest and most trusted aides. The group excluded senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the cadre of comparatively liberal advisers who might have foreseen the economic impact and potential consequences of American and European sanctions.

"It seems the whole logic here is almost entirely the product of one particular mind," said Fyodor Lukyanov, a Russian analyst and editor of the quarterly journal Russia in Global Affairs.

Some of Russia's plans were clearly years in the making, including one to sever Crimea from Ukraine through Moscow's political support for sovereignty and even reunification. Nevertheless, Mr. Putin's strategy in the last two weeks has appeared ad hoc, influenced by events not always in his control.

"We shouldn't assume there was a grand plan," said Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia's security forces from New York University who is in Moscow and regularly meets with security officials. "They seem to be making things up as they go along."

Mr. Putin's decisions since the crisis began reflect instincts, political skills and emotions that have characterized his 14 years as Russia's paramount leader, including a penchant for secrecy, loyalty and respect, for him and for Russia. They also suggest a deepening frustration with other world leaders that has left him impervious to threats of sanctions or international isolation, such that he shrugged off threats by members of the Group of 8 countries to boycott this year's summit meeting in Sochi, Russia.

Because of Mr. Putin's centralized authority, Russia's policies and actions in moments of crisis can appear confused or hesitant until Mr. Putin himself decides

on a course of action. That was the case in the days when violence erupted in Kiev, Ukraine's capital, prompting a frantic effort by the Europeans to mediate a compromise. Mr. Putin, perhaps preoccupied with the Olympics, did not send a representative to those talks until the agreement was ready to be initialed.

Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, said that Russia's role in Ukraine's upheaval was "very passive" up until the moment that the government of President Viktor F. Yanukovych collapsed. This was true, he said, despite the Kremlin's wariness about any new Ukrainian trade agreement with the European Union and its pledge in December to provide a $15 billion package of assistance to shore up the country's faltering finances. Jolted by the government's collapse, Mr. Trenin said, the Kremlin "sprang into action almost immediately."

He and other officials and analysts said that Mr. Putin's reaction stemmed from the collapse of the agreement on the night of Feb. 21. Mr. Putin, by his own account at a news conference on Tuesday, warned Mr. Yanukovych not to withdraw the government's security forces from Kiev, one of the demands of the agreement being negotiated.

" 'You will have anarchy,' " Mr. Putin said he told him. " 'There will be chaos in the capital. Have pity on the people.' But he did it anyway. And as soon as he did it, his office and that of the government were seized, and the chaos I warned him about erupted, and it continues to this day."

By then, however, Mr. Yanukovych had already lost the support of his party, whose members joined others in Parliament in ordering the security services off the barricades that they had maintained around government buildings in Kiev. Mr. Yanukovych, fearful because of reports of armed protesters heading to Kiev from western Ukraine, packed up documents from his presidential residence and fled in the early hours of the next morning. That night Mr. Putin was still assuring President Obama in a telephone call that he would work to resolve the crisis.

By the next day, however, Ukraine's Parliament had stripped Mr. Yanukovych of his powers, voted to release the opposition leader Yulia V. Tymoshenko from prison and scheduled new presidential elections. Russia's initial response was muted, but officials have since said that Mr. Putin fumed that the Europeans who had mediated the agreement did nothing to enforce it. Mr. Putin and other officials began describing the new leaders as reactionaries and even fascists that Russia could not accept in power.

"It was probably not just thought of today," Aleksei A. Chesnakov, a political strategist and former Kremlin aide, said of Mr. Putin's move in Crimea, "but the trigger came when it was clear that the authorities in Ukraine were not able to return to the compromise of the 21st."

Two days later Mr. Putin attended the closing ceremony of an Olympics that he hoped would be a showcase of Russia's revival as a modern, powerful nation. He then ordered the swift, furtive seizure of a region that has loomed large in Russia's history since Catherine the Great's conquest. The decision to order in Russian forces appears to have occurred late Tuesday or early Wednesday among a smaller circle of Mr. Putin's advisers.

The group, the officials and analysts said, included Sergei B. Ivanov, Mr. Putin's chief of staff; Nikolai P. Patrushev, the secretary of the security council; and Aleksandr V. Bortnikov, the director of the Federal Security Service. All are veterans of the K.G.B., specifically colleagues of Mr. Putin's when he served in the organization in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, during the 1970s and '80s.

The exclusions of other advisers, the analysts and officials said, underscored his increasing conservatism since he returned to the presidency in 2012 after a stint as prime minister and faced not only popular protests but also mounting criticism from the United States and Europe of the country's record on political and human rights. "He has bit by bit winnowed out the people who challenged his worldview," Mr. Galeotti said.

Neither Mr. Putin nor any other official has acknowledged ordering an armed incursion in Crimea, though Mr. Putin in his news conference said that he had bolstered security at the bases of the Black Sea Fleet, which has its headquarters in Sevastopol.

The deployment of the Russian forces — which the Ukrainian government has said ranged from 6,000 to 15,000 troops — remains a covert operation, the officials and analysts said, to sidestep international law and the need for approval by the United Nations Security Council, something that Mr. Putin and others have repeatedly insisted was necessary for any military operations against another country.

"It's a traditional thing — to deny the obvious," said Andrei Soldatov, a journalist and the author, with Irina Borogan, of a book on Russia's intelligence services called "The New Nobility."

As long ago as 2008, when NATO leaders met in Bucharest to consider whether to invite Ukraine to begin moving toward membership, Mr. Putin bluntly warned that such membership would be unacceptable to Russia, presaging the strategy that appears to be unfolding now.

According to a diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, Mr. Putin even questioned the legality of the Soviet Union's transfer of the region to the authority of what was then the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. "If we add in the NATO question and other problems, the very existence of the state could find itself under threat," Mr. Putin said, according to the cable, written by Kurt Volker, the American ambassador to NATO at the time.

The question now is how far Mr. Putin intends to go. Sergei A. Markov, a political strategist who advises the Kremlin, said it was not yet clear. "He is improvising," he explained.

Ellen Barry contributed reporting.

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