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### **Ukraine, Russia and the Future of Europe**

*John Besemeres*



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# Ukraine, Russia and the Future of Europe

**John Besemeres, The Australian National University**

*Australia was the only country outside Europe and NATO to support the international campaign to expel Russian diplomats in response to the nerve-agent attack in Salisbury. Australia's decision caused a significant squall of criticism from the Russian side. The Russian Embassy in Canberra accused the Australian side of destroying the "the relatively small but substantial positive asset in relationship, which was created by a joint effort during the last years." Russia expelled two Australian diplomats in response.*

*Despite the fact that Canberra consistently supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, there are still surprisingly many Putin apologists in some of Australia's educated milieus. Ukrinform spoke with a leading Australian expert on Eastern Europe, Research Fellow of the Australian National University's Centre for European Studies, Dr John Besemeres, about why this is so, what attitudes to Ukraine and Russia prevail in Australian society today, how Australia tackles Russian propaganda and how he views Ukraine's strategic position against the background of Europe and the Western alliance.*

Ivan Yusypiuk, Ukrinform, Canberra

*This is an online conversation with Dr John Besemeres conducted by Ivan Yusypiuk, originally published on 10 May, 2018, by Ukrinform Kyiv in Ukrainian, Russian and English; here updated to early July, 2018.*

**Ivan Yusypiuk: Mr Besemeres, I'd like to start the interview with your assessment of how Australia, the most distant continent, now assesses world events and Russia's role in them?**

John Besemeres: Perhaps I might make some introductory remarks, which hopefully will also serve to address your question. Australia traditionally had a very Eurocentric view of the world, following closely the views and national/imperial interests of the United Kingdom. Though many Australian people of Irish origin took a negative view of the UK, for obvious historical reasons, most Australians thought of it as "home" up until roughly World War II. But since World War II, Australian policy-makers look primarily to the U.S. as our key ally

and primary security guarantor. In recent decades, and especially since the Paul Keating government of the 1990s, the Australian foreign policy establishment and commentariat see Asia as our main security priority, sometimes to the point of neglecting our important, indeed vital continuing links with Europe.

In recent decades, Europe has become almost “unfashionable” in this country. Australians’ knowledge of Europe and European issues, despite the huge post-war influx of European migrants, has fallen away markedly. In particular, their knowledge of Russia and its neighbours has declined from inadequate to something worse.

#### **IY: So the situation is bad?**

JB: Well, there are some problems, certainly. Some of the few modest university departments devoted to Russia (and only secondarily, if at all, to its Slavonic neighbours) were closed down or starved of funds. And Australian intellectuals of the left (few Australian intellectuals these days, particularly at universities, confess to being right-wing) in some cases still nurture a residual sympathy for Russia as the land of the great socialist experiment which still radiates a beneficent influence on the West;<sup>1</sup> as the valiant wartime ally (“Uncle Joe”) who saved us all from Hitler; or as the natural and welcome adversary of right-wing governments in Australia. Such sympathies, which may sometimes run in family traditions, are not always coupled with a clear picture of the contemporary reality of Putin’s Russia.

The backdrop against which some Australian intellectuals viewed Russia's illegal seizure and annexation of Crimea, and its violent subversion of parts of the Donbas was a weak understanding of Russia’s region, with a tendency sometimes to see not the escapee colonies

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<sup>1</sup> [https://cesaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Graeme-Gill\\_The-Russian-Revolution.pdf](https://cesaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Graeme-Gill_The-Russian-Revolution.pdf)

(Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia), but Russia as the victim. Russia, some like to argue, is being mistreated by the West because of the resurgence of “Cold-War” attitudes. In Australia, as elsewhere, Putin also has a surprisingly strong constituency on the far right which, strangely, has been further enhanced by the Trump ascendancy.

A prominent journalist with our national broadcaster, the ABC (widely perceived as having developed in recent decades a deeply entrenched left-wing culture), interviewed me shortly after the launch of Russia’s proxy war against Ukraine. I had begun to offer a critical assessment of these events, when I was interrupted by a question along the lines of “But wasn't that the West’s fault for trying to take away Russia’s ally, Ukraine?” I responded by saying that since independence Ukraine had not been an “ally” of Russia, but rather had sought to keep some distance from Moscow, while building better relations with the West, hoping thereby to gain a hedge against any Russian pressure or aggression. I was not invited back to that particular program again.

The ABC’s intermittent bias against Ukraine is often not an issue of left versus right, but rather of ethnicity or of differing perspectives on the nature of international relations. The ABC has quite often invited people onto its programs who claim to be realists, or conservatives, but who are nonetheless stout defenders of Putin’s actions in Ukraine. Many of their Russian guests are emigres in Western countries, including Australia, who nonetheless line up almost invariably behind Mr Putin. Given that their attitudes are so very much “my country, right or wrong”, their self-imposed exile must be painful for them, one might have thought, though it does give them the opportunity to serve their beloved homeland loyally from afar.

The ABC does sometimes elicit comment on Russia-related items from competent people, including from overseas (though seldom if ever from Ukraine, or from Poland, or Estonia, as opposed to Russia). But then a day or two later, it's likely to recycle one of its favourite local Russlandversteher. An overseas correspondent of mine, a long-time observer of the Soviet and now the Russian scene, saw something by one such ABC guest republished in a well-known Western source that reproduces inter alia strongly pro-Kremlin texts. One day I suddenly received an email from him, in which he attached the relevant passage, then asked me:

*Is he a real person or is this a spoof? Even by the standards of the most ardent fellow-travellers in the 1930s, this outburst is really extraordinary. Was it originally published somewhere on April 1?*

Like many other news outlets, the ABC also tends to favour "balance", not as its charter would require between various shades of Australian opinion, but rather in the sense of avoiding making judgements about the parties to conflict situations. For example, in news from Ukraine or Syria, the contending forces will be treated and quoted as though they were all equally to blame for any violence that is occurring, and equally accurate and scrupulous in their assessments of the situation. This doctrine of "balance", no doubt meant originally to maintain the distinction between facts and opinions, is not a peculiarity of our Australian media, but a problem in Western journalism more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

However, when dealing with countries and spokespeople who are notorious for routinely lying (in Moscow's case, in pursuance of an explicitly avowed doctrine of information warfare), and whose lies have been exposed many times, this approach to balance results in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-lies-damned-lies-and-russian-disinformation/>

serious distortions which will have the effect of misleading the naïve and furthering Moscow's objectives.

