President Putin's game plan in Ukraine becomes clearer day by day despite Russia's excellent, even brilliant, use of its traditional *maskirovka*. Russia applied *maskirovka* successfully against Nazi Germany in the later stage of World War II luring the German high command to expect Russian offensives elsewhere than where they actually took place. It stands for deliberately misleading the enemy with regard to own intentions causing the opponent to make wrong decisions thereby playing into your own hand. In today's world this is mainly done through cunning use of networks to shape perceptions blurring the picture and opening up for world opinion to see your view as the correct one legitimizing policy steps you intend to take.
Russia and President Putin seek to prevent signature of the Ukraine to the European Union Association Agreement. It was scheduled to be so in November 2013, but backpedaling by then President Yanukovich at the last moment ignited the current crisis. The EU offered Ukraine $15 billion on the condition of fundamental reforms. Russia stepped in and offered a similar sum of money on the condition of no changes. If Putin cannot stop the agreement he will do his utmost to make sure that Ukraine's economy does not take off and that Ukraine's societal system does not move towards a Western style model.

Behind it all lies Putin's fear that Ukraine in the Western camp turns into a success story with better economic living standard and a higher degree of freedom for its people. If so it will overshadow the Russian model of economics and politics turning the heat on Putin and his supporters indeed threatening their political survival.

President Putin may want to re-establish as much of the former Soviet Union as possible, but he knows very well that Russia is too weak (economically and militarily) to embark on such a course. This is not his political goal. His goal is much more limited. It is defensive demonstrating that in the main part of the former Soviet Union a Western system cannot work, only his system based on old fashioned Russian autocracy, even authoritarian behavior, with no reforms is suitable. Ukraine must not be allowed to prove this assertion to be false.

This policy inscribes itself in Russian history over the last 300-400 years swinging like a pendulum between reforms and suppression, between opening up to the outside world and shutting the door; it is nourished by the fundamental elements of Russia's foreign policy: Suspicion towards what comes from the outside world enhanced by fear of invasion due to having been invaded three times over 150 years (Napoleon 1812, Imperial Germany 1914, and Nazi Germany 1941). This also explains why the endeavors after 1991 to integrate Russia in a kind of Western system ran into obstacles and ultimately failed. Russia is controlled by a deep patriotism linked to the mythic and mystical notion 'Mother Russia' combined with a perception of a unique Russian 'soul or spirit.'
The first round is about the forthcoming Ukrainian presidential election scheduled for May 25, 2014. Russia's position is that this election is illegal because Ukraine already has a president (Yanukovich), who according to Russia was illegally ousted in February 2014. Furthermore the agreement brokered February 21, 2014 with the help of EU foreign ministers as witnesses stipulated presidential elections no later than December 2014 and May 2014 is allegedly in Russia's eyes too early. The Russian mediator at the meeting did not sign the agreement as witness referring to no mandate to do so, but in reality leaving Russia with a free hand to follow its own interpretation. Kremlin fears that the election results in a clear and overwhelming majority even among the ethnic Russians for a pro-western candidate; which opinion polls indeed indicate as the most likely outcome.

This position looks, however, like a loser. The majority of the Ukrainian population does not seem to be against the election and the international community does not share the Russian point of view. Russia and Putin have weakened their hand by forcing a referendum in Crimea under extremely dubious conditions connoting the feeling that invoking legalistic reason for opposing Ukraine's presidential election falls under the label of dissimulation.

Let us therefore assume that the election cannot be stopped irrespective of Russian manoeuvrings, that international observers deem it to be fair, and the result is a pro-western president.

The new president will opt for signing the EU agreement for the simple reason that this is what he/she was elected to do and reflects the view of the majority of Ukrainians.

President Putin cannot let this happen, but what can he do to forestall it? He may not be too much worried about US and EU sanctions for several reasons. The West does not look very determined and the sanctions may bite, but not sufficiently to derail him from such an important objective as defending his own political system. He will worry more about the reaction of the rest of the world. The large majority of countries around the world did not react strongly if at all when he annexed Crimea largely because a well-managed Russian media campaign convinced them that there were arguments to justify
such a step. But annexing parts of Eastern and/or Southern Ukraine is another matter. It would effectively end Ukraine as a nation-state. Russia's neighbors would feel the cold breeze down their neck justifying fears of an aggressive even expansionist Russia. Some of those neighbors are important trading partners and might start to rethink the relations; is Russia a reliable partner? China is buying oil, gas and military technology from Russia. If Russia acts in such an unpredictable way, indeed reckless behavior even brinkmanship, is it then wise to be too dependent on Russia?

The more likely outcome is that Russia and President Putin will engineer trouble in the eastern and southern part of Ukraine among the ethnic Russians mobilizing the propaganda machine to blow them up as evidence of what will be termed atrocities committed against ethnic Russians. This would be a platform for Putin to step in saying that the Russian minority in Ukraine from now on is living under the protection of Russia.

This does not need any soldiers to cross the border -- at least not officially; troops under disguise will certainly move in, as is already the case, but masquerade as local militia or maybe even as volunteers from all over Russia to support this 'just' course.

A new and untried government in Kiev would face a nightmare. Ukraine would be ungovernable and maybe even turn into a failed state with low domestic economic activity and foreign investors shying the country. Exactly what Putin wants to achieve. The Ukrainian economy would come to a standstill and fare even worse than over the preceding five years. Putin would not hesitate to refer to the dismal state of Ukraine having been lured by the West now paying the price for it. The US and EU would find it extremely difficult to help under such circumstances even if the political will is there, which cannot be taken for granted.

Those who can spoil this game plan are the ethnic Russians living in the eastern and southern part of Ukraine. If they look to Russia it stands a fair chance of success seen from Putins's point of view and the risk would be low. If, however, what cannot be excluded, the majority support the newly elected president in Kiev they will spoil this master plan by rejecting to be used as tools in a scenario of alleged suppression.
They do not care much if at all for grand strategy; they care about their own living standard. Those who can convince them through tangible evidence that they offer the best prospect for a better life will also be those who win their support. This is where *maskirovka* may be unable to deliver.