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Western Strategic Disarray and the Short-term Outlook for Ukraine

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Western Strategic Disarray and the Short-term Outlook for Ukraine

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*This is a fully documented and lightly edited version of a lecture delivered
by Dr Besemeres at Monash University*

The Western alliance or strategic community, though larger than it has ever been thanks to the progressive accession of escapees from the Russian sphere of influence is, at the same time, probably in a more unstable condition than at any time in its post-War history.

The Anglosphere, the traditional pillar of the alliance, is divided within itself and at odds with others, thanks to inadequate elite performance. Despite praiseworthy efforts by Canadian, British and Australian leaders to maintain the best relations with the US available in the circumstances, President Trump seems bent on alienating them and the countries in question by casual aggressive tweets, public slagging and serial cancellations of visits and agreements. He seems determined also to open up trade wars on all fronts within and beyond the alliance, heedless of the consequences

It isn't that all his objectives are necessarily wrong – e.g. to curb China's sharp trading practices and reduce the huge US deficit with Beijing; or to stir the West Europeans from their complacent pacifism and free-riding on the US military budget; or to overcome the threats posed by Iran and the DPRK. But the way he pursues them is seldom wise, and he appears to disregard all the collateral damage he causes, in particular to the cohesion and morale of the global West.

The rushed 'deal' Trump imposed on Mexico and Canada to 'replace' NAFTA on October 1 this year provides a good illustration of that collateral damage. Having imposed a tight deadline, deployed coercive tariffs and foreshadowed more of the same to force through a settlement in time to strengthen the position of the Republican Party in the mid-term elections on November 6, Trump reached a deal with Mexico and left Canadian PM Trudeau to stew till he was ready to settle for whatever concessions might still be obtainable. At one point Trudeau fumed about the trade war being an affront to Canada's war dead, but in the end together with his Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, he did his best to present the new USMCA agreement as something in Canada's best interests, despite some residual concerns and ambiguities.

As on previous occasions, Trump took the opportunity along the way to display his contempt for Trudeau personally. His officials were seemingly made to feel that they could adopt the same tone, both with Trudeau ('Obama-lite') and also Freeland. When the 'deal' was finally done, however, the president waxed very enthusiastic about both the deal and Canada. Trudeau, to his credit, did his best to seem cordial at that point, and rescue what he could from the torrid process.

<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/03/trump-trudeau-canada-nafta-trade-828270>

Trump's handling of the dismantling of NAFTA is particularly disturbing for Ukrainians and their friends and allies in that Canada is the home of probably the most influential Ukrainian intellectual diaspora in the world. Foreign Minister Freeland is herself an outstanding representative of that milieu, and an able and eloquent advocate of the Ukrainian cause and Western strategic interests and values generally.

Trump's approach to Trudeau is typical of the way he deals with most European leaders also. On such issues as the US trade deficit with Germany, or the trade war he has imposed on Iran and the US withdrawal from the JCPO nuclear deal (both against the wishes of his European allies), he regularly rides roughshod over key allied leaders' sensitivities. And now we can expect to see a similar story with the foreshadowed withdrawal from the INF treaty (of which a little more later).

For his part, French President Macron made great efforts to charm his way into Trump's confidence, despite Trump's rudeness. Chancellor Angela Merkel also tried initially to establish contact with the president, if less assiduously than Macron. But now the Franco-German duo are proclaiming the need for Europe to be more independent of the White House and look more to their own security.

Even as declaratory policy, handling any security issues affecting Europe without doing everything possible to draw in Washington's full support is folly, folly precipitated largely by Trump's own actions and manner, but folly nonetheless. The Europeans cannot deal with Putin on security issues without the backing of the US, and increasingly over time will probably also have difficulty dealing with China on their own. They have no alternative but to swallow their injured pride, increase their defence expenditure as Trump demands and continue to slog away at stabilising the transatlantic relationship with their new and difficult partner.

Trump's reckless alienation of his natural Western allies is bad enough. But even worse, the elected President of the United States has for some years appeared to be a fawning admirer of Putin, his empire and his domestic and external statecraft. This is less apparent at the moment than it usually has been, probably because of the looming threat he is facing from Special

Counsel. Robert Mueller, and his investigation into the Trump camp's relationship with Russia.

Trump is eager to prove that this is all a 'witch-hunt', and that 'there is no collusion'. All too many of his Republican colleagues, with their eyes fixed on the mid-term elections to be held next week, have been happy to go along with him in this, seemingly almost regardless of the truth of the matter. Anyone still in doubt about this issue should read Luke Harding's eponymous volume 'Collusion', which sets out the case compellingly.

The good news, however, is that Trump and the Trump Administration are two quite distinct entities. Despite Trump's intermittent expressions of love and respect for Putin and his desire for the best possible relationship with Russia, most dismayingly at the Helsinki 'summit' on July 16th this year, his Administration continues to speak and act with another and much more rational and traditional Western voice. Often we read analyses of the Administration's performance or hear accounts emerging from inside the White House that speak of the role of 'adults in the room' in saving the President from himself and keeping Western strategic interests intact.

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

For some vivid illustrations of the often chaotic Trump foreign-policy decision-making process and its neglect of vital Western allies' interests, see Bob Woodward's latest book 'Fear' chapter 37. Note, however that Woodward's focus in this case is South Korea, not the Russian connection, about which he seems to have a completely blind spot.

<https://www.justsecurity.org/60832/fear-fear/>

This strange dualism between the White House and the Administration is dramatically illustrated by the Helsinki Summit itself. Many of us here this evening, I'm sure, were already alarmed at the prospect of an apparent 'about us without us' opportunity for Trump and Putin to reach furious agreement in Helsinki.

At the end of the secretive Helsinki meeting, we were given a glimpse of what might have transpired by the press conference, during which the US president seemed to grovel before Putin. Yet within a few days, in which Trump was subjected to intense criticism for his abject performance, senior officials began to reaffirm the basic doctrinal verities of the Western alliance to reassure members and aspiring members that nothing substantial had changed.

But how close was it or was it not to a disaster, impending or in prospect? A very interesting account of what was apparently discussed by the two presidents and hoped for by Moscow, appeared in The National Interest, a journal of opinion once described unkindly on social media by someone as the best PR outlet for the Kremlin in Washington DC.

The author of the article in question was Tom Graham, a long-time Russia-watcher, former senior State Department official, and latterly Managing Director of Kissinger Associates:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/henry-kissinger-a-longtime-vladimir-putin-confidant-sidles-up-to-donald-trump/>

In his article Graham asks himself 'Was the Helsinki Summit Worth It?

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/was-helsinki-summit-worth-it-26021>

In Graham's view, the summit set the right course for the US and Russia in defusing tensions – until the last thirty minutes. Russia, Graham wrote, needs good working relations with the US for its own purposes and wanted the summit to advance that goal.