Having been critical of our ABC, I should add that it has many fine journalists and great traditions and does much excellent work across a variety of genres, much of which our other media outlets could or would never replace. It has shown in recent times some signs of responding to the criticisms of its left- and green-leaning culture that have been made. And its coverage of Russia can be very good. It has, for example, recently produced and presented an excellent three-part program on the Trump-Russia relationship, featuring some striking images, fascinating interlocutors and some very tough questioning by the presenter, Sarah Ferguson.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the occasional poor performance of our quality media, most of our journalistic coverage of the issues has been solid. And as a result of Moscow's continuing aggression against Ukraine and its military intervention and repeated war crimes in Syria in support of the brutal Assad regime, Australians have started to gain a better understanding of the Kremlin's *modus operandi*. The shooting down of Malaysian flight MH17, in which some 38 Australian citizens and permanent residents perished, did much to sharpen both Australia's perceptions of, and its policies towards Russia. Even so, some Australian commentators still saw then PM Tony Abbott's public comment that he would "shirt-front" (a rough tackle in Australian football) Mr Putin at the G20 summit in Brisbane in November 2014 as reckless, and ill-advised.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who replaced Mr Abbott in a "palace coup" in September 2015, seemed at first to take a more "moderate" approach to Russia than his predecessor. But

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/trumprussiJB:-follow-the-money/9840958>

over time and with more exposure to Russia's policies, he too has toughened his line, and the Skripal case has had the effect of further strengthening Australia's policy towards Russia, as has occurred in other Western countries.

**IY: In your recent comments to ABC 24 Hour TV News<sup>4</sup> you said that “the West has been too soft on Russia” for too long and that the recent response of the international community to the attack in Salisbury represented an “unprecedented show of strength.” Do you think that at last we are witnessing a turning point in global politics when the world realized that the concept of resetting relations with Russia at this historic stage is hopeless?**

JB: I do indeed think the West has for far too long been pitifully inadequate in its responses to Russia's aggression against many East European countries of Western orientation. The US aside, well-off democracies tend to be pacific by inclination, though other Western countries have in recent decades occasionally supported the US in military interventions in defence of the liberal international order (including its non-proliferation regime and the defence of civilians threatened with major bloodshed). Some of those interventions, notably those in Iraq and Libya, were ill-judged. But the liberal international system which was finally solidified, as it seemed, by the fall of communism in 1990-91, had much to recommend it and was and is worth defending.

However, since 1991 most Western countries have radically reduced their military establishments and downsized many of their soft-power institutions aimed at reaching the populations of aggressive tyrannies like Russia, China and Iran. As a result, most Western countries are now politically and militarily ill-prepared to deal with external aggression, whether it be military, cyber, mendacious propaganda, or subversive.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-27/russian-diplomats-to-be-expelled-from-australia/959079>



In the case of Russia, which has the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet, neither the US nor its Western allies wish to be drawn into direct military engagement. But there are measures short of that which can be deployed. And an adequate conventional military preparedness is necessary as a basis for any such response. But for some time after Putin launched his anti-Western campaign on returning to the presidency in 2012, in Europe there was neither the preparedness nor the response.

But Putin's serial aggression against many members of the Western strategic community as well as former vassals in Eastern Europe since Russia's attacks on Ukraine in 2014 has finally provoked more robust responses, including from the Trump Administration. These responses from Washington were a pleasant surprise, given President Trump's frequent public statements calling for better relations with Moscow.

On the margins of the abortive G7 meeting in Quebec on June 8-9, however, President Trump went well beyond his usual mantras about a warm relationship with Putin. His contemptuous treatment of all his partners at the G7 meeting, coupled with his call for Russia to be reinstated in a revived G8, has cast a very dark shadow over the future of the Western alliance. Potentially his latest moves even threaten the security of some newer allies and partners, especially Ukraine and other Western neighbours of Russia. The Trump Administration has taken important steps to strengthen those countries and NATO's eastern flanks more generally. But President Trump himself seems often to be at variance with his own administration. To make matters worse, in recent months he seems to be increasingly dispensing with the close involvement and advice of some of the key figures in his

administration, once seen as being ‘the adults in the room’, who had been managing to deliver sound policies while restraining some of the president’s more impulsive gestures.<sup>5</sup>

Europe, for its part, has been going through a series of enervating crises, which accentuate the self-imposed military weakness it has chosen for itself since the end of the Cold War, and against which Trump has been railing, not unlike many of his predecessors, and not entirely without reason, but far more raucously than them, and in grossly inappropriate settings.

Europe’s leader is now Germany, a country which for historical reasons has chosen to become a programmatically pacifist country. Some German leaders have continued repeatedly to call for “dialogue” with Russia despite Moscow's aggressive behaviour. Chancellor Merkel, who usually manages to keep such anachronistic Ostpolitik impulses in check, now has very serious domestic difficulties of her own, with her CSU colleague, Horst Seehofer, threatening to split the Christian Democrat partnership along its CDU/CSU axis on the migration issue. That very issue of course, is causing Merkel, Germany and the EU as a whole acute difficulties, at which Putin will be rejoicing, and to which he has prolifically contributed in Syria, in propaganda output, and elsewhere.

