



Russia, Ukraine and the West: How do you solve a problem like Vladimir?

by Ian Bond, 13 April 2021

Vladimir Putin is threatening Ukraine again. The West so far lacks a unified and effective way of dealing with this and other challenges from Russia.

In recent weeks fighting has surged in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian casualties have increased along the line of contact between Ukrainian government-controlled territory and the parts of region under the control of Russian puppet regimes. As before they invaded in 2014, Russian regular forces are poised near the Ukrainian border. [Open source intelligence](#) shows that some units have redeployed to Ukraine's north-eastern border from bases much further east. At least part of the 76th Air Assault Division, which took part in the 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine, has moved from near Russia's border with the Baltic States to Crimea. The Russian defence ministry has also announced that it is moving amphibious vessels from the Caspian to the Black Sea, supposedly for exercises. What is Russian president Vladimir Putin up to, and what should the EU and NATO do about it?

Russia will hold parliamentary elections in September. They will not be free or fair, but President Vladimir Putin needs the results to have a veneer of credibility in order to avoid the kind of protests that took place after blatantly rigged parliamentary elections in 2011. Things have not gone well for him domestically, however, since the Russian constitution was amended last year to allow him to stay in power until 2036. Russia's [excess death rate](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic has been among the highest in the world. [Growth forecasts](#) for the next few years are anaemic, according to the IMF. [Opinion polling](#) shows that more Russians currently think Putin has been unsuccessful rather than successful in promoting economic development, raising living standards and fighting corruption. Protests against the detention of opposition leader and anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny in January were the largest in almost a decade, and took place in almost 200 cities across Russia. And in neighbouring Belarus, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in power since 1994, has struggled to re-impose control after a rigged election in August 2020 – an unwelcome precedent for Putin. Perhaps that explains why he is turning to old stratagems, cracking down on the opposition at home and creating distractions abroad: he hopes to silence critics, create a burst of patriotic support and secure the election outcome he wants.

The manoeuvres around Ukraine may only be intended to apply psychological pressure to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and underline his country's vulnerability. One independent Russian military analyst [says](#) that until mid-May the ground in the Donbas will be too wet for major armoured advances. There is also a suggestion that the helicopters and aircraft needed for an airborne assault are still absent from Crimea – signs that no attack is imminent.

Alternatively, Russia's military actions may be intended primarily to unsettle Western countries. Putin may think that talk of renewed war leading to the destruction of Ukraine (a phrase used by both Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Putin's Ukraine negotiator Dmitri Kozak recently) will persuade France and Germany, the mediators of the Minsk agreements that brought an end to heavy fighting in 2014 and 2015, to lean on Zelenskyy to make concessions. Implementation of the agreements has largely stalled since a [burst of progress](#) after Zelenskyy was elected in 2019. Concessions might include giving the Kremlin's proxies in the Donbas a veto over Ukrainian foreign policy, or allowing Russia to place its forces along the line of contact as 'peacekeepers' – as it has done recently between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces around Nagorno-Karabakh. Experience elsewhere in the former Soviet Union shows that Russian peacekeepers are rarely neutral, and are hard to dislodge.

Or the Kremlin may in fact be preparing a new invasion for the summer. One worrying indicator is increased [Russian propaganda](#) accusing Ukraine of preparing to attack the 'separatist' areas, and planning 'genocide' against ethnic Russians. Such disinformation, seen extensively in 2014 when Russia attacked Ukraine, has both a domestic and an external purpose: it increases popular support for defending Russian 'compatriots'; and it allows foreign governments looking for a reason not to fall out with Moscow to pretend that Ukraine is to blame for its own misfortunes.

Regardless of which thesis is true, the US and other Western countries should have two goals: to reassure Ukraine, so that it does not feel compelled to take rash pre-emptive action (falling into the trap that Georgia did in 2008, when it was quickly overwhelmed by Russia's counterattack), and to deter Russia by shifting the cost-benefit calculation in favour of de-escalation. Many Western leaders have spoken to Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian leaders to reiterate their support for Ukraine. But so far there is not enough clarity about the negative consequences for the Putin regime of a renewed push into Ukrainian territory, nor about what the West might do to help Ukraine defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Ukraine is less likely to try to strike first, in anticipation of a Russian push, if it is confident that it can hold its positions along the line of contact. Ukraine's forces are much more capable than they were in 2014, but Western countries should work with them to identify and fill the gaps in their defensive armoury, and to provide training where necessary. The UK has announced that it will form a 'Ranger Regiment' later this year to train, advise and accompany partners in high threat environments. The government is [reportedly](#) considering deploying it initially in Mozambique or Somalia; it could make a bigger contribution to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area if deployed in Ukraine.