What follows is a distinctly plausible, even authoritative statement, one might say, of Putin's goals and what had presumably been discussed in the intimate one-on-one encounter between the two presidents off-camera:

'Russia may be playing a larger role in the Middle East, and it may have made itself indispensable to the resolution of the Syria crisis, but it needs America to validate Russia's position in Syria, to help raise the vast sums needed for reconstruction, and, more broadly to help manage the dangerous dance between Iran and Israel (and Saudi Arabia). Similarly, in Ukraine, Russia needs the United States to put more pressure on Kyiv to implement the Minsk Agreements. Russia also needs the United States to engage seriously on strategic issues, in part to rein in an accelerating technological arms race, which it cannot afford at this time. Finally, left unspoken, as always, Russia needs the United States as a strategic counterbalance to China.'

Graham concludes by lamenting that in the last thirty minutes of the press conference, Trump's 'public self-indulgence' (his fawning public deference to Putin) 'exacerbated by Putin's gratuitous support' (Putin's excessively transparent championing of Trump's performance in office) could have jeopardized all the progress that might have been made 'in the private discussions'.

If this close observer's reconstruction of the course of events is near the mark, this would suggest that Trump might indeed wish to do business with his highly esteemed opposite

number if he thinks he can get away with it. This, however, is hard for him to do with his present group of key officials, and with Robert Mueller's investigation still casting a shadow over his political future.

A serious threat remains. Trump is desperate to put an end to Mueller's enquiries, and while many senior Republican leaders warn against that, there are also many within the Republican establishment who would go along with a move against Mueller. The president may yet build a successful populist case for what would amount virtually to a constitutional coup d'état, and do whatever it takes to ensure that Muller is removed or silenced.

If the less partisan Republicans are outmanoeuvred, what course might Trump follow towards Putin thereafter? Would he still tolerate adults in the room, or would he seek to replace them? If Tom Graham were to be appointed to high office, we would know that momentous changes in US policy towards Russia were in train.

The other great pillar of the Western alliance that is increasingly beleaguered by largely self-inflicted dysfunctionality is, of course, Europe. Despite its enormous achievements in establishing peace and prosperity in Europe and extending it to many countries in East-Central Europe who longed to join it, the EU has since the GFC lost much of its self-confidence, authority and allure. After a prolonged slump, its economic performance is again improving, but it is plagued by other issues: to name a few, migration, Brexit, populism, disunity and the dilemmas posed by Donald Trump's disconcerting challenges and Putin's multifaceted aggression. NATO is confronted by some of the same difficulties, though it is able to cope with them a little better than the EU.

Brexit was an unwise choice by the British electorate in my view, though negative sentiments about the EU are not confined to the UK public. EU member states, including some original

members, usually avoid putting EU issues to any domestic vote for fear of eliciting a negative response. But the voters' choice was bound to cause trouble, above all, for the UK. Already the British economy has been declining relative to overall EU performance, and that trend will very probably continue at least for some time after Brexit is implemented, especially if London bombs out without a deal of any kind.

Britain's approach to implementing its own decision has been disunited, ineffective and insular, whilst the attitude of Brussels and core member states has often been inflexible, and apparently punitive, reflecting a far greater unity and determination in relation to the UK, an indispensable ally, than is ever noticeable in their dealings with Putin's Russia, an avowed and often contemptuous enemy.

The Brexit decision, like Trump's electoral victory, was narrow and against the flow of opinion polling. In both cases, it has become increasingly clear that Moscow campaigned heavily and in a variety of ways for its friends, Donald Trump and Nigel Farage and their supporters, including by gross cyber interference, making fraudulent use of the growing power of social media to influence voting patterns. Trump and the Republican Party are at pains to deny that any such thing occurred, or that if it did, it was minor and had no influence on the result. But this, it now seems, was not the case.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump>

Prime Minister May, despite having been personally against Brexit, has hitched her carriage firmly to that outcome. She and most UK political actors are apparently agreed that the Russian interference in the vote was not decisive and does not need close examination. But this too is not entirely clear.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/russian-influence-brexit-vote-detailed-us-senate-report>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_interference_in_the_2016_Brexit_referendum

What is clear, on the other hand, is the Putin regime's desire to use every method available to weaken the West, and increasingly to falsify their election results. Western countries are now belatedly becoming seized of the danger posed by malign cyber distortions to their electoral systems. But it is questionable whether they will find the money, the personnel, the unity and the resolution to block or deter much more of the same. The results of the Macedonian referendum on 30 August this year, for example, may well prove to have been another triumph for Putin's political technologists.

<https://jamestown.org/program/the-uncertain-road-ahead-for-macedonia/>

Mass inflows of people into Europe from Africa, the Middle East and South-west and Southern Asia has been an even more disruptive influence on the EU than Brexit. Especially since the so-called migration crisis of 2015, that followed German Chancellor Merkel's decision to open Germany's doors to anybody claiming refugee status, heated debates about migration have dominated the politics of many countries in Europe. The issue has also overwhelmed the agenda and blighted the governance of the EU as a whole.

Even now towards the end of 2018, when the numbers of people entering Europe have been greatly reduced thanks mainly to determined resistance by some European governments and large sums of EU money being granted to Turkey to stem the flow, the arguments within and between member states have continued unabated. The party structures of most European countries have been transformed or even destabilised, with anti-immigration parties surging to prominence and securing a role in government or threatening to do so.

Mainstream parties have done their utmost to exclude the newcomers from power, but are finding it increasingly difficult to do so. While the radicalism of these parties is at times overstated by the politically correct, the programs and behaviour of some of them are indeed disturbing. But conspiring to exclude them all from any influence on political decisions is not a sustainable policy either, leading governments sometimes to collapse or voters to desert the mainstream parties in favour of more extreme parties. Nor does ignoring the feelings of many of the host population make them more welcoming towards the newcomers. Indeed it may well be that exclusion or suppression of debate about ‘sensitive’ multicultural issues could contribute to the impulse of some activists to take direct action against migrants and asylum-seekers.

<https://www.dw.com/en/german-politics-fragment-as-support-for-big-parties-erodes/a-45594211>

At the level of the EU as a whole, the arguments about what is to be done continue. The initial plan by Brussels to impose quotas on member states to relieve the more heavily burdened, was launched in September 2015.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34193568>

Though the numbers involved were modest, it was strenuously resisted especially by some of East Europeans. Three years later, even that symbolic project had achieved virtually nothing.