But for a while at least, as recently as in March/April this year, the Skripal outrage and the barrage of lies, threats and sneers with which Russia responded to being called upon to explain itself seemed to mobilize the West into a surprisingly vigorous and unified response. UK Prime Minister May handled the situation with skill and leadership, President Macron contributed vigour and decisiveness, President Trump delivered an unexpectedly high number of expulsions, though apparently by accident,<sup>6</sup> whilst Chancellor Merkel succeeded

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<sup>5</sup> <http://insidestory.org.au/putin-and-trump-anatomy-of-a-bromance/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qq13BDVzbqw>

in containing, as usual, the Russlandverstehers impulses of her colleagues. Soon after the climax of the Skripal affair, there occurred yet another clear case of chemical weapon use by Assad with Russian support and complicity, which evoked a similarly unified and robust response from many of the same Western players.

**IY: How enduring and how strong has this more unified policy of Western countries towards Russia been?**

JB: For a brief season, the responses of Western countries to the Skripal case and to the use of CW in Syria gave grounds for hoping that the end of the period of Western passivity and disunity in the face of Russia's increasingly impudent acts of aggression was at hand. But even then, a big question mark remained on whether that new resolve and solidarity could be sustained, as Russia probed further, and tried to drive wedges into the Western alliance.

Despite Russia's totally unjustified tit-for-tat “retaliatory” expulsions, no further such actions were undertaken by any Western countries. Moscow took particular aim at one of its favourite Western hate-figures, the UK. First it expelled 23 British diplomats (the same number as London had expelled). It also closed down the UK consulate in St. Petersburg as well as the British Council which had existed continuously for 59 years, through many decades of variable co-existence with successive Soviet regimes. In addition, it placed an arbitrary ceiling on the permitted size of the UK's Moscow embassy, necessitating the recall of a further 27 British diplomats.

Thus, in effect, Moscow expelled more than double the number of diplomats that London had. We can be sure that the proportion of KGB and GRU operatives among the Russian expellees would have been close to 100%, and nothing remotely analogous to it in the case of Russia's supposed “retaliations”. There would have been little genuine concern by the

Kremlin about Western espionage through diplomatic posts. Rather, they would have seen the situation as a golden opportunity to attempt to weaken further any Western presence in Russia and further increase the isolation of Russia's population and its information space. When the West could summon no further response to this abuse of diplomatic process, it conceded important ground to Putin's regime.

In April, when President Trump had authorised strikes against Syria for its renewed use of chemical weapons against civilian populations, his administration also foreshadowed<sup>7</sup> further sanctions against Russia for its complicity in Assad's brutal attacks. This initially looked like a robust response. But Trump then backpedalled on any such action (upstaging Nikki Haley, his Ambassador to the UN New York), while his spokeswoman reaffirmed yet again his wistful desire to have a meeting with Putin.

In June, backed up by Russian airstrikes and diplomatic support with the usual quota of civilian casualties and attacks on hospitals, Assad launched a further brutal assault on a large area in south-western Syria that had been the subject of an agreement by Russia, Jordan and the US a year before, declaring it a de-escalation zone. After first issuing warnings that these brazen violations, which are already generating a large new flow of refugees towards the Jordanian border (270,000 by the most recent estimate), with serious potential consequences for a Europe already besieged and politically hamstrung by migration flows, Trump has again abandoned Western-aligned victims in Syria (as he did earlier the Kurds who had fought valiantly with the US against Islamic State).

Trump has been making clear that he wants to withdraw US forces from Syria as soon as possible. An important consideration for him in this is doubtless to save money, as he said

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/16/trump-nikki-haley-russia-sanctions-526856>

proudly when explaining why he was suspending what he chose to call ‘provocative’ US exercises in South Korea (‘provocative’ is the Kremlin’s preferred word for them). But very likely he is keen to leave Syria to the tender mercies of Russia and Assad. This would be a US policy warmly welcomed by the Kremlin in anticipation of the Putin-Trump “summit”.

Similarly, in April after Russia had simply followed its usual tactic of “retaliatory” expulsions, and even before the latest war crimes in Syria, the West should have had painful follow-up measures ready to impose on Moscow, but there was no sign of them. It soon became apparent that any serious boycott of the World Cup, for example, was out of the question, and Sochi has since become another huge PR success for Russia and for President Putin. For Western leaders, producing surprising and damaging responses is, of course, far more difficult politically than for Putin. And trying to deprive democratic voters of their footy, it seems, is more than most Western leaders are prepared to risk. But if the West cannot muster a serious boycott of a football tournament, however important, what message does this send to its adversaries?

April begins to look like an idyll in retrospect. Trump’s most recent manoeuvres have raised much more serious concerns than his retractions and half-measures in April, worrying as they were. One now has the sense of a general unravelling of the Transatlantic alliance on various fronts, with President Trump the key instigator of most of the damage. Chancellor Merkel and President Macron are having great difficulty in advancing some coherent new overall strategy for the EU. The migration issue seems insoluble by “more Europe” manoeuvres, though ad hoc bandaid solutions are being devised. At the same time it is spawning populist forces everywhere, some of them, as in Italy and Austria, forming governments which are at once radically anti-migration and strongly pro-Russian.

Meanwhile, Trump continues displaying aggressive contempt for most of the US's traditional allies, whilst pursuing his bromance with President Putin and, on the domestic scene, hurrying along what appear to be preparations to remove Special Prosecutor, Robert Mueller. Now with the summit imminent we can probably expect to see the mother of all resets, with a deal being struck with Putin like the one with Kim Jong-un, but on a much larger scale; one where with no officials present, President Trump concedes much and gets airy platitudes in exchange. The Western alliance is in a parlous state, and this poses a grave danger to Ukraine's security.



