Five minutes with Anne Applebaum: “Putin cannot let Ukraine become a democratic, pro-European state”

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/03/10/five-minutes-with-anne-applebaum-putin-cannot-let-ukraine-become-a-democratic-pro-european-state/

10/03/2014

Tensions have continued to rise in Crimea ahead of a planned referendum on the region seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia. In an interview with EUROPP’s Managing Editor Stuart Brown, **Anne Applebaum** *discusses the importance of Vladimir Putin’s domestic situation to his handling of the crisis, the role of the Russian media in shaping public opinion, and why a key priority for the EU should be to enforce its own anti-corruption standards with regard to Russian investors.*

How important is Vladimir Putin’s domestic situation to the Russian intervention in Crimea?

On the one hand, a major part of the motivation for Russia’s intervention is Putin’s concern for his own legitimacy. He needs to continue to prove to the Russians that he’s doing something for them: that he’s acquiring a new territory or giving them more prestige and elevating them to a higher place in the world. On the other hand, part of the motivation is that he really cannot let Ukraine become a democratic, pro-European state – even theoretically. Because if it were to do so that would lead to the question, well why can’t Russia be that too?

Ukraine is very close to Russia culturally, economically and in many other ways. And the fact that the Ukrainians don’t want to be ruled by the same system that the Russians are ruled by – an autocratic system with a corrupt oligarchic economy – undermines Putin’s own regime. So in one sense this is definitely about Russian pride and restoring the Russian empire, but it’s also very much a move against the kind of Ukraine that could theoretically emerge from this process: against a democratic, pro-European Ukraine.

Ultimately does Putin fear a similar kind of protest movement in Russia to that which removed Yanukovych from power in Kyiv?

I don’t know whether there is a real danger of that happening, but I’m certain that Putin believes there’s a danger and that he fears that kind of situation. This is a man who saw East Germany fall apart in 1989 following a series of mass demonstrations. This is a man who was trained in Andropov’s KGB. Andropov was someone who was also very conscious of the kind of power that small democratic groups and organisations can have if they build up into a larger movement – he was of course the Russian ambassador to Budapest in 1956 during the Hungarian Revolution.

So yes, Putin is very conscious of the need to prevent something like that from happening. Whether he’s right to be afraid of it I can’t say, but it’s clear that his policy since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004/5 has been very much directed at preventing something like this from happening in Russia.

How significant is the media dimension in the crisis, given that many Russian media organisations have refused to acknowledge that the troops in Crimea are Russian?

The Russian media has been extraordinary over the last few weeks. Even for me, I’ve watched it for many years, and I’m very surprised at the kind of coverage we’ve seen. There’s been a level of blatant dishonesty and outright lying that I didn’t expect, particularly because the Russian media is not usually monolithic – there are usually opposition voices and debate, rather than it being completely one sided.

But on this issue the coverage has been appallingly bad, including the ludicrous description of Russian troops who go into Crimea dressed up in unmarked uniforms as some kind of Crimean ‘self-defence forces’. The descriptions of the events in Kyiv as a fascist coup-d’état were also extraordinarily off base and easily contradicted by anybody who

was there. The way in which they've tried to shape the media, both inside of Russia and in the West, does require some new thinking about how to deal with it. The American State Department in the last few days, for the first time that I can remember, published a list of falsehoods to try and counteract the Russian description of events. Unfortunately I think those are the kinds of tactics that our diplomats are going to have to start using again.

You've previously written on the weak application of anti-corruption standards in the West with regard to Russian investors. Does this undermine the EU's credibility in attempts to influence Moscow's position over Ukraine?

I think the EU would have a lot more credibility in Russia – both with ordinary Russians and with the Russian government – if European governments were far more careful about their own standards and rules on who is allowed to invest money in their economies. Not all Russian money is corrupt and not all wealthy Russians are a negative influence, but both governments and individuals in western Europe need to be very careful about who they're dealing with and what kind of money they're using. If the EU doesn't care about Russian corruption then why should the Russians care about it?

The most important thing we could do to change our Russia policy is to take seriously the threat of corruption that comes from Russia into our own countries, and to take more seriously Russia's own concerns about corruption. The opposition that we saw grow so fast in Ukraine was really an anti-corruption movement. What people object to is the lack of transparency and the fact that countries are ruled by people with huge amounts of money, often stolen directly from the state or state companies. Ordinary people are really the victims of this and it's our obligation to make sure that we focus our own domestic and foreign policies on stopping that kind of corruption.

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About the interviewee

Anne Applebaum

Anne Applebaum is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author who has published extensively on the history of communism and the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. From 2012-13 she was the Philippe Roman Chair in History and International Affairs at the London School of Economics.