As a senior Czech official told an ANU seminar at the time, if his country were to accept such a mandatory allocation, the government would soon fall, and in any case, given the operation of the Schengen agreement, the asylum-seekers themselves would in no time be on the train to Germany or Sweden. Under the Dublin Regulation, [<https://ec.europa.eu/home->

[affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en](#)] the countries where asylum-seekers first present (usually EU member states with Mediterranean coastline) have an obligation to assess their claims, but as a result tend to be overrun. Their pleas for relief are typically left unanswered, which unsurprisingly has led recently to the emergence of the populist anti-immigrant Salvini government in Italy. Rome's determined efforts to block any further arrivals are now creating intractable problems for EU governance.

These problems have been developing over a long time. Well before 2014, there was growing unease in many European countries about the accumulating numbers of immigrants from countries with cultures not readily integrable with those of the host nations. Criminal gangs, unacceptable social practices like female genital mutilation and forced marriages of children, efforts by newcomers to introduce alien legal principles, and most of all, the spread of jihadi sentiment and Islamist terrorist attacks evoked a continent-wide unease about the whole immigration project.

The inflows had arisen initially in European countries because of labour shortages, post-colonial adjustments and other considerations, but had gradually acquired a momentum of their own. Virtually nowhere, however, had they been the subject of any kind of democratic choice on the part of the host electorate. Often governments tried to find ex post facto justifications for what was happening anyway. So unlike in Australia and other countries of immigration, there was in Europe a lack of any accepted rationale for what was a momentous change, or adequate democratic legitimization of the consequences.

The haphazard development and expansion of post-war immigration into Europe and its ultimate explosive metamorphosis into full-blown crisis is well described by Douglas Murray's 2017 book *'The Strange Death of Europe'*.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/strange-death-europe-2>

An earlier book by the US writer Christopher Caldwell 'Reflections on the Revolution in Europe' raised many of the same concerns.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflections_on_the_Revolution_in_Europe

Both writers, particularly Caldwell, evoked a good deal of anger, particularly among Muslim writers. But they are thorough, carefully documented accounts written by authors with an excellent knowledge of the languages, politics and societies of much of Europe. They are a sobering corrective to the view widespread in Western elites, that all asylum-seekers anywhere are to be cherished, regardless of their manner of arrival or their 'loss' of any documentation along the way, and that any scepticism about their claims is to be resolutely condemned – and usually by deploying the lethal 'r' word (racist) against the sceptics to shut down any further discussion.

How Europe's unplanned immigration experiment will develop further is difficult to say. Over time, the EU may achieve control over the flows and integrate the rapidly growing communities of non-Europeans with great success. And the communities themselves may suddenly begin embracing the European idea and European identity much more than they do at present. But two things can be said with confidence: firstly that the immigration phenomenon will weigh heavily on European democracy and social stability for at least the short to medium future; and that Vladimir Putin is delighted that Europe has this problem, and will do everything in his power to make it worse. And incidentally, hard-right opposition to immigration and hostility towards the immigrants themselves correlates closely with pro-Putin sentiment.

Despite Trump's repeated slagging of NATO as an institution, and his relentless harping about member states' poor financial contributions (overlooking their contributions in blood over a long period and in many conflicts), NATO and the Trump Administration as institutions are doing rather better. There has been substantial improvement in NATO's readiness to resist Russian aggression in the last few years. Much still needs to be done to reduce Russia's escalatory dominance in the East, but already there is a sufficient Western presence on the Eastern flank to make Russia pause before attempting any military strike. The forces there, however, are essentially still 'tripwires' rather than wholly adequate defensive formations in themselves.

NATO is conscious of the need, however, to further strengthen its Eastern flank. The NATO Summit in Brussels last July approved the Four 30s Readiness Initiative, whereby it was agreed that by 2020 the alliance should have enhanced naval, ground force and air capabilities ready for use within 30 days or less. This was aimed at reinforcing the steps taken at the earlier Cardiff and Warsaw summits, which established a rapid reaction force and the Enhanced Forward Presence forces deployed in the Baltic states and Poland.

http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=24813

But given Russia's increasing militarisation of the whole region and its aggressive military posture and exercises, something more than a tripwire is urgently needed. The Brussels Summit also addressed the need for more command and control facilities, and greater freedom of movement for its forces, especially reinforcements which might be needed very rapidly. Movement of large military units and equipment from west to east in Europe is

surprisingly complicated and beset by local bureaucratic requirements and infrastructural inadequacies. At least a start is being made.

<http://www.gmfus.org/publications/nato-after-brussels-summit-bruised-or-emboldened>

But the tripwires do in themselves have significant deterrent value, and not just for the most exposed member states like the Baltic states and Poland. Non-member states Sweden and Finland, for example, increasingly co-operate with and rely on NATO to respond to Russia's persistent probing. In addition, the support on offer to victims of Russian aggression further afield, like Ukraine and Georgia, is also building up. Following on the recent delivery of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, US special envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker has foreshadowed the provision by the US of more naval and aerial defence capabilities to counter Russian aggression, in particular its naval harassment of Ukrainian movement and trading activities in the Sea of Azov.

In this respect too, the Brussels NATO Summit has imparted a valuable stimulus by reaffirming NATO's Article 10, the open-door policy, and formally inviting Macedonia to join the Alliance. This invitation was predicated on the expectation that the name issue between Athens and Skopje would be resolved by the planned referendum. Unfortunately, this issue remains fraught. But NATO displays greater readiness to absorb Balkan countries than countries nearer Russia, like the former Soviet republics, because of some European members' nervousness about 'provoking' Russia.

Potential applicants nearer Russia are, however, also benefiting from the mood set at the Summit, and the growing readiness of the Trump Administration to support them. Of the two main applicants for full NATO and EU status, Georgia may be slightly ahead of Ukraine in the queue. At several high-level meetings in September involving very senior Georgian and

US and NATO officials, Georgia received strong assurances of commitment and support for the bilateral relationship and for prospective NATO membership.

<https://jamestown.org/program/us-and-nato-send-reassuring-messages-to-georgia/>

Significantly, US Ukraine envoy Volker, who was present at one of these meetings, emphasised that the West was coming to a much clearer understanding in relation to both Georgia and Ukraine that Russia was the aggressor and needed to be resisted. It has taken 10 years of Russian aggression following its invasion of Georgia in 2008 to breathe life into the somewhat vague declaration at the Bucharest NATO summit of that year, that both countries would become members at some unspecified point. But the Trump Administration is declaring itself in favour. Continuing scepticism will be concentrated rather in some of the European members.

Much more would be needed to decisively deter a sudden Russian escalation at any one or more of a number of points around Ukraine's borders, especially given Moscow's continued build up, and increasingly aggressive 'exercises'. But a little more is better than the nothing, which was usually the reaction of the Obama administration. At this stage the EU is only maintaining its sanctions, which have to be renewed every six months; there is no appetite for increasing them. Even renewal often seems at least slightly problematical.