**IY: On that disturbing note, let us now switch to Ukraine. You are known to the Ukrainian audience first of all due to your book *A Difficult Neighbourhood* published in late 2016. At that time, you wrote that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was the crucial test of Europe's and the world's ability to respond adequately to current challenges. What is the perception of Russian aggression against Ukraine in Australia today?**

JB: In such a rapidly evolving or perhaps mutating situation, I can only confidently speak for myself. I continue to believe that Ukraine is the central challenge that the West faces from

Moscow, and for the West to become distracted and fail to hold the line on Ukraine would be a major disaster, not only for Ukraine, but also for the West as a whole. Any attempt to carry through some grand deal even partially at Ukraine's expense, would be even worse. That said, I should re-emphasise that until recently, I had been for the most part encouraged by the way in which the West had been reacting to most Ukraine-related challenges. Minsk was not a well-drafted agreement,<sup>8</sup> but both Kyiv and its Western supporters stuck to it in a way that made it more difficult for Moscow to embark on fresh territorial grabs. Its military aggression against Ukraine has continued throughout, however, and the Kremlin clearly has both the capacity and the intention to ramp up its operations whenever it judges that to be advantageous. Western support for Ukraine on the ground has been expanding, especially with the delivery of the Javelin anti-tank missiles, but is still not sufficient. And Western reactions to such issues as Nord Stream 2 and Russia's abusive response to the Stockholm arbitration court's decision on the Gazprom/ Naftogaz dispute have also been inadequate.<sup>9</sup>

But now we are already facing the possibility of Trump reaching a dubious agreement with Putin about a range of issues. It has been made clear that Ukraine and Syria will be under discussion. Syria will be well represented by its triumphant ally, Russia, and it's already clear that Trump is positively eager to guarantee Putin a free hand on that and possibly a good deal else in the Middle East.

The Trump Administration's surprisingly strong support for Ukraine until recently might possibly be supplanted by a Minsk 3 that makes its predecessors look benign. A report from

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/also-in-2017/ukraine-three-years-optimism-russia-military-war-poroshenko-stoltenberg-nato-secretary-general-crimea-annexation/EN/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.uawire.org/swedish-appeals-court-suspends-arbitration-award-to-ukraine-s-naftogaz#>

20 June suggesting that US military aid to Ukraine is to be substantially reduced in the US defence budget for fiscal year 2019 may be a worrying harbinger in this context.<sup>10</sup>

Let us hope that no deal eventuates, or that if there is one, it does not seem to damage vital Ukrainian interests. The new National Security Advisor, John Bolton, who is playing a key role in preparations for the bilateral meeting has been known throughout his career as a hawk, including on Russian issues, which should be a good sign. But he is not the president, and his evident delight in Moscow at having met President Putin and set up the summit was less than reassuring.<sup>11</sup>

As for Australian views about Russian behaviour towards Ukraine, I think we are now seeing broadly sensible responses from the government and most of the public. Unfortunately, the coverage of Ukraine in the Australian media is much more limited than it used to be, as other issues have driven it off the front pages. There is also a tendency as in other Western countries, for more criticism of Ukrainian internal developments to surface, not all of it balanced or well-informed. Nor do such voices always remember to make the basic point that for a country to have an intractable corruption problem does not mean that a much larger neighbour (with a much more toxic corruption problem) should be free to attack it.

That said, some of the criticisms that are voiced in Western countries do not emanate from people ill-disposed towards Ukraine, but from people sympathetic to Ukraine, who want to see it succeed. The continued prevalence of corruption is a severe problem, and the difficulties associated with legislating and activating effective anti-corruption structures dismay not just Ukraine's foreign sympathisers but, much more significantly, the IMF and

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.uawire.org/the-united-states-will-nearly-halve-its-military-aid-to-ukraine>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/prelude-to-a-putin-trump-pas-de-deux-choreographer-v-v-putin/>



many Western governments. After more than four years, progress on corruption though positive, remains modest.

Ukraine's policies on language and "national memory", while in themselves understandable, and especially so in a context in which the country is fighting to maintain its sovereignty and even its identity, have brought it into conflict with some of its western neighbours. Poland, Romania and Hungary have responded sharply. Of those neighbours, Hungary appears to have the least justification for its very militant stance, particularly as in recent years it has veered at times dismayingly close to overtly pro-Moscow positions. But there is blame to share around all the participants. What is clear is that the only beneficiary from such disputes among states that should be allies is Moscow, the active instigator of many of them.

Recent repeated attacks by militia groups against Romany encampments have attracted very unfavourable publicity in the West. The impression they left was made even worse by reports of law and order officials visiting the scene and making no attempt to restrain the attackers, but on the contrary, fraternising affably with them. After another such attack recently, where one of the victims was killed, the incident was rightly given wide publicity in Western media, including in Australia.<sup>12</sup> This was the fifth such attack in two months, and while it was good to see that multiple arrests were made of those responsible for the fifth attack, had similar action been taken after the first, some of the others might have been forestalled.<sup>13</sup>

Issues like these provide useful material for Russian propagandists, but they also damage Ukraine's standing with its Western supporters. Many old friends of Ukraine, like Swedish economist Anders Aslund for example, worry greatly about the very slow progress in

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44593995/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/seven-arrested-for-deadly-attack-on-roma-camp-in-western-ukraine/29316319.html>

combating corruption and advancing crucial economic reforms required by the IMF. While they appreciate that the ruling coalition in Kyiv is precariously situated politically, and that any substantial reforms carry risks of unintended downsides, some Ukrainians and friends of Ukraine in Australia worry along similar lines. I quite often don't find myself in agreement with the EU foreign minister Mogherini, but her reported criticisms of the shortcomings of Kyiv's reform efforts at the Ukraine Reform Conference in Copenhagen on June 27<sup>th</sup> would probably be endorsed by many foreign friends of Ukraine, as well as by supportive Western governments and institutions.<sup>14</sup>

