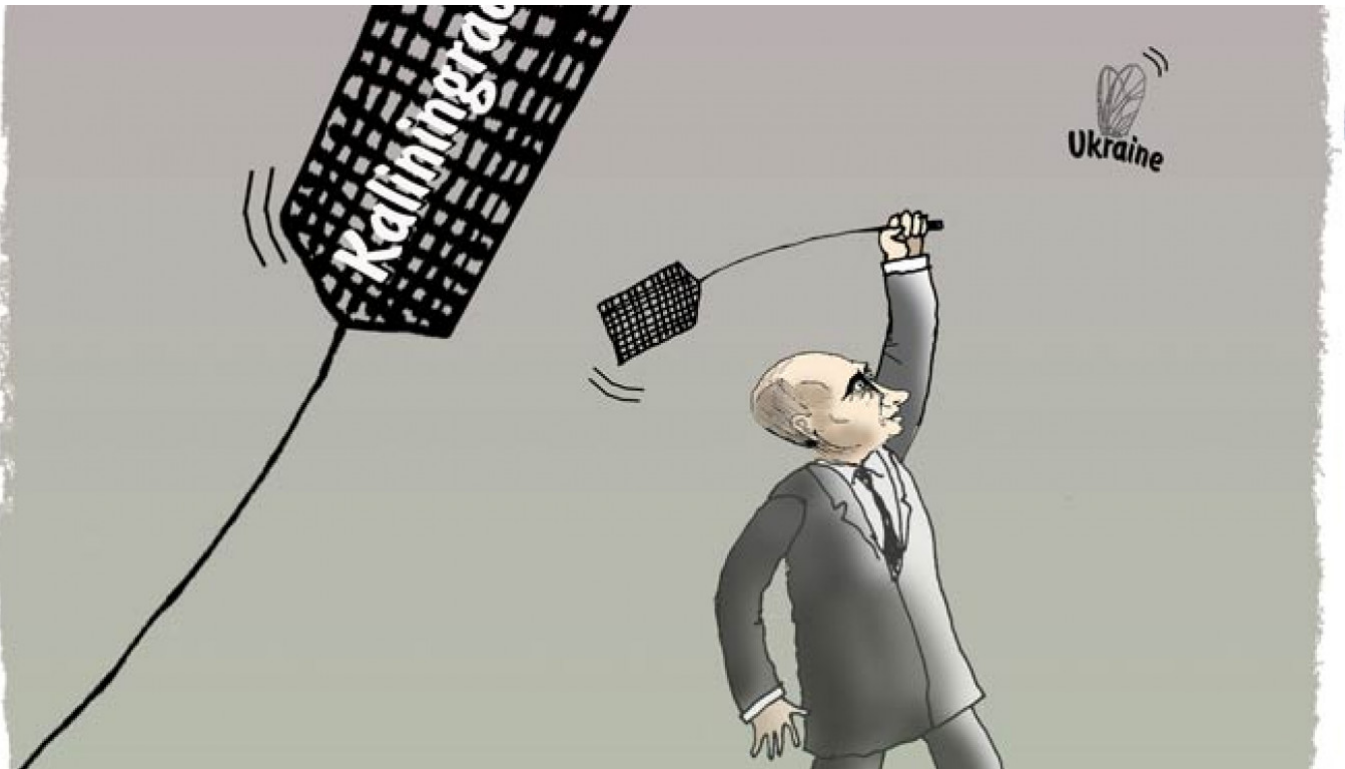


# Obama Should Push Putin Back

By [Richard Lurie](#)

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The crisis in Ukraine has generated reams of nonsense. The acting president of Ukraine, for example, requested the United Nations to send in a peacekeeping force to Ukraine, apparently forgetting that this would need to be approved by the Security Council, where Russia has veto power. This was a foolish error that was motivated either by ignorance or desperation. The president of the Czech Republic has called for sending NATO troops into Ukraine.