Poroshenko has recently warned that support for sanctions may weaken, no doubt having in mind that more pro-Russian politicians are assuming leading positions in EU governments, and Merkel, the chief 'enforcer' of sanctions is becoming politically weaker. Recently the populist new government in Rome called for the EU to discuss easing sanctions on Russia.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/italy-russia-sanctions-matteo-salvini>

More generally, apologists for Putin abound throughout the Western world. The more aggressive the Putinist regime becomes, the more war crimes and breaches of the rule-based system it perpetrates, the greater seemingly the determination of some Western commentators and politicians to find excuses for that behaviour, and typically, to blame it on the West itself.

http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Kuzio_Western_Experts_on_Russian_Aggression_Ukraine.pdf

My book, '*A Difficult Neighbourhood*', which is to be 'relaunched' tonight, has quite a bit to say about Putin sympathisers, who have acquired the German tag of *Russlandversteher* or *Putinversteher* (one/those who understand/empathise with Russia).

As the tag suggests, there are many exponents of this pattern of thought in Germany, including some in influential positions in politics, business and the commentariat. Among the most spectacular examples are two former Chancellors, Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt. But Chancellor Angela Merkel is the adversary of *Russlandversteher* both in and outside Germany, at least on sanctions. And the distinguished German political scientist, Andreas Umland has given us an excellent example of how to unmask apologists in the context of Russia's grossly illegal seizure of Crimea:

<https://www.eurasiareview.com/23082018-to-whom-does-crimea-belong-analysis/>

There are, moreover, many in most other countries as well, some of them implanted or facilitated by the Kremlin.

https://imrussia.org/images/stories/Reports/Hybrid_Analytica/Smagliy_Hybrid-Analytica_10-2018_upd.pdf

Nor is the phenomenon absent from Australia, though gradually in recent months, most Western publics, including ours, have begun to wake up to what Putin's hybrid warfare on the West means.

Still, apologists in Germany are particularly eye-catching because they are in position potentially to do more harm than most – as for example, with the Nord Stream 2 project. I once heard a distinguished German politician at the ANU, during an interesting and otherwise standard Western presentation, declare that for historical reasons, it was obvious that Crimea should be Russian, but that the means they used to annex it were not acceptable, and for that reason, sanctions must continue.

It is thinking of this kind, in Europe in particular, that worries President Poroshenko, and should worry us all, not just Ukrainians. It reflects the feeling not only that Europe should avoid 'provoking' Russia, but moreover, that it should also restrain 'hotheads' further East from doing so. While NATO overall is becoming more robust in its stance towards Russia (under US pressure), such perceptions limit NATO's capacity to develop an adequate response to Russian aggression.

Key European leaders like Macron and Merkel should be putting their weight behind the Trump Administration, and drawing it as fully as possible into Europe's security posture. Failing to do so, or declaring that they can or will no longer rely on Washington for their security is exactly what Putin wants to hear.

For now, the language from Washington is reassuringly robust. Even Trump himself has begun lately to speak firmly about Russia on occasion. But the strong suspicion must remain given what we know of his attitudes, that this may not be a learning curve or a change of heart on the part of the president, but rather an effort to fend off the Mueller investigation. If

he succeeds in disabling or silencing the Special Counsel, the outlook will become murkier.

Would the checks and balances in the US system continue to operate then as before, or would President Trump begin appointing his own Russlandversteher to high office?

I would like now to offer some generalisations about Russia to outline some of the reasons why it is a grave threat to Ukraine, particularly in the short term, and to the West as a whole, and therefore to the world. What I'll be saying are the sorts of things that Russian propaganda typically dismisses with their own 'r' word – Russophobia.

Russia is a great European nation, whose contribution to European literature, music, art, architecture, ballet, cinema, theatre, chess, and most areas of science and sport has been immense. Without that contribution, European culture in the broadest sense would be difficult to imagine.

But its governance has for the most part been dismal or worse, and its contribution to international relations in the last century at least mostly regrettable, when not actually diabolical. The cruelty of its domestic tyranny and its treatment of other countries and its own imperial captives has often been evil. Making matters worse, it seems unable to regret any of its crimes for more than a few years at the most before 'rising from its knees' and again rediscovering the unblemished and incomparable perfection of all its achievements. The regime of the day then inculcates this complacent view of itself in the current generation by blanket propaganda and coercion.

Yet we all know that Russian people are for the most part not the monsters that their domestic regime and international behaviour might suggest. They are often, warm, hospitable, curious about other countries and friendly. The best of them are often incredibly brave in resisting pressure, propaganda and persecution from the state.

But most generalisations about contemporary Russia cannot be positive. It is a KGB state run for the most part by Putin and a clique of his siloviki cronies. Unlike most of their Soviet predecessors, they leave a degree of freedom of expression and activity, but that residual area of freedom is constantly shrinking.

Though 99% of all accused are convicted and punished, the oppression of oppositionists is not yet massive, but extensive and growing. Dissenters are harassed and blocked from meaningful participation in public life, though they may be able to publish some of their more acceptable thoughts in low-circulation outlets. But increasingly they are physically manhandled, detained, imprisoned for longer terms or even murdered by ‘unknown assailants’, who are seldom held to account. Even when someone is, the case against them is seldom convincing or the person who gave the order identified.

In some minority areas, especially the North Caucasus, the brutality has at times been massive and horrifying. Minority rights granted under Yeltsin are being reined in and the trend now is strongly towards renewed Russification. The heavily KGB-infiltrated Russian Orthodox Church has been given license to impose repressive social restrictions on the population. Various militias and bully-boy organisations, including phoney Cossack groups have been encouraged to practise vigilante actions against people judged to be undesirable.

The monstrous crimes of the Stalin period have been hidden from sight, and Stalin himself stealthily restored to his pedestal. Putin has created a huge new suppression agency called Rosgvardiya that is subordinated directly to the president, and put the head of his personal security detail for many years, one Viktor Zolotov, in charge of it. Zolotov, who looks and sounds like a mafioso’s minder, recently challenged the endlessly harassed oppositionist,

Aleksei Navalny to a duel, in a bizarre video, in which he said that he would personally make mincemeat of him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SINC48hEFM>

The big domestic build-up of suppression capability reflects Putin's obsessive fear of a 'colour revolution', which he attributes not to the stagnation and corruption of his regime, to which public resistance is building, but to alleged scheming by the West. While repression of the Russian population has to date been selective rather than massive, Putin's behaviour in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and latterly in Syria suggest that a major flare-up of urban discontent in the Russian heartland could see violence unleashed there too on a greater scale.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SINC48hEFM>

Another unattractive feature is the mobilisation for military-patriotic training objectives of young people in the 'Youth Army (Yunarmia), which by one estimate has in just two years already reached 250,000 members. This formation