In the present difficult moment, with President Trump bent on 'reset', the prevalence of such calls should be of particular concern to the Kyiv authorities. Anything they can do to meet the criticisms will be valuable both domestically and internationally. At the G7 meeting according to two diplomatic sources, President Trump informed the other G7 leaders over dinner that Crimea was Russian, because everyone who lives there speaks Russian; and during the same conversation, he appeared to question why his colleagues should side with Ukraine on this matter since, as he put it, "Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world".<sup>15</sup>

If reported accurately, these dismayingly crude observations coming from the most powerful leader in the Western world illustrate graphically why corruption in Ukraine is not just a very important economic and political issue, but also one that goes to the heart of Ukraine's security.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/rfe-rl-eus-mogherini-urges-ukraine-to-implement-more-reforms-now.html>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/trump-russia-crimea?utm\\_term=.vpx2PVRxZV#.sg6va6oD36](https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/trump-russia-crimea?utm_term=.vpx2PVRxZV#.sg6va6oD36)

Though we still have an irritating number of Putin apologists who produce comments worthy of comparison with the ones just quoted, but who nonetheless gain access to our media spaces, there is a growing awareness in Australia of the threat Russia poses to the international system, including through its "strategic partnership" with China. A book published recently by the influential Australian academic strategist and former senior defence official, Professor Paul Dibb, categorised Russia as a danger to Australia comparable to China.<sup>16</sup> Our government's attitude to Moscow now seems similarly robust. Importantly, on these issues, our national policy is essentially bipartisan as between our two main parties.

**IY: In your publications, as well as in your book, you pay significant attention to antecedent facts and describe the historical background of the events that preceded this or that decision of the Russian government. Do you consider that your audience has a misconception of Russian intentions and behaviour, or are you deliberately trying to remove any opportunity for them to unwittingly spread Russian propaganda slogans?**

JB: In whatever I write or say, I do always try, without being too hectoring about it, to give Australian readers a few reminders about basic historical facts, as even university-educated Australians are unlikely to know much about the history of Russia's neighbours, unless they themselves have family links to one of them. Even then, their knowledge may be restricted to that one country, with limitations and biases regarding the rest. They may have some basic knowledge of Russia, and because of Russia's recent prominence in the news, that knowledge may be growing. But even a basic grasp of Russian realities can't be taken for granted.

Now at many of our tertiary institutions, we are seeing a tendency to offer a smorgasbord of options often reflecting radical social change. Our society, like most Western societies, is experiencing successive waves of identity politics, gender wars, and various secularist ethical campaigns on climate, refugees, Aboriginal disadvantage and other issues of the day. All of

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mup.com.au/books/9780522874150-inside-the-wilderness-of-mirrors>

these topics are doubtless worthy of consideration, but there is a danger that they may flourish and proliferate at the expense of what were once basic curriculum items like history and unsentimental strategic studies. On more than one occasion in my academic career, when I was wanting to insist that students in my charge would need to do some serious work on history, I was informed by higher academic authority that if I wanted that outcome, I would have to “market it”.

What our students do know about Russia’s neighbours is often affected by the Russocentric approach to the subject of their teachers. Many Australian Russia specialists lack a sufficient grounding in the neighbours’ perspectives on Russian history and behaviour. If I were a benevolent dictator in these matters, I would require all students of Russian language, literature or history to spend at least a few months in one of the former colonies – Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic states, Georgia, etc. And incidentally, it is in Ukraine’s long-term interests that it should itself become more of a centre of Russian studies for foreigners, where such a perspective would be obtained by a natural osmosis, with positive effects on the student, lasting benefits for Ukraine and a broadening of international understanding.



**IY: This is a very interesting idea, and I think we should take advantage of it. How would you describe Australian experts and their perception of Russia? Do you feel the efforts of Russian propaganda machine in Australia? How does Australia resist that?**

JB: I have already commented on the shortcomings of the Australian expert milieu regarding Russia and Ukraine. We have too few genuine experts on either country, especially on Ukraine. By contrast, the eruption of Russian violence against Ukraine in 2014 suddenly revealed that we had an unexpected abundance of instant experts who in their own estimation understood the situation perfectly. They came in various packages: Russian specialists and Russian patriots who sometimes had a weak understanding of basic Ukrainian realities, even whether Ukrainians existed or not; "realists" who argued that Russia is bound to dominate Ukraine, and that every one else should simply capitulate unresistingly to that *fait accompli*; anti-Western tribunes who say that anything Russia does now that we don't like is our own fault because we were so mean to Russia and didn't help it keep its empire; and so on. All of these types are present in our mix of commentators. Australia has a relatively small community of students of the region, and standards are perhaps accordingly not as high as they should be.

The Russian propaganda machine does indeed operate in Australia, aided by what are sometimes unkindly described as useful idiots, some of whom still feel that loving Putin is a more legitimate position than supporting our traditional alliance with Washington (yes, even under the present disconcerting leadership, which won't last for ever), or their own elected government. Our very own Julian Assange, hiding away from the terrifying prospect of Swedish justice in a leftist embassy in London, and Moscow resident, Edward Snowden, both of whom almost unfailingly serve Putinist interests, are still viewed as heroes by an uncomfortably large number of people in Australia, as in the West generally.

Few Western countries have developed serious institutions capable of responding to Russian disinformation, and in that respect Australia is no exception. Even Europe, which is in the front line of the information war, has little enough awareness of the need for thorough and well-funded responses to Russia's propaganda onslaught. The EU spends only a minute proportion of the amount of funding that Russia lavishes on interfering in European elections and influencing European public opinion. In Australia to suggest that money should be spent on countering Russian propaganda would sound outlandish.

In those circumstances, one resists all this as best one can.