Western countries also need to show more political support for Ukraine, without encouraging unrealistic expectations. NATO governments are even more divided over allowing Ukraine to progress towards NATO membership than they were at the Bucharest summit in 2008, when they unwisely promised Georgia and Ukraine NATO membership without a timetable or a pathway to achieving it. Rather than highlighting Ukraine's continuing inability to join Western clubs, Zelenskyy should encourage as many EU and NATO countries as possible to hold high-level physical or virtual contacts with the Ukrainian authorities and civil society in the coming months, to show their concern about the situation.

Putin knows that the West has no wish to go to war for Ukraine; the West must therefore show it will also raise the cost of aggression in other ways. The EU, UK, US and other Western supporters of Ukraine should make clear in their contacts with the Russian authorities that they are working on co-ordinated packages of sanctions that could be deployed quickly in the event that Russian forces cross the border again. New sanctions must go beyond those imposed in 2014; those contributed to discouraging Putin from his [goal](#) of taking southern Ukraine and turning it into 'Novorossiya', but were not enough to persuade him to withdraw from the east or Crimea. This time, they should be designed to do real damage to the sectors of the economy on which the Putin regime relies, particularly the oil and gas industry, and to Russia's access to the international financial system, as well as to a wider range of Russian elite figures than have been targeted so far.

In devising and advocating for sanctions, the US must be sensitive to the fact that its European partners have much more at stake economically than it does – in 2019, EU trade with Russia was more than nine times greater than US trade with Russia. Europeans are also dependent on Russia for about one-third of their oil and gas. Sanctions will need to be tough if they are to have a deterrent effect, but they also need to be politically saleable for politicians in countries whose economies have already been hit by the effects of the pandemic; the US and other countries may need to find ways to help those worst affected. The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea should be top of the target list for sanctions. It is almost complete, but if it goes into operation, despite previous US sanctions against companies involved in its construction, it will be a considerable victory for Putin. It will drive a wedge between Germany on the one side and the US, Poland and the Baltic States on the other, and enable Russia to shut down current pipelines transiting Ukraine. It will also perpetuate Europe's excessive dependence on Russia for its energy. Peter Beyer, Co-ordinator of Transatlantic Co-operation in the German foreign ministry and a former member of the Bundestag, called on March 31st for a moratorium on further construction work on Nord Stream 2 – a sensible interim step, albeit demanding a painful climb-down from the German government.

The security of Ukraine is the most urgent but far from the only Russia-related challenge facing the West. After 20 years of Putin, Western countries have still not devised a comprehensive strategy to combat his ability to disrupt those he perceives as adversaries. Just as important as buttressing Ukraine is countering broader Russian efforts to subvert liberal democratic systems. The Kremlin showed in the US in 2016 and 2020 and in France in 2017 that it is able and willing to interfere in elections. It would be naïve to think that the threat has gone away. Germany faces Bundestag elections in September 2021; the first round of the French presidential election is in April 2022. Western powers need to share information and best practice in combating disinformation and manipulation of voters, and to identify, expose and where possible prosecute Russian agents of influence in their political systems.

Western countries must also ensure that their armed forces are adequate to deter any future Russian efforts to intimidate or coerce them. Putin's military modernisation programme has passed its peak and the Russian defence budget in 2019 was about 10 per cent less than in 2016, but it still accounts for almost 4 per cent of GDP, compared with a NATO average (excluding the US) of 1.7 per cent. Russia's armed forces are much better equipped and more capable than they were when they defeated Georgia in 2008. The UK's recent 'Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy' described Russia as "the most acute threat to our security" – a view probably shared by many countries in Central and Northern Europe. Putin has laid particular stress in recent years on the new nuclear weapons (including a nuclear-powered cruise missile) that Russia is developing – weapons that are little use for fighting a war, but could certainly be used to intimidate a potential adversary. To maintain deterrence,

NATO needs credible conventional and nuclear counters. It also needs a dialogue with Russia that ensures that each side understands the other's aims and red lines – though Russia has so far [refused to engage](#) with existing international mechanisms for clarifying military intentions.

The human rights situation in Russia, though deteriorating, is not a direct threat to Western interests in the way that a Russian invasion of Ukraine, successful Russian manipulation of a Western election or military coercion of a European country would be. That should not stop Western leaders and officials raising individual cases whenever they meet their Russian counterparts, or sanctioning individuals in egregious cases. But human rights should not be a driver of policy – even in the case of a figure as prominent as Navalny.

A more coherent Western approach to Russia must be based on limiting the damage it can do to the interests of EU and NATO countries and their Eastern European neighbours, above all Ukraine but also Belarus – still a possible target for incorporation into Russia. Putin could be in office for another decade or more; he is unlikely to shed his distrust of NATO and the EU, or to stop seeking a sphere of influence in the former Soviet space. Some European politicians, including Emmanuel Macron, continue to [argue](#) that Europe must improve its relations with Russia through dialogue. The West should indeed keep talking to the Kremlin and to Russian society more widely, but without illusions that there will be a fundamental change in relations. Putin's zero-sum worldview, generally shared in the Russian political establishment, will guide Russia's external behaviour for the foreseeable future. All Western countries can do is try to ensure that they and their partners do not end up on the losing side.

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