[<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2018/8/12/1787652/-250-000-Putin-Youth-members-now-report-to-Russian-Army-loyalty-director>] has now been subordinated to another neo-Stalinist innovation, a new wing of political commissars within the Russian army, responsible for strengthening the army's military-patriotic readiness.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-politics/in-soviet-echo-putin-gives-russian-army-a-political-wing-idUSKBN1KL1VA>

Despite occasional crack-downs on high-level corruption in which the victims are usually people who have fallen out of favour, business activity is awash with corruption, in which

bureaucrats are often implicated. Very large numbers of small businessmen are cheated and punished by gross legal abuse.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-01-29/when-russian-officials-nightmare-your-business-you-can-lose-everything-even-your-life>

After a period of high energy prices in his first decade in office gave Putin an undeserved reputation for economic management, the economy has foundered and apart from a few success stories like agriculture (strangely), it has been near to stagnant since the GFC. Education and health services have been grossly neglected in favour of more than a decade of priority for militarisation and domestic repressive apparatuses. All the trendlines are towards greater repression and isolation of Russian citizens from foreign influences.

Putin's domestic regime has become more and more oppressive. But it is also becoming potentially unstable. Putin's personal ratings have been sinking to even lower levels than he was registering in 2013 after returning to the presidency, with trust in Putin down from 59% in November 2017 to 39% in September 2018.

<https://www.levada.ru/2018/10/08/doverie-politikam-2/>

In 2013 of course, he hit upon the brilliant expedient of a short victorious war – in Crimea, followed by the triumphant annexation which lifted him back to ethereal heights.

This time, however, the decline seems to have been more precipitous and threatens to sink further. Observers are predicting that he might again do something similar to the seizure of Crimea in order to restore his fortunes. But if he does, the sanctions burden could become markedly worse. Meanwhile, his various emissaries of death and glad tidings seem to be

making more and more egregious mistakes and uniting wider Western opinion against Russia.

In the absence of genuine opposition parties, the permitted parties like Zhirinovsky's absurdly misnamed Liberal Democratic Party, and the ageing Zyuganov's communists, are securing enough votes to enter government at local levels. There is a faint whiff of destabilisation in the air. And Putin sometimes seems to be losing his grip. Perhaps instead of an annexation or a bloody crack-down, we might just see at some point a discontinuity, even conceivably a retirement to a resoundingly honorific post owing to health issues, with the emergence of a new leader keen to distinguish his policy output from that of his newly retired predecessor. But that seems highly unlikely for the moment; and any successor could also prove to be worse from our point of view.

For the time being, the external scene is every bit as bleak as the domestic. Russia under Putin has become aggressive across the board towards all its Western neighbours, especially but not only those who have been its vassals in the past. Putin is eager to restore some version of his beloved Soviet empire. Perhaps partly because of a family-related resentment, or the relative success of the targeted ex-vassal, he chose Estonia for his first assault on one of his much smaller neighbours in 2007, with a comprehensive cyber-attack on its highly computerised economy and public administration. At the same time, mass demonstrations by its large Russian minority were skilfully set in train.

Then in 2008, he attacked Georgia, which like Estonia was conducting very effective domestic reforms. And in 2014, after proxy police-state reforms and crackdowns through its clients in the Yanukovych regime, trade wars and other coercive pressures had all failed,

Russia seized Crimea, and launched a proxy war in the Donbas, while denying any Russian involvement.

Russia's foreign policy is a mixture of lying propaganda, violence, and hybrid warfare.

Hybrid warfare involves the weaponization of all forms of international contacts for coercive or fraudulent advantage: for example, cyber attacks, exporting corruption, bribing or even buying susceptible foreign politicians, abusing academic exchanges, abusing international extradition arrangements and appellate jurisdictions, murdering people in foreign countries, abusing international sporting events by mass cheating for propaganda purposes, and using military exercises for intimidatory or deceptive purposes, etc.

Russian lies, which are recognised in Russian strategic doctrine as an essential part of defeating opponents, are to be practised at all times against any targets, and not just during armed conflict. The Putinist version of propaganda is replete with lies and half-truths, but is much more skilled than its Soviet predecessors, though many of the old tricks are still in use.

The Kremlin always maintains that its rich menu of aggressive tactics are defensive reactions to Western encroachments on its vital security interests. What this line amounts to is a demand that the West recognise its empire at its maximal extent in the past as being of permanent validity, and that once a vassal must mean always a vassal. A surprising number of Western politicians and commentators accept such lines of reasoning as genuine. But official Russia knows that the West never made any undertaking to respect and help preserve the Soviet empire; and also that the spread of Western influence in the 1990s did not present any kind of military threat to Russia in Europe, at most one of democratic competition.

For many years, NATO left its new member states (who were desperate to find refuge from Russia) totally unprotected despite Moscow's abuse of the spirit of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.

<https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-1997-nato-russia-founding-act-does-not-prohibit-permanent-nato-bases-eastern>

Moscow knew that NATO was not going to launch ground offensives against it. Post-war West Europe had become a zone of peace and disarmament, which spread further east after the fall of communism, without any ground force build-up. Russia's relative military superiority along the new demarcation line was far greater than it had been in the Cold War.

There is more substance to Russia's criticisms and complaints about misconceived or poorly executed Western attempts to stave off regime massacres (R2P – the Responsibility to Protect) in Libya, or to defend the non-proliferation regime in Iraq. These grave mistakes, which triggered conflicts and destabilisation involving severe loss of life, and as a result of which Russia lost allies or investments, are understandably viewed with resentment by Moscow. And Russian officials seldom fail to bring them up in any ideological exchanges.

But accusations that acceptance of states formerly subordinated to Moscow by the EU or NATO were intolerable threats to its security are not credible. At most they were an irritant that made aggression against those countries to force or entice them back into the fold slightly more difficult for Moscow.

Russia's so-called energy diplomacy denotes manipulation of oil and especially gas supplies to exert coercive geopolitical pressure on target countries; or to extend inducements, often corrupt, to draw other countries or their leaders into sweetheart deals with Moscow. These

practices are notorious, have been widely described and analysed, and it is not controversial to say so. Nonetheless the West still continues sometimes to bite on the bait when it is offered

Putin spends much of his time on energy diplomacy, a subject which has links to his dubiously acquired higher degree.

