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Guest writer Jul 21 09:39 Comments



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, has tough decisions to make this week that will have a profound impact on his legacy and on Russia's future. His two choices are both unpalatable for the anti-Ukrainian strategy he has pursued since last November. Then, he led Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's president at the time, to turn away from Europe, supplied weaponry for Ukraine's security forces used against protesters, occupied Crimea and launched a proxy war to break up Ukraine by detaching the so-called "New Russia" (Tsarist Russia's name for east Ukraine).

Putin can and most likely will continue his proxy war against Ukraine in the face of international condemnation following the downing of the Malaysian civilian airliner MH17. This risks provoking sector sanctions, assuming Germany and other EU members end their appeasement of Russia. Such sanctions would have a profound impact on Russia's already struggling economy.

Putin's second option would be to withdraw his support for the Donetsk separatists. In doing so he would be admitting his first defeat in the three military adventures he has embarked on since coming to power, the first and second being in Chechnya and Georgia.

Would Putin's nationalist credentials survive such a humiliation?

Western reaction to the tragic shooting down of MH17 has assumed that Putin is a rational actor who respects treaties and has some concern for humanity. All three assumptions have no basis in reality.

First, Russian nationalism, being similar to the nationalism of former Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevich, is fuelled by anger, xenophobia, illusion and romanticism – not by Anglo-Saxon rationality.

Putin was adamant that the 'green men' occupying Crimea were not Russian. Today, he claims Russia is not providing military support to the Donbas separatists and that they did not shoot down MH17. Such claims reveal the extent to which Russia's leaders live in an Orwellian fantasy world beyond the grasp of many western policy makers.

Second, the Russian leadership operates outside the rule of law and will not abide by international treaties or the conditions of membership of the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is against a state with which it has a border treaty. Russia is one of three 'guarantors' of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine gave up the world's third largest nuclear weapons stockpile in return for guarantees of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Third, Putin has never displayed human warmth of any kind (recall that US President George W Bush quipped he "was one cold

dude”). In 2000 he displayed no humanity when the Kursk submarine sank with the loss of 118 crew. His murderous campaign in Chechnya razed Grozny to the ground and caused the deaths of a tenth of the population, a higher proportion than the war crimes committed by Serb forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The west has been culpable in letting Russia get away with murder until now. It has turned a blind eye to earlier frozen conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where ethnic cleansing took place. Russia's occupation of Crimea was the first major example of imperialism in Europe since World War II but barely moved Eurocrats off their comfortable chairs.

Putin's proxy military campaign failed to find widespread support in the eight Russian-speaking provinces of Ukraine; even in the two regions of the Donbas, support for separatism is lower than in Scotland and Quebec. Without Russian support the separatists would quickly be defeated.

The tragic shooting down of MH17 provides Ukraine and the west with an opportunity to rid the Donbas of its separatists by using superior air power, no longer fearing Russian surface to air missiles. This would also be a good opportunity for the US, Canada and the UK to provide covert advice and training to the Ukrainian National Guard and special forces.

Defeating the separatists is the only way to return peace to east Ukraine and remove this threat to European and global security. Political reconciliation could then be achieved with the assistance of the OSCE.

If Russia ignores global public opinion, does not cooperate in a full investigation of MH17 and continues to supply weaponry to the separatists, the EU, the US and Canada should apply Iranian-style sector sanctions and categorise Russia as what the US Department of State calls a “state sponsor of terrorism”.

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