**IY: In your book, you mentioned that because of Russia's destructive policies towards its neighbours and itself during the last decades, Russia has become a rogue state, an outcast from the international community. Taking into account recent world events, don't you think that this is not just bad governance but part of the essence of Russia? Given Europe's history of political ailments and the conflicts that have recently broken out between close neighbours like Ukraine and Hungary or Ukraine and Poland, for example, and given Western dependence on social media and democratic openness, is it the case that Russia has been able to succeed in creating divisions in the international community, and thereby strengthen its own positions?**

JB: At the launch of my book, I drew attention to the remarkable disjuncture between Russia's immense contribution to most fields of European intellectual and cultural life, and its dismally negative role in governance and international relations. As I said then, most of its domestic political and international history since 1917 has been deeply regrettable. The event it celebrates as its crowning achievement, the victory over Nazi Germany, was a task in a real sense undertaken against Stalin's will. Even that victory was in per capita terms more the achievement of Ukraine and Ukrainians and Belarus and Belarusians (and some other captive peoples of the Soviet empire). Moscow also benefited from the heroic resistance in genocidal conditions of East European countries like Poland. In return for their quixotic sacrifices and attempts to engage and co-operate with the approaching Soviet forces, Moscow rewarded the

Poles by murdering more of the heroic survivors of the Warsaw Uprising, who had been left to face Hitler's enraged obliteration of their city alone. This gift from Stalin came in addition to the Katyn tally (22,000), and many other victims of the Soviets' earlier occupation of Poland.

Unfortunately, even its contribution to European culture, especially in the performing arts, has also often been distorted by its perverse and oppressive governance, and still continues to be (vide the Serebrennikov case<sup>17</sup>).

As Guy Verhofstadt has said, the internet was devised and many of its greatest applications were developed by the West, whilst Russia's current regime, and other regimes like it, have reduced it to a cesspool of disinformation.

On further reflection, perhaps I was overestimating the cohesion and resolution of the international community when I said that Russia had become an outcast, and underestimating the factor you mention, namely Russia's capacity to divide and rule, and its undoubted skills in the arts of mendacious propaganda and subversion, to say nothing of military interventions on bogus pretexts, in all of which it is a world leader. And now, at the end of June, it is apparent that Russia has pulled off a PR triumph with the World Cup, with no more than symbolic pinprick boycotts by Western countries. The picture that is emerging is one of large throngs of visitors enjoying themselves and very well pleased with everything they've seen. Not a bad outcome for the sports doping capital of the world.<sup>18</sup>

But nonetheless, I would still argue that while a country's political culture can often be highly durable, a factor which should never be overlooked, countries can and do often change

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<sup>17</sup> <https://au.news.yahoo.com/russia-extends-house-arrest-for-theatre-director-serebrennikov-39946032.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/29/world-cup-plaudits-cheer-putin-as-russia-revels-in-spotlight>

rapidly for the better as well as for the worse. Gorbachev and the early Yeltsin-era reformers failed in large part because of adverse movements in oil and gas prices. Conversely, Putin succeeded in establishing and stabilising his KGB-dominated rule because energy prices surged, making him appear to his subjects like an economic genius and a benevolent tsar. Russian political culture was not pre-ordained to reject Gorbachev or Yeltsin's reformers. They made serious mistakes, but perhaps their worst mistake was not to dismantle the KGB empire more effectively than they did. That failure made it much easier for the *siloviki* (securocrats) to take over and set their rule in concrete when Yeltsin gave them a golden opportunity to do so.

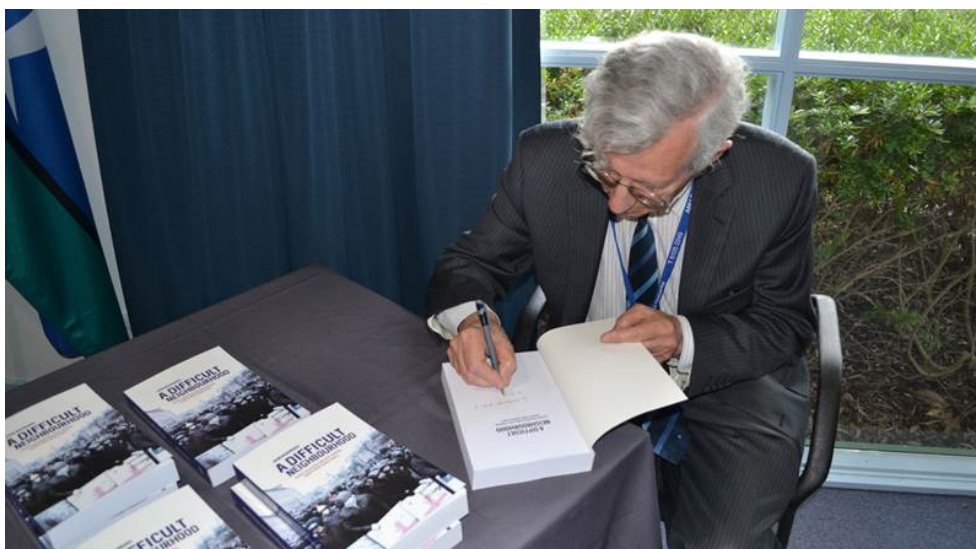
It is also true, of course, that the Gaidar reformers of the early Yeltsin period had the very difficult task of totally revamping a vast complex of political and economic structures mainly devoted to external and internal security in the Soviet sense of the word. As Polish dissident Adam Michnik said in 1990, contemplating the huge task ahead of his fellow anti-communist reformers, "We know very well how to turn an aquarium into a fish soup, but we don't know how to turn a fish soup into an aquarium". The operation of the fish soup conundrum also favoured Putin as it would have favoured any other successor to Yeltsin. Gaidar et al. did the tough stuff and had to accept the odium, rather like former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatseniuk's kamikaze government which, by implementing very tough reforms, restored Ukraine's ravaged fiscal position back to something approaching health in 2014-15, but saw the ratings of the premier's party slump to single digits and stay there. Michnik's colleagues, it's true, did find a way to turn the fish soup back into an aquarium, but then Polish political culture was much less devastated than Russia's, and its military-industrial complex markedly smaller.