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Putin-Dissertation-Event-remarks-with-slides.pdf>

Moscow also uses nuclear technology exports for similar purposes and the increasingly wayward and Kremlin-friendly regime in Budapest, which has accepted nuclear largesse from Moscow on heavily subsidised terms is a striking case in point. It is not clear that such exports made available on the basis of generous credits meant not to be repaid but to win friends, deliver any economic benefits to the Russian Federation. But their purpose is geopolitical, not economic.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which threatens to cost Ukraine some US\$3 billion a year is one of the most recent and startlingly anachronistic in a long line of Russian schemes aimed at buying complicit friends in the Western alliance, while at the same time punishing unruly subjects or ex-subjects. Ukraine has been taking effective steps to diminish its exposure to ‘energy diplomacy’, including via international arbitration, which for good reason tends to find in its favour. But Russia has responded to that in turn by ignoring unfavourable decisions, and pursuing ‘lawfare’ in other jurisdictions against its poorer neighbour which does not have the resources to defend its position against endless legal chicanery by Moscow.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/09/the-global-financial-system-is-dying-in-a-london-courthouse/>

Moscow reserves special venom and relentlessness in its hybrid warfare against Ukraine, but it treats most other of its former colonies in much the same way unless they are compliant. There is no time to review that scene in depth, but a quick roll-call of Ukraine's neighbours and their experiences may help to fill out the picture.

Belarus, Ukraine's northern neighbour, is run by its long-term dictator, Lukashenka rather like a Soviet theme park, with its own KGB and Investigative Committee (named after Russia's star chamber). Its sense of national identity is much weaker than Ukraine's, and it identifies more closely with Russia than any other of the former Soviet republics. Russia has rewarded it with generous subsidies for its loyalty.

But since the seizure of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas, Lukashenka has taken fright and has sought to position Belarus closer to Ukraine and to the West, while doing enough to continue to earn Russian aid. Russia has been pressing it to allow a Russian military base on its territory, which would threaten its independence (think Crimea). Minsk has resisted this, and Russia is increasing the pressure, including more overt hints at withdrawal of the subsidies. Latterly there has been increased speculation about a possible Anschluss of Belarus by Russia which, if it happened, would totally transform the geopolitical context of Eurasia, with disastrous implications for Ukraine, as well as Poland and the Baltic states. It might also result in the emergence of a unity state of Russia and Belarus, long foreshadowed, of which Putin could become the president, thereby sidestepping the constitutional limitation on his serving for yet another term after 2024.

<http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/09/30/moscow-officials-currently-preparing-for-anschluss-of-belarus-larionov-says/>

To Ukraine's south is Moldova, a small country of mainly Romanian ethnicity, though with a separate regional identity much cultivated by the Kremlin in Soviet times and since. As in several other former republics, Moscow established a military presence soon after the USSR broke up, intervening in local disputes on the side of pro-Moscow forces. Russia has retained these bridgeheads everywhere it can, in the form of 'frozen conflicts', which serve its neo-imperial agenda.

The population of Moldova is mainly pro-Western, but alienated by spectacular levels of corruption, including one heist of \$1 bln, representing one eighth of the country's GDP, in which Russian operatives were implicated, as well as an ostensibly pro-Western political strongman, Vladimir Plahotniuc, who is tilting more and more Moscow's way.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2016/08/01/billion-dollar-theft-in-moldova-one-rich-bankers-crime-has-a-nation-doing-time/#63630e884f7e>

Thus does Moscow export corruption into Moldova and exploit it to its own political advantage.

The judiciary has been manipulated to stack elections in Moscow's favour (eg overruling on specious grounds a pro-Western victory in the capital, Chisinau, and preventing the large number of Moldovans working in Western countries from voting). There is an ongoing struggle between a basically pro-Western and competent premier and government (which has repaired most of the damage done by the crime of the century) and overtly pro-Kremlin forces in the presidency, parliament and the deeply corrupt judiciary. This could lead to a victory for the pro-Russian camp after the next elections in February, 2019.

http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/A_Strategy_for_Moldova_web.pdf

Meanwhile the Russian military protectorate of Transnistria within Moldova's borders established by the military intervention in Yeltsin's time, is gradually being handed over bit by bit to Moscow's sovereign control by the OSCE under a series of pro-Russian Western European chairmen.

<https://jamestown.org/program/de-sovereignization-testing-a-conflict-resolution-model-at-moldovas-expense-in-transnistria-part-two/>

Though ostensibly remaining part of Moldova's sovereign territory, on present indications, Transnistria will soon be absorbed de facto into the Russian Federation. For its part the OSCE, originally conceived as a way of bringing post-Soviet territories into democratic modernity, has been progressively worn down by determined Russian vetos and manipulation.

If Russia by various expedients does snatch control of Moldova's government despite the country's increasing economic dependence on and visa-free links with the EU, the consequences for Kyiv could again be very unfortunate, enabling greater pressure to be exerted on sensitive regions of southern and western Ukraine.

Armenia, a strongly European country in sentiment, has this year undergone a successful colour revolution led by the charismatic Nikol Pashinyan. Moscow is clearly not pleased by this development, and Pashinyan has added to their displeasure by rash moves against some close Kremlin allies among former Armenian leaderships. He has also moved against the Armenian Secretary-General of the Moscow-dominated CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) – which Putin hopes will become a counterpart to NATO, for past offences against Armenian street protesters.

Pashinyan has tried to reassure the Kremlin that he will not be changing the country's security orientation in favour of co-operating with NATO. He needs Russian support against Armenia's Azerbaijani adversaries, but his strongly democratic and pro-Western attitudes irritate Putin, who will look for opportunities to pull Pashinyan and his followers back into line.

Azerbaijan is veering back more towards Moscow in recent months, partly in reaction to Pashinyan, and his assertive policy towards the Karabakh dispute. A Muslim country, with a harsh and autocratic domestic regime, it has little to bind it to Western countries or institutions, though it does see value in maintaining links to the West for strategic balance and commercial advantages.

Georgia thinks of itself as a European country like Armenia, and as mentioned earlier, has been very pro-Western, especially since the reformist pro-Western leadership of Saakashvili. This orientation was strengthened by Russia's invasion of the country in 2008, and its progressive expansion and militarisation thereafter of its two protectorates of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow has already appropriated half of Georgia's Black Sea coast, and continues to slice away at sovereign Georgian territory. Since first taking over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Yeltsin's time, the occupation regime has strongly encouraged its proxies to brutalise the ethnic Georgians who were once the major ethnic group in the protectorates, but who for decades now have been refugees in their own country.

All of this has been grossly illegal imperial thuggery, yet many Western countries have made excuses for Russia and accepted its phoney propaganda about protecting the human rights of its proxies. Not surprisingly, Tbilisi actively pursues membership in Western institutions, especially the EU and NATO. Like Ukraine and Moldova, it has an association agreement

with the EU, with free trade arrangements and visa-free travel in the Schengen zone. It wants very much to become a full member of both the EU and NATO. Washington increasingly supports their aspirations, and strengthens bilateral contacts, but European members will probably continue to block membership for fear of ‘provoking’ Russia.

