

## Russia and the West

# Vladimir Putin's European adventures

**The Russian president's strategy towards Ukraine and the West may not have worked as well as he hoped**

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AS RUSSIA'S president, Vladimir Putin, sat down for dinner with his French counterpart, François Hollande, this week in Paris (one of two state dinners in the Elysée on the same evening, so that Barack Obama would not cross paths with Mr Putin), he might have been forgiven for thinking that the worst moments of his angry clash with the West were behind him. Even as eastern



Ukraine sinks into further conflict, European leaders have little appetite for new sanctions against Russia. With official meetings fixed with Mr Hollande and Britain's David Cameron, the diplomatic isolation threatened by Western leaders is not extending to Mr Putin personally. And France is going ahead with its sale of Mistral-class assault ships to Russia.

In Ukraine, Mr Putin may also presume he is getting what he wants, even if Moscow is not directing day-to-day fighting in the east. Ukraine's newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, who will be inaugurated this weekend, is inheriting a messy and intractable conflict that will divert attention and resources from other problems, not least a floundering economy. Financial woes and the need to end the fighting will force Mr Poroshenko to deal with Mr Putin—though the reverse is also true, since the Kremlin will have to accept Mr Poroshenko as a valid interlocutor.

At a minimum, Mr Putin and separatist forces in the east, inspired and in many cases supported by the Kremlin even if not run by it, have created facts on the ground that make the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO impossible. This was Mr Putin's most paranoid fear from the start of the Maidan protests in Kiev last November. The Kremlin will doubtless push for Ukraine to drop any such aspirations. Beyond that, the insurgency in the east gives Mr Putin a bargaining chip that can be used to threaten Kiev and can ultimately be traded for more decentralisation.

It may be that Mr Putin was not dissuaded from invading eastern Ukraine by the threat of sanctions, but that he would have gone in only if there had been no other way to achieve these goals. The tens of thousands of Russian troops stationed on the border—Western military officials say all but a handful have returned to their bases—were there mainly to intimidate and deter Ukrainian forces and to act as cover for rebel paramilitaries to take over more government buildings.

The danger both Mr Putin and Mr Poroshenko share is that this strategy has worked almost too well. Whatever political aims existed a few weeks ago have been consumed in the logic of violence. The conflict has descended into warlordism, in which rebel commanders control militias that do not necessarily communicate with or much like each other. In Donetsk, a rebel battalion led by Chechen mercenaries has taken control of separatist headquarters and is backing Alexander Borodai, a political operative from Russia. But their influence does not extend to nearby towns such as Sloviansk and Gorlovka, where rival militias hold sway.

The Kremlin may thus have flipped the switch for an anti-Kiev insurgency that it cannot easily turn off. The violence of what Kiev is calling its “anti-terrorist operation” is also hardening local sentiment. On June 2nd a rocket apparently launched by a Ukrainian military jet killed several people outside an administrative building occupied by separatists in Luhansk. Hostility to the new authorities in Kiev was formerly inchoate and fed by Russian propaganda, but more civilian deaths and a sense of siege have made it harder to reverse. This leaves Mr Putin trying an awkward manoeuvre: he wants a destabilised and weak Ukraine, but not one riven by the chaos of civil war. Pushing too hard for the first could land him with the second.

As for Europe, where Mr Putin is this week travelling for the first time since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of fighting in eastern Ukraine, his calculation appears to be twofold. First, he thinks Europe lacks the will to inflict real economic pain on Russia. And second, he wants Russia to be able to do without the West by anchoring itself in Asia instead.

On the first, he may be right. European leaders see the \$450 billion of annual trade with Russia as too large to risk tougher sanctions. The sale of Mistral ships, worth €1.2 billion (\$1.7 billion) and highly important to France's arms-export industry, shows commercial considerations winning out. The rise of far-right parties across Europe gives Mr Putin further comfort. Movements like France's National Front have an “ideological convergence” with the Kremlin, notes Thomas Gomart of the Russia centre at the Institut Français des Relations Internationales: both believe Europe is in decline, multiculturalism and the homosexual lobby are a threat, and America is the root cause of many problems.

The hoped-for anchoring in Asia is a large geopolitical gamble, the result of which will only slowly become apparent. On May 29th in Astana, Kazakhstan's capital, Mr Putin signed a deal

to create a Eurasian Economic Union with the Kazakh and Belarusian presidents, Nursultan Nazarbayev and Alexander Lukashenko. The agreement was vague, with technical details left unresolved, making it a political show rather than economically significant. And though it buoyed Mr Putin's efforts to demonstrate influence over the post-Soviet world, it was, says Alexey Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, "no triumph". Mr Putin had to rush to sign the agreement before the underlying customs union is in place, says Mr Malashenko, so questions over energy sales, business regulation and farm trade may undermine it.

Mr Nazarbayev and Mr Lukashenko are as wary of Mr Putin as they are eager to bind themselves closer to him. Similarly, the \$400 billion gas deal he signed with China in May, more than a decade in the making, was of great symbolic importance, but with unclear long-term economic benefits. The Kremlin and Gazprom accepted a lower price for the sake of their geopolitical priority of opening new markets in Asia.

The weakness in Mr Putin's strategy is that, by allowing his visceral fears to drive his policy in Ukraine, he risks bringing about just what he hoped to avoid. He has lost Ukraine as an ally and a potential partner in the Eurasian union, while NATO is reasserting its military posture and bolstering its defences (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21603484-barack-obama-promises-increase-americas-military-presence-eastern-europe-troops) (<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21603484-barack-obama-promises-increase-americas-military-presence-eastern-europe-troops>)). The spectre of increased NATO forces on Russia's borders in Poland and the Baltic states has become a reality thanks to Mr Putin's actions in Ukraine. And having fought to preserve its sovereignty and economic leverage in relation to Europe and the West, Russia risks replacing them with a new dependence on China.

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