People who know ordinary Russian people are always aware of the difference between the official anti-Western xenophobia that they may partly reflect in conversation and the warm hospitality and interpersonal generosity that they otherwise often display. There is therefore a brittleness to Putin's xenophobia-based stability, partly for these very reasons, which is something that Russia's adversaries could affect deeply, if they were able to summon the resolution to do so. The more that Russia's largest neighbour, Ukraine, can succeed in its post-Maidan project, for example, the greater will be the pressure on Russia itself to undertake reform.

Putin has now at last had to accept the necessity of painful economic reforms, in particular a large increase in the retirement age from 60 to 65 for men and from 55 to 63 for women. In a very short time this has triggered a steep drop in his electoral rating to 48%, near the lowest it has ever been, despite all his efforts to pin the blame on PM Dmitry Medvedev and his government. On the first of July, demonstrations against the pension age increases broke out in many cities across Russia.

Higher oil and gas prices are now reviving the economy, but Russians have lived through four very lean years. More austerity from whatever cause could be destabilising for the regime. Future developments in Russia, to repeat, are not pre-ordained, though the legacy of the Bolsheviks and the Stalinists, and now the neo-Stalinist Putinists holding Russia back from progress, modernization and normality is a very heavy one.



Dr John Besemerer

**IY: In conclusion, I cannot refrain from asking you to predict the development of events in Europe. As an expert in world politics, who has been assessing international developments for so many years, how do you see the future of Europe, and against that backdrop, the future of Ukraine?**

JB: You've saved up the easiest question till last. Despite its enormous post-war achievements, Europe's social cohesion and democratic culture are now under serious threat. President Putin sees Russia and himself simultaneously as the main source of that threat and the embodiment of all that is worth saving in European civilization. He is wrong on both counts, though the danger his neo-Stalinism poses is certainly a very real one. But Europe and the global West must also and above all overcome problems which are basically of their own making, for all that they are often exploited by the Kremlin's hybrid aggression. I will mention a few that strike me. Despite your kind words, however, I must confess that I am not an expert on all these complex matters.

Europe, like the West generally, must address such problems as high unemployment, especially among young people, as well as entrenched and possibly growing inequality,

which alienate the poor, providing ready targets for populist politicians, and which, incidentally, could well be made much worse by technological advances.

Europe should check and perhaps partly reverse its tendency to excessive centralization. It can be argued that the only priority areas in Europe really demanding coordinated and centralized decision-making and enforcement at all costs are internal and external security, and loyalty to basic European values, above all the principles of democracy. Such principles should ipso facto rule out the emergence of rulers determined to bend the rules to achieve total control and interminable periods in office for themselves. They should also exclude any flirtation, as opposed to necessary communication with the Kremlin under present management, or any other government which declares itself the enemy of European institutions and values.

Europe must – as humanely as possible, but with sustained determination – regain full control of its borders (and accept some consequential modifications of Schengen internally) so that the existing European populations and cultures know that they will be protected from uncontrolled influxes that cannot be integrated successfully. Failure to achieve this leads to situations like the current configuration of German politics, where the issue is threatening to fragment the ruling party, and where suddenly the largest opposition party is, thanks to its populist exploitation of the migration issue, Alternative for Germany (AfD), a hard-right party with extremist tendencies, and an overt supporter of President Putin. Perhaps I should add, to pre-empt any misunderstanding, that the establishment of secure borders does not equate to the end of migration.

More generally, Europe must somehow strive to check the rising tide of populism in its politics, caused in large measure by the failure to ensure border security. The need for people

to feel that their country will not be ethno-demographically turned on its head is not racism; similarly, a feeling of greater or lesser comfort with this or that other ethnic group is not racism. The mainstream parties must step up squarely to this issue and meet the growing demands of their constituents. To repeat again, morally vain and feckless handling of border security issues has undermined domestic governance in much of Europe and governance within the EU itself. If Europe's leaders leave it all to populists and extremists, including instant parties leaping into the void left by the mainstream parties, the outcomes could be dire, and will on present indications strongly favour Putin's Russia, which has learnt how to play the migration and other similar cards very skilfully.

All the above, in turn, will probably involve dealing with the deadly constraint on freedom of speech created by political correctness. PC is the enemy of free discussion, undermining frank and realistic analysis; and incidentally, it makes satire and much of traditional humour obsolete. The West, especially the Anglosphere, is becoming a strangely Victorian culture. "We are not amused" might aptly become the byword of our age.

Europe's political culture, which has devised so many altruistic ideologies, above all Christianity (though all ideologies including Christianity may be vulnerable to perverted distortion), must somehow be enabled to grapple with the me-now tendencies which are currently so rampant in Western society. Europe needs to find some overarching goals or values that can inspire idealism and mobilise the loyalty and commitment of a substantial majority of Europeans. Tolerance, which is one of the most pervasive values of mature Western democracies, though a necessary attribute for social harmony, especially in a pluralist society, does not of itself inspire loyalty, commitment or a readiness for sacrifice. Wrapping it in layers of newly-minted social prohibitions and commandments backed by the force of PC endorsement, is not inspiring either.



Dr John Besemeres at the ANU Centre for European Studies

In Brussels there is often talk of “more Europe” as a panacea for almost anything. But this nostrum does not work at the grass roots level, where many feel that they have too much Europe already. While there is a sense of shared European identity which has grown with the successes of the EU, Schengen and the eurozone (all subject to certain qualifications), it does not appear strong enough to sustain an ideology that would inspire mass sacrifice in its defence, or even the endurance with fortitude of lesser misfortunes, much less the determined pursuit of a difficult objective. National sentiments are still stronger, and stand in the way of any overarching European patriotism.

