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## **An existential struggle : What Putin wants—and how Europe should thwart him**

Many Europeans are complacent about the threat Russia poses—and misunderstand how to deter its president



### Full text:

IN RED SQUARE on May 9th Vladimir Putin is due to celebrate Victory Day, marking the defeat of Nazi Germany. The parade used to include Russia's second-world-war allies. Today, as Mr Putin targets what he absurdly claims is another "Nazi" government in Ukraine, it signals how Russia stands resolutely against the West. That should worry all of Europe.

As the death toll in Ukraine has grown, Mr Putin's war aims have swollen to justify Russian losses. What began as a special military operation next door has become Russia's existential struggle against distant enemies. This is a profound shift. It means Ukraine's future depends on Mr Putin's ambitions more than President Donald Trump's theatrical diplomacy. It also means that many Europeans are complacent about the threat Russia poses—and that they misunderstand how to deter him.

Russia may not be about to invade other parts of Europe. But it will try to gain sway by redoubling its cyber-attacks, influence operations, assassinations and sabotage. If Mr Putin senses weakness, he could seek to split apart NATO by seizing a small piece of territory and daring the allies to respond. He could be ready for that in two to five years. This may sound a long time. In military planning it is the blink of an eye.

Many people in America and southern Europe will find these claims hysterical. Some, like America's envoy Steve Witkoff, say that Mr Putin can be trusted; or that he would not dare violate Mr Trump's putative peace deal. Others, though wise enough not to trust a man who has gone to war five times in 25 years, argue that Russia is too weak to pose much threat. In Ukraine it has suffered almost 1m dead and wounded and, since its gains in the first weeks after the invasion, it has taken less than 1% more of Ukraine's territory.

Many in the Baltic states, Poland and the Nordic countries go to the other extreme, warning that the threat is bigger than Mr Putin, because Russian imperialism has deep roots. That fear is understandable given their history of being mauled, but it is the wrong way to approach Russia. Not only does it affirm Mr Putin's message that NATO is incurably anti-Russian, but it makes Europe more likely to miss chances for detente.

[Mr Putin is indeed an aggressor](#) who needs to be deterred. A bad peace imposed on Ukraine could become a springboard for his next war. At the same time, however, even if Mr Putin is implacable, he is 72 years old. Now is the moment to influence what comes after him.

Deterrence depends on understanding the threat Mr Putin poses. After three years of fighting, war has become an ideology. In the past, 60% of Russians said that the government's priority should be to raise living standards. Today, that share has fallen to 41%; instead, 55% now say they want Russia to be respected as a world power. Mr Putin has put the whole of Russian society onto a war footing. The arms industry creates employment.

Generous payments to soldiers and their families amount to 1.5% of GDP. Mr Putin also uses war as his excuse for ever-harsher repression and isolation from the West.

It is wrong to think that Russia's forces are spent or incapable. The navy and air force are largely intact. NATO's top commander says Mr Putin is restocking men, arms and munitions at an "unprecedented" pace. Russia plans to have 1.5m active troops, up from 1.3m in September; eventually, it could boost forces and kit on the western front by 30-50%. Thanks to the war, it has deepened its ties to China, Iran and North Korea.

Russian tactics are crude and costly, but a sudden small incursion into a NATO member would force NATO to choose whether to take back lost ground and risk nuclear war. If it did not fight, NATO would be broken. In a longer conflict NATO could surely repel a first Russian offensive, but would it have the resources for a fifth or sixth? Mr Putin might count it a strategic victory if Mr Trump declined to turn up, even if Russia were pushed back. That is because America's absence on the battlefield would entrench Russia's influence over Europe.

Defence against Russia begins in Ukraine. The more Mr Putin is denied success there, the less likely he is to attack NATO. As *The Economist* has argued, that means supplying Ukraine with arms, as well as giving it more money to pay for those it can build cheaply itself. Ukraine could produce \$35bn-worth of kit a year, but has orders for less than half as much. Mr Trump should see that financing Ukraine is in America's interests, if only because China is watching Russia's progress.

However, backing Ukraine is not enough to make the entire continent safe and Mr Trump is unlikely to offer much help, so Europe must do more. That means working harder to defend itself, shoring up its unity and laying the foundations for a post-Putin Russia.

Europe is buying more arms. New figures from SIPRI, a Swedish think-tank, show that NATO, excluding America, increased spending by \$68bn, or 19%, in 2022-23. More is needed, but European leaders have still not prepared voters for the sacrifices ahead. They are squabbling over arms contracts. For example, Britain may not be allowed to join a European Union scheme unless it lets EU boats fish in its waters.

Work is needed to enhance NATO's unity, especially if America no longer binds it together. It is naive to think that countries like Spain and Portugal will ever fear Russia as Estonia and Poland do. But they face threats to their infrastructure and politics. They also have a vital interest in the EU being spared the dysfunction that would result from greater Russian influence over its eastern members.

Last, Europe needs a Russia policy that looks beyond Ukraine. In the cold war the West persuaded ordinary Russians that it was on their side, and that what kept them from freedom and prosperity was the Soviet regime. It cultivated dissidents and encouraged contacts. Today, too many Europeans are hostile to all Russians, rather than just the warmongers.

Europe has the wealth and industrial power to withstand Mr Putin. It has the potential to find an accommodation with his successor. As Russian soldiers strut through Red Square, the question is whether Europe can overcome its divisions in order to save Ukraine and protect itself. ■