

THE

# IMPROVISED

BY ANDREW S. WEISS

**AFTER THIS WEEK'S DEVASTATING MILITARY SETBACKS FOR THE Ukrainian government, Western observers are trying urgently to get inside the head of Vladimir Putin. But the practitioners of this burgeoning cottage industry—call it Putinology—are missing one essential point: Mr. Putin has largely been improvising his way through the current crisis. That means that the Ukraine showdown is even scarier and more dangerous than you think: Mr. Putin is making it up as he goes along.**

The Russian leader has routinely experimented with (and quickly jettisoned) any number of concepts, strategies and approaches, all in the name of gaining short-term advantage. Mr. Putin may be living "in another world," as German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly suggested to President Barack Obama—but in our world, which Mr. Putin is busily remaking, he seems to think that keeping his opponents guessing and off-balance is an end in itself.

In opinion columns and books, the Putinologists have been struggling to explain the thinking of the man who, almost single-handedly, seems to be dragging much of the West into a new Cold War. Like their Kremlinologist forebears, they try to decode Moscow's intentions through painstaking analyses of the Russian

leader's every public utterance or symbol-laden photograph; they comb through minute aspects of Mr. Putin's career and private life; they sift for clues in the output of Russia's sprawling state propaganda apparatus. A lucky few even get invited to come to Russia once a year to sit down over elegant meals with the man himself and other mandarins and courtiers who spin them on how things really look from Moscow.

The larger-than-life portrait of Mr. Putin that usually results from such research is trotted out to support whatever sweeping conclusions about the Ukraine crisis seem relevant at a given moment. Thus we are told that Mr. Putin's aggression in Ukraine and confrontational stance toward the West are natural extensions of his years in the KGB, where he must have

been schooled in the black arts of Soviet intelligence and steeped in feverish anti-Americanism. (Never mind that Mr. Putin's rather undistinguished KGB career was concentrated in the unglamorous field of counterintelligence, with big chunks of time spent in backwaters such as a Dresden field station and the campus of Leningrad State University.) Mr. Putin's public flirtations with the trappings of Russian tsarism—including its Russian Orthodox faith and imperialist, anti-Western ideology—are sometimes cited as reflections of a deep-seated desire to reestablish control over the newly independent countries that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union. Similarly, Mr. Putin's dismaying assertion of a Slobodan Milosevic-style

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*Mr. Weiss is vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment. During the administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, he worked on Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian affairs at the National Security Council, the State Department and the Defense Department.*

INSIDE

MOVING TARGETS