Better than disengaged  
containment, a harder line  
toward Putin will surely get his  
attention — and his respect.

Nothing worse could be imagined. Though the crisis in Ukraine is about ethnic fault lines, failures of governance and deep bonds between Russia and Ukraine, at bottom the real problem is NATO. There is nothing Russia dreads more than being surrounded by NATO

from the Baltic to the Black Sea. A Ukraine tilting toward the West would complete that encirclement.

Rule No. 1: Never surround a paranoid country.

Over the years, NATO has constantly reassured Moscow that its eastward expansion should not be interpreted as a hostile gesture. But as is clear now, there is immense residual hostility toward Moscow lurking close to the surface. In the West's narrative, a Russia led by a former KGB chief easily falls into the role of villain.

The countries of Eastern Europe were of course right to scurry under NATO's armored umbrella at the end of the Cold War. They had suffered enough at Russian hands in the 20th century — and in the 19th for that matter — to take the risk that post-Soviet Russia was going to be significantly different from the Russia that preceded it. Even though some of the Baltic countries have sizable Russian minorities — Estonia about 25 percent, Latvia 27 percent — they really have little to fear. Russia is not going to risk that level of escalation for a little more Baltic coastline. The game is simply not worth the candle.

But Ukraine is another matter. It's not in NATO yet or any other structure that would integrate it into the West. Whether or not Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was promised that NATO would not move "one inch east" in exchange for allowing the reunification of Germany no longer matters. What matters is that NATO did move east, not inches but miles — hundreds of them. Putin is accused of being too 19th century or too 20th century, but the principle of not letting your opponent outflank you belongs to the Darwinian truths of geopolitics.

The West seems more intent on condemning Putin's behavior than in fathoming his psychology. But it is only by understanding his psychology that his next moves might be guessed and thwarted.

Rule No. 2: Don't send a college professor to negotiate with the Hell's Angels.

The problem is not that the professor is necessarily weaker than the biker. It is just that the two simply won't understand each other. In the Ukrainian crisis, Putin inflicted body blows right away, while the West punched back with the threats of sanctions that caused only slight pain — and only months later.

So how can the West push back? And, equally important, where? There is little chance of taking any serious action at the Ukrainian part of the Baltic-Black Sea axis. Pressure, however, could be exerted at the other end where a piece of Russia is already surrounded by NATO. This is the Connecticut-sized exclave of Kaliningrad, which is located between Lithuania and Poland. There is no land connection between Kaliningrad and Russia itself. Possessing Russia's only ice-free Baltic port, Kaliningrad city is home to Russia's Baltic Fleet. Once the capital of Prussia, Kaliningrad fell to the Soviet Union as a war spoil. There are no Germans left there now.

The U.S. has sent a small contingent of troops and 12 F-16s to Poland and six F-15s to Lithuania in response to recent large-scale Russian military exercises in Kaliningrad. This is woefully insufficient. The U.S. should conduct massive military exercises on the both sides of the Kaliningrad border. Troops in the hundreds are meaningless, but troops in the

thousands could cause the Kremlin some real anxiety.

The West could raise questions about the validity of Kaliningrad itself — its geographic disconnect from Russia and the fact that its very existence as a Russian territory is only because the criminal regime of Joseph Stalin grabbed it as a war trophy. If the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by Russia guaranteeing Ukraine's territorial integrity can be violated, why can't the same be done with the Potsdam Agreement of 1945 which defined post-World War II borders but only became fully operational with the signing of the Final Settlement With Respect to Germany in 1990?

It is, of course, risky business to build up troops along the Russian border and question the validity of the agreements that uphold the boundaries of post-war Europe. This is how countries slip into wars — if not World War III, then at the very least Cold War II.

Still, such moves would be bound to get Putin's attention — and his respect. That is a better idea than withdrawing into a policy of disengaged containment, which may suit Obama's aloofness more than U.S. national interests. There will always time for withdrawal, aloofness and containment. Obama should first try some real pushback.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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