Though the Baltic States have joined EU and NATO, Russia has not given up on any of them, but continues its hybrid warfare activities against all three. It fought an outright cyber-war against Estonia on a trivial pretext in 2007, and exploits the large Russian minorities (greatly increased by two brutal Soviet occupations) in Estonia and Latvia, and similarly manipulates the smaller Russian and Polish minorities in Lithuania. Russian-speaking ex-Soviet nomenklatura families are also often targeted. Early in October, elections in Latvia saw the prospect arise of a pro-Russian party being not only the largest in the parliament, but also potentially able to head a coalition government, though this did not come to fruition. Trade boycotts, ‘energy diplomacy’, regular military intimidation, huge flows of propaganda and electoral interference, even recruitment of ‘Russian’ fighters to join the ‘separatists’ in the Donbas have all been observed. In a word, the neighbours from hell.

That is probably sufficient to convey the pattern. But it is worth emphasising again that Russia deploys very similar tactics on countries further to the west that used to belong to its Warsaw Pact ‘alliance’. There is the same sense of entitlement and the same feeling that its rightful dominance over those countries had been unjustly wrested from it in breach of alleged promises by the West never to do so.

And indeed, Russian behaviour towards many countries further afield again is not greatly different. In traditionally neutral Sweden and Finland, they have been so threatening in recent

years, that both countries are greatly increasing their co-operation with NATO, and in Sweden's case contemplating seeking membership.

Moscow has also cultivated close ties with several European countries with leaderships or strong parties of the illiberal and populist right; or the hard-left, where sentimental feelings about Putin are nurtured in the apparent belief that the mega-billionaire, who presides over one of the most inegalitarian countries on the planet, is still the leader of the international communist movement.

Russia's close attention to the Balkans, in particular the former Yugoslavia, is characteristic. There were historic links, especially between Russian Orthodox atheists and Yugoslav Orthodox communities. But since Tito defied Stalin's imperial presumption in 1948, that region has not been part of the Kremlin's sphere of interest. Yet it is going after the post-Yugoslav countries with particular zeal. Russian operatives were involved in helping Serbian insurgents to stage a coup against Montenegrin president Djukanovic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montenegrin_coup_plot

The Kremlin has been encouraging the Bosnian Serb leader Dodik, once a moderate, to behave provocatively in a way suggesting that both he and Putin would either like to see the Milosevic wars revived with a better outcome from their point of view; or at the very least to ensure that Bosnia is not integrated with the EU or NATO, and that the dream of a greater Serbia remains alive. As Serbian leader Vucic recently said, Milosevic's intentions were good.

<https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/bosnia-on-the-chopping-block-march-2018.pdf>

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=10&nav_id=105039

And with Macedonia, Russia is trying hard to deflect it into a blind alley by supporting the boycott of the referendum on changing Macedonia's name to facilitate rapprochement with Greece and thereby overcome their veto on Macedonian accession to the EU and NATO. It is also encouraging the Greek hardliners to maintain their hostile attitude to any rapprochement between Athens and Skopje. In the process they have greatly angered even their former close allies, the Greek Syriza government of ex-communist Alexis Tsipras, who wants something better both for Greece and Macedonia than the sterile stand-off of recent decades, which has increased Greece's unpopularity in both organisations.

So what are the prospects for Ukrainians coping with their own difficulties - themselves in very large measure the legacy of centuries of rule from Moscow, while this aggressive and much bigger adversary is doing all it can to inflict further damage and casualties upon them?

Ukraine's national identity is now more stable and secure than it has perhaps ever been, which is why I would argue that barring disasters, the mid- to long-term future for Ukraine looks promising. But next year is an election year and it comes at a time when Ukraine's economy and polity remain unstable, not exclusively because of Russian military and hybrid aggression.

The World Bank's 4 October economic update for Ukraine, for example,

<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/674341538644590138/Ukraine-Economic-Update-October-2018-ENG.pdf>

notes that despite a small uptick this year in the growth rate ‘supported by an early agriculture harvest’, investor confidence is held back by delays in key reforms and the IMF program. This, it adds, is occurring at a time when Ukraine faces exceptionally difficult public debt repayments. Such an assessment would be supported by many other observers, including some strongly sympathetic to Ukraine and quite ready to acknowledge that the post-Euromaidan administration has accomplished more than all its predecessors put together. But the rate of reform activity has latterly fallen away. Indeed a senior Ukrainian visitor commented that the word ‘reform’ had almost become a dirty word in government circles.

Rather later than the eleventh hour, to wit on 19 October, Prime Minister Hroysman announced [<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-imf-reach-deal-on-new-4-billion-loan/29553456.html>] that household gas rates would be raised by nearly 25%. This politically excruciating decision proved sufficient to facilitate a provisional ‘staff-level’ agreement with the IMF for a new Stand-By Arrangement worth nearly \$4 bln. This was to replace the previous Extended Fund Facility (EFF) loan approved in 2015, which had been only partially implemented and in abeyance since early 2017 because of Ukraine’s failure to meet IMF conditions, leaving Ukraine perilously exposed, and potential investors discouraged. The deal is still provisional and subject to approval at higher levels. Let us hope that all flows smoothly and that Hroysman’s rabbit from the hat will again confirm one’s impression that Kyiv gets there in the end.

Official Kyiv’s enthusiasm for painful reforms has (understandably but undesirably) diminished over time, as has its zeal for combating corruption. It seemingly has more new anti-corruption institutions than it has successful convictions of major corruption offenders. At times, its actions suggest that it sees anti-corruption activists as more of a menace than the offenders themselves. It pursued the admittedly mercurial and difficult Saakashvili with a

single-mindedness worthy of a better cause. He was after all the prime mover in a successful anti-corruption reform in Georgia.

All this is at least a bad look for both voters who regularly indicate that corruption is their main concern, and for Ukraine's foreign partners. As Vitaliy Protsenko has pointed out, Ukrainian voters are capable of accepting market reforms, provided they trust their rulers and can see that the reforms are just. [<https://voxukraine.org/en/the-economics-of-pain-and-injustice-how-ukrainians-turned-into-a-leftwing-nation/>] A bad look can undermine that trust.

For better or for worse, Ukraine's political system is more a presidential than a parliamentary one. While many of us may not feel enraptured by the outcome of the next elections to the Verkhovna Rada, the presidential elections will be what matters most and what matters first. And the outcome of the presidentials will have a big impact on the parliamentary elections. As of recent months, there seem to be only about half a dozen candidates with serious chances of winning the top job.

https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_ukraine-presidential-elections-2019_net_0.pdf

Of those, two stand out at this stage as more likely to win, namely Yulia Tymoshenko and Poroshenko. Anatoliy Hrytsenko, the partly US-trained and s pro-Western ex-officer and military official, and the pro-Russian Yuriy Boyko have strong followings, but the judgement of the former and the loyalty of the latter are often questioned, which would impede them if they were to reach the run-off stage. Oleh Lyashko, a populist nationalist who promises ruthless pursuit of corruption, and popular entertainers Vakarchuk and Zelenskiy could also cause a surprise.

