



By: Iuliia Mendel, TA Kyiv

Putin's Puppets—Ukrainians as part of Russian strategic plans



Vladimir Putin has a knack for turning former Ukrainian citizens into instruments of his will, using their insider knowledge and loyalty to shape his ongoing war and influence over Ukraine.

Since the early 2000s, he has strategically searched for loyal allies in Ukrainian politics, expertise, and media to advance the Kremlin's interests, intending to transform the post-Soviet nation into, if not a formal extension of Russia, then a compliant vassal state similar to Belarus.

Even after igniting the war and annexing Ukrainian territories, Putin is sticking to this goal. He is quietly gathering those who could potentially form a new pro-Russian government, both experienced loyalists and people who have never supported the Kremlin's policies—but all holders of a Ukrainian passport.

This is how Putin has seen mutual existence with Ukraine since he came to power.

In the 2000s, Viktor Medvedchuk, then chief of staff to Ukraine's second president, was one of the most influential **figures** on the Ukrainian political scene. He was so closely associated with Putin that the Russian leader even baptised his daughter.

Medvedchuk, who held several high-level political positions for many years, became very wealthy, mostly constructing oligarchic schemes. Medvedchuk was not just a friend; he was Putin's eyes and ears.

He was so important that he even participated in the prisoners exchange between Ukraine and Russia until 2019. Putin insisted that he continue on this path.

According to my contacts in security services, Medvedchuk fed Putin a dangerously seductive lie for years: that Ukrainians would welcome Russian troops as liberators, eager to restore ties with Moscow, and that Kyiv would fall without a fight.

When this fantasy crumbled in 2022, Putin

sidelined Medvedchuk, now trading him in a prisoner swap, and seemingly discarded his flawed advice.

The leader of all occupied territories

But the Kremlin's playbook did not close. Putin keeps Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's **ousted** pro-Russian ex-president, simmering on the sidelines—his political ghost occasionally appears on Russian TV in the occupied territories, hinting at a possible role in Moscow's schemes.

According to Ukrainian intelligence services, one of the Kremlin's scenarios could be to install Viktor Yanukovich as the leader of all occupied territories and potentially appoint him as a governor or head of a Russia-orchestrated artificial enclave.

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For years, Russia **propagated** the narrative of a “legitimate” Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and abroad, yet his persona failed to elicit either sympathy or empathy, rendering the narrative ineffective in swaying the electorate.

Furthermore, by tying Yanukovich to Russia, his image triggered increased anger and condemnation following Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas. Consequently, Putin shifted his focus to other Ukrainian-born figures.

A candidate for Ukraine's presidency

Before Russia's full-scale invasion, Dmitry Kozak, a native of Ukraine's Kirovograd region and now the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff, was Putin's point man in **talks** with Kyiv. He

remains actively engaged in this sphere, playing a pivotal role in shaping decisions concerning Ukraine-Russia relations.

Now take Kirill Dmitriev, a Stanford and Harvard graduate, who used to **maintain** a low-profile presence, despite his long-standing closeness to Putin.



Could Putin, whom Kirill Dmitriev refers to as “the boss”, view him as a compliant candidate for Ukraine’s presidency if the Kremlin’s strategy of installing a puppet government succeeds?

A Kyiv-born investment banker has become one of Putin’s trusted confidants, having served as the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund since 2011.

Today, Dmitriev is at the table with the United States, **negotiating** Russia’s future relations—and exerts undeniable influence over Ukraine’s destiny.

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Russian security forces are already searching for individuals to fill key positions in various sectors, as some former government officials have confided in me, signalling the Kremlin’s growing confidence.

Loyal Ukrainians, who have long pledged their allegiance to Moscow, could provide a convenient, if artificial, legal facade for transforming Ukraine into a controlled vassal state.

Strategic bargaining chips

But there are still figures lurking in the shadows that Putin may be keeping as strategic bargaining chips. In recent months, Putin has drawn another Ukrainian into his inner circle: Andriy Derkach, a former parliamentarian who fled to Russia.

Designated by the U.S. **sanctions** list as a “Russian agent with over a decade of experience,” Derkach, according to Ukraine’s Security Service, oversaw an agent network within the Russian General Staff tasked with facilitating Russia’s takeover of Ukraine.

I met him once when helping prepare a piece for The New York Times. The meeting left a lasting impression, as Derkach had invited us to the radio station he had recently acquired.

A calendar on the front door marked the date—Friday the 13th—while a black cat darted through the studio, adding a theatrical flair to the setting.

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These dramatic elements foreshadowed our less-than-successful interview, which exposed Derkach’s profound ideological disconnect and his conspiratorial views on American journalism.

Derkach appeared notably confident and hospitable, yet extracting any meaningful information from him proved exceedingly challenging.

Can he serve as a potential element in the Kremlin’s plans today? Perhaps he is controlling the promotion of offers for Ukrainians to join a potential pro-Russian government?

These aren't isolated cases—since Ukraine's independence, a number of Ukrainian-born figures have danced to Moscow's tune, each playing a role in Putin's dream of reclaiming control. Yet, it never worked for the Kremlin, at least not with Ukraine.

Even if the war concludes, Ukraine will remain weakened by the conflict, leaving it vulnerable to Russia's attempts to leverage its vast resources for informational and political dominance.

This influence could manifest through territorial control and the manipulation of puppet politicians tied to Ukraine by heritage or citizenship. Whether Russia can muster sufficient human resources to establish another pro-Russian enclave on post-Soviet territory may become a true test of Ukraine's independence and sovereignty.