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Conflict in Ukraine

The siege

Believing that Vladimir Putin has surrendered Ukraine would be naive. The West must keep up the pressure

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THANK goodness for Petro Poroshenko. That is the response of some Western observers to the advances made by the Ukrainian army in its fitful war with Russian-backed separatists. Mr Poroshenko won the presidency in May on a promise to defeat the insurgents; his forces' victories this week have begun to fulfil it. They have also persuaded

some outsiders that Vladimir Putin has relinquished his bid to control or conquer eastern Ukraine—and that happily the West need harry him no further. That is a delusional and dangerous mistake.

The separatists have been ousted from their erstwhile stronghold of Sloviansk; they have fallen back on Donetsk, the biggest city in the region, and are frantically appealing to Mr Putin for help (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21606863-ukrainian-forces-regain-some-rebel-held-towns-face-tougher-fight-over-donetsk-biggest) (<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21606863-ukrainian-forces-regain-some-rebel-held-towns-face-tougher-fight-over-donetsk-biggest>)). Unfortunately for them, the Ukrainians have also managed largely to halt the flow of Russian “volunteers” and weaponry across the border. An optimistic reading of this situation is that, wary of incurring further economic punishment that Russia can ill-afford, Mr Putin has abandoned the separatists to an inevitable rout.



On the contrary: the conflict has entered its most perilous phase. Donetsk is a city of 1m people; the desperate rebels, whose favourite tactics include kidnapping and human shields, would have few qualms about sacrificing some of them. And the cost of an urban battle would be measured not only in lost lives but also in future state-building. Much of eastern Ukraine's infrastructure has been destroyed, and some of its population displaced. A bloodbath in Donetsk would make reintegrating the region into a coherent nation even harder.

Making that task impossible is precisely what Mr Putin intends. His urge to prevent Ukraine escaping Russia's influence is long-standing; recent setbacks, such as Mr Poroshenko's trade deal with the European Union, will have strengthened his resolve. Using the country's east as a brake on westward moves in Kiev remains his best option. True, some Russian troops have pulled back from Ukraine's eastern border; Russia's parliament has revoked its authorisation for their deployment. But Mr Putin can wreak havoc without them, even if Donetsk falls, through sabotage and guerrilla strikes.

Turn the screws

That is why, as well as holding the Ukrainian government to its vow to be patient with Donetsk, the United States and the EU must redouble their pressure on the Kremlin—by, at the least, expanding the list of officials and cronies subjected to travel bans and asset freezes. Mr Putin may no longer be fortifying the insurgents as energetically as before, but nor has he persuaded them to disarm. At home he faces powerful nationalist calls (largely of his own making) to defend them. The West must make the cost of interference prohibitive.

The blithe outside view is that existing sanctions have forced Mr Putin to back down. Even if that were true (and it is unlikely to prove so), it would be an argument for maintaining the pressure on him rather than easing it. In fact, the West's overall role in this strange, confected conflict has been inglorious. It connived in Mr Putin's pretence that he had not invaded eastern Ukraine—even though, in a furtive, tricky way he plainly had—because to say otherwise would have required a drastic response. In recent weeks both America and the Europeans issued ultimatums to the Kremlin, then did nothing when they expired, leaving Mr Poroshenko little choice but to prosecute his war. In this way, although most of the blame belongs to Russia's paranoid, vengeful leader, the West's reticence has contributed to Ukraine's tragedy. Now it must act.

From the print edition: Leaders