But my amateur money would be on Tymoshenko and Poroshenko being the two dominant figures in the contest. Tymoshenko has consistently headed the opinion polls over an extended period. She has experience, charisma and courage, and is a formidable campaigner. But she is often and justly criticised for her populist demagoguery, and as the elections approach, that feature of her political persona has come in for severe criticism. Her suspect links to Putin crony Viktor Medvedchuk could also cost her support. But she remains the biggest threat to Poroshenko.

Poroshenko and his coalition parties have lagged in the polls, and have had to pay in popularity for the tough reforms they have pushed through, as well as for their failure to achieve more. But the advantages of the presidency are great. And Poroshenko is an oligarch with his own TV station. He has handled his foreign policy role skilfully, especially the difficult task of dealing with President Trump, and has been rewarded with vital arms deliveries and the prospect of more. What has probably changed his prospects most decisively, however, is his crucial role in securing the breakthrough towards autocephaly for Ukraine from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

During the election year, however, Russia will be trying all out to distort the outcomes by every form of hybrid warfare. So it will be a dangerous period. And given that, my own personal preference would be for Poroshenko, despite his failures, to be re-elected against any run-off contender.

One of Russia's weapons of choice at all times and particularly in the present context is to stir trouble between Ukraine and its key neighbours, who ought to be its allies, but increasingly are not so. Working through proxies it did much to sow discord between Ukraine and the naively nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland, but not only there.

<https://jamestown.org/program/russian-disinformation-pervades-central-eastern-europe/>

PiS and Poroshenko with Moscow's coaching have become at times the best of frenemies.

Another Russian semi-client, Hungary, has taken umbrage enthusiastically at Ukraine's national language laws to the point of going out of its way to veto Ukraine's participation in NATO outreach meetings, which would certainly win Viktor Orban brownie points with Putin.

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-hungary-blocking-ukraine-s-western-integration>

It can be plausibly argued that Ukraine is only doing what many other countries emerging from servitude have done to strengthen national identity and the position of the national language and culture; and that any costs involved must be borne as necessary collateral damage. And there is plenty of blame to be shared by the other sides in these disputes. But Kyiv really needs to minimise that collateral damage as much as it can when it is navigating such choppy seas as it is currently.

The autocephaly issue has been rightly described as a second independence in its capacity to build up and strengthen Ukraine's national identity, statehood, and international standing.

<http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/10/15/poroshenko-achieved-second-independence-russia/>

As such it undoubtedly works for Ukraine as well as for Poroshenko. But it also presents serious dangers.

https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_272.pdf

Predictably, Putinist Russia has responded to the autocephaly break-through with rage, and an avalanche of propaganda against Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as well as Kyiv, including veiled and not so veiled threats of violence.

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-10-17/relations-severed-between-russian-orthodox-church-and-ecumenical>

Peskov spoke with faux restraint, before repeating the line which has prefigured aggression elsewhere: that it was incumbent on Russia to protect Russians and Russian speakers from any abuses purportedly unleashed by Bartholomew's decision.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-week-in-russia-a-schism-a-school-attack-and-putin-s-talk-of-nuclear-war/29553280.html>

It can be readily imagined that the regime will do its best to stage *provokatsii* in which Russians and Russian-speakers might be held to have been maltreated in the course of disputes over church property in Ukraine. Kyiv is preparing carefully to forestall any such developments, but it will not be easy to maintain peace and courteous co-existence everywhere and at all times. One can be certain that Moscow will snatch eagerly at anything that looks as though it could be turned into a reason for punishing Ukraine. Putin may also try to use his new amity with Turkish president Erdogan to pressure Patriarch Bartholomew.

Meanwhile, Moscow's Kerch/Azov harassment and trade strangulation operation continues, with some, but insufficient, push-back from the Western alliance.

https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_strait_to_war_russia_and_ukraine_clash_in_the_sea_of_azov

Moscow is also of course adding to the militarisation of this region, as EU ‘foreign minister’ Mogherini has publicly declared, drawing the usual denials from Russia.

<https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-ato/2564709-rossia-provudit-massirovannuu-militarizaciu-azovskogo-mora-mogerini.html>

Ukraine is fighting back bravely, but there is a limit to what it can achieve on its own. In this case as in others, failure by the West to engage adequately in Ukraine’s defence, will concede yet another ‘victory’ to a rogue state already out of control, and intoxicated by its own sense of importance and impunity.

Last week’s sensation was Trump’s declaration that the US would withdraw from the INF Treaty. It’s interesting that Trump apparently has signed on to this decision and has spoken about it like a traditional Republican president. Perhaps for him, the appeal was at least partly that supporting his hawkish NSA Bolton on this issue might be useful in his ongoing struggle with Special Counsel Mueller.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/withdrawal-syndrome-experts-weigh-in-on-possible-u-s-exit-from-inf-treaty/29557785.html>

Despite its own repeated breaches of the treaty, Russia is of course feigning indignation about Washington’s INF decision, and has a propaganda line on the subject well prepared.

European countries can in many cases be expected to wobble as Moscow helpfully points out their vulnerability to its perfectly reasonable counter-measures. US strategist Steven Pifer, a former ambassador to Ukraine, believes this step by the US is a mistake, which gives Russia an excellent opportunity to divide NATO and an excuse for further deployments of weapons threatening all its European targets.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/10/19/the-trump-administration-is-preparing-a-major-mistake-on-the-inf-treaty/>

Other commentators see the treaty against a wider backdrop as having become outdated and no longer in the US's interest to preserve, among other reasons because China is not bound by it, and Russia is breaching it anyway.

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/arms-control-and-a-nuclear-order-in-decay/>

<https://www.rferl.org/a/withdrawal-syndrome-experts-weigh-in-on-possible-u-s-exit-from-inf-treaty/29557785.html>

The INF issue will probably be a central topic of discussion at the meeting that Trump wants to have with Putin in Paris on November 11, for which NSA John Bolton visited President Putin in Moscow on 23 October to make preparations.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-cites-china-nuclear-buildup-in-vowing-abandon-inf-treaty-with-russia/29558658.html>

But in essence, any particular issues aside, Putin can choose to unleash fresh aggression against Ukraine in any one of a number of ways, via any of a number of points of ingress and at any time he judges to be propitious. What is needed to deter him will be, as always, Ukraine's readiness to defend itself vigorously, and the readiness of the West, above all the US, to respond with decisively stronger sanctions and delivery of more potent defensive weaponry. Ideally that reaction would be clearly signalled before any major attack occurs. But that may be hoping for too much.