Many observers have felt that enlargement was the greatest achievement of the European project after the establishment of peace in the continent in the early years. But already for many years we have been observing instead “enlargement fatigue” and a tendency to xenophobia which can extend to citizens of member states (“the Polish plumber”) and usually even more so to newcomers from further afield. Citizens of some member states of NATO do not wish to defend new frontline member states against possible Russian attack, much less

take on any more such encumbrances. Putin's empire, stuffed to the gills with propaganda, knows no such inhibitions. But a multi-state formation which resolutely sets its face against expansion despite a profusion of would-be members, and which is located next to a huge and hostile country with a positive appetite for further expansion, will very probably not prevail.

Europe should try at least to slow down the tendency for Western countries to jettison many if not most of their traditional values and to apologize for ever having held them. To take one example, Christian observance and the language of Christian observance should not be virtually abandoned in public institutions and spaces in deference to the supposed sensitivities of non-Christian immigrants.

The EU should also display caution in advertising its new secular values in the form of top-down moral advice to countries which aspire to become part of the global West. The global West (a term I borrow from the distinguished Russian political commentator, Kostya von Eggert) is, incidentally, now a cultural and geo-political, not an ethnic or a geographical category. Muslim communities can and do belong to the global West. Modern Turkey belonged to the global West for decades until its present Sultan realised he had more in common with President Putin and President Assad. Japan, and increasingly other Asian countries, peoples and individuals can and do belong to it. Any individuals and communities who are visibly not European can belong to it. It is a matter of values and attitudes above all.

But for key Western institutions to tell candidate states prematurely that they must embrace the latest Western social advance, even worse, that it has suddenly become virtually a condition of entry, may strike them as both pompous and off-putting. Such complacent virtue-signalling does not always work in foreign countries. They may simply think we're bonkers. There are some such issues which are actually a gift for Putin's anti-Western

propagandists, who will invent alternative facts to make the latest Western PC doctrine seem totally outlandish and turn the EU's European neighbours to its east against Europe. If these and other problems can be handled better, Mr Putin and his allies will have far less material with which to work.

Unfortunately, none of these "ifs" are small "ifs." And they have all become bigger "ifs" since April.

And what of the future of Ukraine in the context just sketched out?

In the longer term, after three decades of independence, two maidans, several democratic changes of government and over four years of vicious, sustained and costly proxy aggression by Moscow which celebrates its links to the Stalinist regime which in turn gave the Ukrainians several decades of sanguinary oppression, including the Holodomor (the murder by artificial famine of at least 4 million Ukrainians, a basic fact which Ukrainians are now at last becoming aware of) – after all these and other developments, my sense is that Russia has irrevocably lost its "little brother".

But unfortunately, Putin and his colleagues have not yet recognised that Ukraine is a different country. The independent Russian commentator Dmitry Trenin tried to tell the Kremlin that in a bold essay<sup>19</sup> recently, but found it necessary to publish what looked like a mea culpa in the form of a drearily Putinist anti-Western sermon shortly afterwards.<sup>20</sup>

This is a difficult moment in Ukraine's very difficult history. While in the last four years, it has displayed great courage and resilience, its immediate future is heavily dependent on

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<sup>19</sup> <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75847>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/geopolitiek/971-russia-will-stand-strong-and-rely-on-itself>

support from the West at a time when the West is in a dismal state of disrepair. President Trump shows every sign of negotiating with Putin about the future of Ukraine at his ridiculous summit on July 16<sup>th</sup> over the heads of Ukraine's legitimate rulers. In itself an apparent betrayal, this event could herald a major disaster. One must still hope the Trump Administration's adults can again perform better than their leader, but the signs are inauspicious, and at a crucial moment, they will not be in the room.

Putin seems to be gearing up for a fresh advance in his Ukrainian campaign by one means or another. But he is not unaware of the dangers of trying to force the issue. He would prefer at this stage to manoeuvre pro-Kremlin politicians into high office in Kyiv with Trump's help, rather than risk another military confrontation. He is keen to get sanctions off his back, and will be hoping and planning to secure Trump's foreshadowed help for that also; and that may hold him back from any impetuous *coup de main*.

But he is a risk-taker, who is sinking in the opinion polls. Small victorious wars have served him very well in the past in similar circumstances. He invaded Crimea just after the Sochi Olympics and may be inclined to achieve a similar success after the end of his triumphant World Cup, delivered to him by innumerable useful Western partners. Before he departs the scene he would like again to make history by decisively gathering in more of the Russian lands. And with Trump in place, he will judge that this is as favourable a conjuncture as he can reasonably expect for a bold further move. But in the first instance, with the summit taking place just after the World Cup ends, he may wish to postpone any use of major force until he can see whether Trump can deliver progress on US recognition of Crimea or the easing of sanctions. Either on its own would be very difficult for Trump in the US system, but the president does seem terribly keen to make progress on one or the other, or both.



There are possible scenarios for lesser deployments of force in the not too distant future. Kyiv is withholding water from Crimea and the peninsula's agriculture and civilian water supplies are in dire trouble. Russia, meanwhile, is using its naval superiority in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov to bully Ukraine and to greatly impede vital exports from its key ports.<sup>21</sup> Putin could try at some point to resolve those issues by a swift *fait accompli*.

My guess is that Putin will get enough from the "summit" (a one-one event, it is being reported, ominously), for him not to spring any surprises in its immediate aftermath. But even if there is a bad outcome at some point, *shche ne vmerla Ukrayina* (*Ukraine has not yet perished*). The courage and resilience that Ukraine has displayed in recent years will continue, and the new and stronger sense of national unity and identity will stand Ukraine in good stead. Ukraine is a big country with many thousands of well-armed and strongly motivated fighters. Trying to hold it by force would be a nightmare for the Kremlin, and might stir a serious response, even possibly from the Trump Administration. Alternatively, if the Kremlin can manage, say, with US help, to install a President Medvedchuk (a close Putin crony) in Kyiv, a further Maidan would never be far away.

And perhaps at some point before long, the US Republicans will come to their senses sufficiently to enable the restoration of authentic leadership to Washington and the Western alliance.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-planning-a-post-world-cup-surprise>